

Chapter 11

The next morning, everyone in the Palace was so busy with the preparations for the New Year's Festival, Cassandra and her Prince were woken up early by all the outside ruckus. The young concubine, still tired, rolled over to his side, and laid her head on his shoulder.

Despite his closed eyes, she knew Kairen was awake from his fingers gently stroking her hair. The previous night, Shareen had left early after grabbing Valeria and taking her to her apartments. Cassandra trusted her to get as much information as she could out of her younger half-sister, and had left with Kairen to avoid more trouble. The tension was high between the brothers, and she didn't want to stay in Phetra's presence longer than necessary. That woman made her too upset, it was like being in the same room as a venomous, cunning snake.

"Get up, sleepyheads!" suddenly yelled a voice inside the room.

"Your Highness! You can't barge in like that."

Cassandra sighed from recognizing the voices. Kairen sat up and glared at his sister, who was at the end of their bed, fists on her waist.

"Come on, I want us to get out of here before the whole Palace goes crazy."

"It's barely dawn," sighed Cassandra, sitting up, too.

She was glad she had slept in her nightgown instead of naked like most nights. Kairen, very unhappy about the unwanted morning call, was glaring at his sister with an annoyed face. She was good at ignoring him though, and sat on their bed.

"I know, but we have to find what that potion is made of, who made it, and your younger sister. Plus, we have to be back early for tea with Mother before the beginning of the celebrations. And you don't want to be late for tea with my mother."

Cassandra sighed. Indeed, Kareen had limited patience, but what Shareen ignored was that she was most severe about her own daughter's lateness. Cassandra had never been late, but she could tell the Imperial Concubine would let it go a couple of times.

"Dahlia, could I get some tea, please?"

“Coming right away, My Lady!”

The servant left the room, and much to Kairen’s annoyance, Cassandra got up and started getting ready.

“What did you get from her?” he asked with a raspy voice.

All three of them knew who he was talking about. Shareen crossed her arms.

“Phetra ordered her to go get the potion, but she really didn’t know who that snake was intending it for. But she said it was before Phetra knew you and Cassie were coming, so... She probably really didn’t intend to use it on you in the first place.”

“Then, the question is, who is pregnant?” said Cassandra, while grabbing a pink dress out of the closet.

“Someone Phetra would want to lose their child. You would have been first on her list, I guess, but if it isn’t you, it has to be one of our brother’s concubines. What I don’t understand is why she would care since no dragon egg seems to have appeared yet.”

While she was relieved it wasn’t aimed at her, Cassandra was disgusted that Phetra would try to make someone lose their baby. Kareen had warned her many times about the greedy and jealous women of the Palace, but she could never accept it.

She put a hand on her own belly, which was growing a bit bigger each day. According to Kareen, she still had about three or four months to go before her son would be born. The dragon-tamers always came to the world early, but they would be healthy nonetheless. As long as she could endure one more week in the Palace, Cassandra could leave and have her son at the Diamond or Onyx Castle.

Kairen took her by surprise when he came from behind, putting his arms around her.

“What are you worried about?” he asked.

Cassandra shook her head, giving him a quick kiss.

“It’s nothing. I will go to my herb garden and then outside. I’ll stay with Shareen and Dahlia.”

He nodded, despite his usual frown. If it wasn’t for his sister being with her, he wouldn’t have let Cassandra anywhere he couldn’t see her.

Cassandra finished brushing her hair and picked some accessories with Dahlia's help, before kissing her Prince goodbye. With Shareen right behind her, she walked up to her herbal garden and took the potion from Dahlia's hands. The bottle was green, a bit more expensive than the usual apothecary goods. It had no other indication about any manufacturer, however. Dahlia and Cassandra spent some time studying the potion's content, during which Shareen had to wait. The Princess wasn't too good with patience, however, and started grumbling after only twenty minutes or so.

"Aren't you done yet?" she growled.

"Almost, actually. There's this scent I don't recognize," said Cassandra, frowning.

"I don't smell anything else, My Lady," admitted Dahlia with a sorry expression.

To Cassandra, whose sense of smell was enhanced, there was definitely something else, but she couldn't point it out. Nothing had come out of analyzing the potion's thickness or color. However, whatever it was that she was smelling felt strangely familiar, something that went back to her farthest memories.

"Could it be...petrichor?"

"What the heck is that?"

"It's... the smell of the rain," said Cassandra, still baffled.

Shareen exchanged a look with Dahlia, both a bit doubtful.

"You're telling me rain has a smell?"

"It's more like the smell of the earth after the rain, actually. But the soil's smell after the rain smells exactly like this. I just haven't smelled that in a long time."

It wasn't surprising, considering how rare rainy days were in this country. The Dragon Empire's Capital was hot, humid, and suffocating, except for a short rain season, it was as arid as a desert most of the year. They had to go to further cities, like Kareen's city or the Shadelands, to see something other than dry soil and sand. The Capital relied mostly on the large wells and few rivers that came all the way down from the sea, but the water came from the earth or the sea, not from the sky.

"That potion probably came from outside the Capital," said Cassandra. "If they didn't make it in the Capital, the only reason would be that they must have found a better price having it imported from the outside. Someone must have bought a larger stock."

“It actually makes sense. Valeria bought this potion in the Red District, where they probably use that kind of potion often, for the prostitutes. If Phetra only asked her for an abortion potion, that child probably just went to the first place she thought of getting one.”

“So this is a dead-end?” sighed Dahlia.

Both women stayed silent for a while. Cassandra felt like they were missing something, but she couldn’t say what. After a few minutes, her eyes fell once again on the green bottle, which she grabbed.

“Not necessarily. Why would they have put this potion in a fancy container like this one?”

“You’re right,” said Shareen. “If it’s from a large stock, the seller wouldn’t bother putting it in a green jade container. It’s like they knew who they were selling it to.”

“The order was placed beforehand,” concluded Cassandra. “Valeria was made to retrieve the potion by Phetra, but the seller knew it had been ordered from the Palace.”

“So, the seller knew the buyer,” said Shareen with a grin. “Now, we just need to find them. I’ll send one of my girls to see who sells those in the Red District.”

Once Shareen was done giving orders, she and Cassandra agreed it was time they left the Palace to look for Missandra in the upper neighborhood. There was no reason for them to go back to the Red District to investigate the potion, but Cassandra was adamant about looking for her younger sister as soon as possible. Krai was nowhere to be seen, for now, probably hunting somewhere far away from the current ruckus at the Palace.

As they left the Palace, Shareen couldn’t help but think about their earlier talk over and over again. Cassandra had taken her by surprise. Though she knew about her brother’s concubine’s exceptional knowledge in medicine, she was shocked to hear her talk so well about the usual trading habits of the Capital merchants. What kind of life had she lived, exactly? Common slaves didn’t get that much knowledge just by some observation. Under her weak and quiet appearance, that woman actually turned out to be even smarter than most of the concubines. No wonder their mother had taken a liking to her.

When they finally reached the neighborhood Cassandra had set out to target first, the young concubine was a bit lost. Where to start? This wasn’t like the Red District, where everyone knew pretty much everything that happened next door. She tried to

think of what to ask, and as soon as she found a shop, she walked straight up to the merchant.

The old man was speechless upon seeing the three women that had appeared, but Cassandra was now used to this kind of reaction.

“Excuse me, Sir, could I ask you a few questions?”

“Of course, Your Highness! Anything, Your Highness!” said the old man, immediately bowing as low as he could.

“Please get up, Sir. You don’t need to bow. I wondered if you had seen any new shops opening in the neighborhood recently? Like an apothecary, or perhaps for southern medicine?”

“No, Your Highness, not that I know of. Many merchants come and go, Madam.”

Cassandra sighed, thanked the old man, and then left. Shareen, with her arms crossed, looked bored already.

“Why does it feel like this is going to take forever?”

“This area is considerably larger than the Red District, and my sister doesn’t want to be found by anyone, either. I can’t even look for someone with her name. She probably found a new alias to hide from the thugs from yesterday.”

Cassandra was right. Targeting the middle-class businesses meant they would have to search in a zone that was at least five times bigger than the Red District. Moreover, she had no name to give this time and only a rough idea of her sister’s possible whereabouts.

They had left early, but after four hours of walking around and asking as many people as she could, nothing happened. Cassandra had asked dozens of people, without ever getting anything concrete. The few known apothecaries had been established for many years, and no matter how many times she asked, no one seemed to have seen anyone that fit the description Cassandra gave over and over again.

After a while, Cassandra started to feel the fatigue, her feet and back were aching. She had been so adamant about looking for her sister, she had forgotten her pain until she couldn’t anymore. Shareen helped her sit in a chair of the closest tea shop, somewhere she could hide from the sun. Even for the first day of spring, it was too hot for

Cassandra. She had spent terrible summers in the Capital, with a hard time coping with the heat. She truly wasn't fit for extreme temperatures.

"Go order us something," Shareen said to Dahlia, who walked away after a bow.

The place was crowded, but no one dared to even look at the two women. People were absolutely shocked and terrified at one glance of Shareen's purple dress. After a few minutes, they were truly isolated, as all the nearby tables and chairs had discreetly scooted away from them.

"I can't believe we haven't found anything yet," said Cassandra, disheartened. "I really thought that last apothecary might be hers."

"Well, unless your sister turned into an eighty-year-old granny, it wasn't. You still have one week in the Capital, you'll be able to look for her until then."

Cassandra truly hoped she would find Missandra before then. Dahlia returned with the two cups of tea, and they drank silently. Cassandra was touched that she had thought about ordering a verbenia and lemon-flavored one for her, while Shareen had a black tea.

"I'm thinking, maybe I guessed wrong. Maybe Missandra already fled the Capital, or she went to the poorer side."

"Looking for someone inside the Capital is like looking for a needle in a haystack. And like you said, your sister made enough enemies to...to not... want... to..."

"Princess Shareen?" asked Cassandra.

But Shareen's face was quickly turning white, and she was obviously struggling to stay conscious. Her eyes were closing and her words didn't make any sense. She spilled her tea in a clumsy movement and, before Cassandra could react, fell on the ground like a dead weight.

"Shareen!"

Cassandra ran to the Princess' side in utter panic. What was going on? Shareen had fallen off her chair like a lifeless doll! Her first move was to check her pulse and breathing, but in a matter of seconds, she realized the Princess wasn't poisoned but drugged.

"Dahlia!" she called.

“I checked both cups, My Lady, I swear!” replied the young woman, crying in shock. “I swear I drank from both! The tea was fine!”

Cassandra believed Dahlia, but this didn’t make any sense! She was completely fine while Shareen was passed out. She grabbed both cups, smelling them. Nothing smelled out of the ordinary, but it could have come from anywhere.

Around them, people were in total panic after seeing an Imperial Family Member pass out. No one wanted to be associated with a crime towards the Imperial Family, and the punishment that would come with it. Everyone around quickly fled the scene screaming, leaving the three women alone. Cassandra desperately tried shaking Shareen, calling her name and hoping to wake her up. Who had done this? Who would be crazy enough to attack the Princess in the middle of the street! And so few people knew about their outing, too!

She brought her fingers to her mouth and whistled loudly, out of despair. She hoped he wasn’t too far, because she had no idea what to do!

“Come!” suddenly said a voice, grabbing her wrist.

Before she could protest or resist, Cassandra was dragged away from Shareen. Whoever was running in front of her held her wrist strongly, not letting go.

“Let me go!” yelled Cassandra, despite the shock.

However, her kidnapper didn’t stop. She couldn’t even see who it was, as they were covered in a dark hood and cloak. They ran across several streets, but Cassandra, with her round belly, was running out of breath.

“Stop! Stop! I can’t...”

Whoever it was finally stopped, and took her inside a house. Cassandra was too busy catching her breath to look around, but she could tell it was the one of the most common kind of house for middle-class people, big enough for one or two people to live in. It was pretty dark, however, as the individual left the windows closed.

“It’s really you,” whispered the woman, still standing a few steps away from her.

“Who are...”

But before she could finish her sentence, Cassandra’s eyes finally met the woman’s eyes.

There was no mistake possible, no matter how incredible it looked. She had such a strikingly similar face, the same emerald eyes, the same dark brown hair. She only looked a bit younger, and her lips were fuller, her cheeks chubbier.

“Mi...Missandra?” she stuttered.

The young woman nodded slowly, looking like she was having a hard time believing her own eyes, too.

“You’re... really Cassandra, aren’t you? I can’t believe it.”

They were both in utter shock. Cassandra fell on the closest seat, her legs unable to support her a minute longer. She observed her younger sister from head to toe, shocked to have found her, but also shocked to see how alike they were, physically. Missandra had grown up to be a strikingly beautiful woman. Cassandra was pure beauty, but Missandra was a cultivated one. Every detail of her face looked perfect, as if it had come out of a painting. She had some light makeup on, almond-shaped eyes and the bits of her skin visible didn’t have a single scar, unlike her older sister, who had marks everywhere. She was indeed a bit curvier than Cassandra, too, showing that she had probably gotten better meals while growing up. Her hair was cut shorter, to her chest, and was a bit more voluminous and curly.

She stepped a bit closer, looking at Cassandra as if she was seeing a ghost.

“How did you...”

“I saw you on the terrace of my shop, so I...”

“That was your shop?” asked Cassandra, suddenly realizing what had happened.

Of all places, they had picked her sister’s shop! She had thought about an apothecary business but didn’t think about a tea shop, although those were increasingly popular in that part of the Capital, as tea was considered a fancy drink.

Missandra nodded, taking off her hood.

“Yes. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw you, with a Royal, too, but I knew I had to move quickly. So I drugged your drinks and put the antidote in yours. It was easy to know which one. Apparently your tastes haven’t changed at all.”

So that was why Dahlia hadn't felt anything, like Cassandra she had drunk both the drug and the antidote... Dahlia! Cassandra suddenly realized she had left her at the scene with Shareen. Well, at least the Princess wouldn't be alone when she woke up.

"What the Heavens happened to you?" whispered Missandra, looking at her body and pink dress, detailing her sister from head to toe. "You're so...thin. And...are you really...?"

"Yeah, I'm a concubine, and...pregnant."

Her sister's face immediately seemed on the verge of tears, looking completely sorry for her.

"No, no, Missandra, I am fine! I am really fine, this is not..."

"If only I had found you sooner," she sobbed. "I swear, I looked everywhere for you as soon as I could leave the Red District! But when I finally found your last Master, a few months ago, they said you had been taken to the Imperial Palace as a slave to be sacrificed, I thought...I really thought you were..."

"You thought I died," sighed Cassandra. "No, I was saved unexpectedly. I was looking for you, too! But back then, the Red District was the one place I never went, and when I got there yesterday, they said you had left months ago. Missandra, I am so sorry, you were sold to a brothel."

Missandra shook her head, trying to wipe her tears.

"No, it was probably nothing compared to you, Big Sister. To be taken as a concubine. I am so glad I took you out of there! Don't worry, I can give you some of my clothes, and we can leave the Capital, they won't find us! I have enough money saved away. We can terminate the pregnancy, too, so they..."

"What? Missandra, no!"

Cassandra had screamed without thinking because she was shocked. She hadn't thought her sister would think she needed to be saved, let alone help her get rid of her child! She put her hands on her belly, immediately getting protective of her child.

"No, no, Missandra, you don't understand."

“Big Sister, I know what those red or pink dresses mean! You don’t have to be afraid, I will help you! I know it must have been hard to live with those wretched Imperials, but now...”

She was stepping closer to take Cassandra’s hand, but the elder sister shook her head resolutely.

“Missandra, listen! I do not need to be saved. You need to listen to me. My Prince loves me, he really takes care of me, and this is our baby, our loved baby. The woman I was with earlier, she’s his sister, Princess Shareen. She’s here to protect me, too! Actually, we should go back and check on her, Shareen might...”

“No!”

Her sister grabbed her hand, shaking her head, looking completely panicked.

“No, no, you can’t go back! I don’t know what they told you, but the Imperial Family is cruel, Cassandra! How many other concubines does he have? Those women kill each other every day! And you can get killed anytime, too, as soon as he gets bored! Big Sister, you don’t want that life! We can...”

Before Missandra finished her sentence, a loud growl suddenly resonated from above, making them both jump. Cassandra immediately understood what was going on, but her sister’s eyes were wide open in utter fear, looking at the roof.

“What is...”

“That’s my bodyguard,” sighed Cassandra.

The next second, the walls and floor shook strangely, and the roof over their heads was completely blown away in a big gust of wind. Wood and stone fell apart in all directions, small debris falling around them, and Krai’s big head appeared above, growling loudly.

Missandra screamed in pure terror and tried to run away, but Cassandra held her hand, preventing her from leaving and trying to have her calm down.

“Missandra, it’s fine! It’s fine!”

“It will eat us! That beast will eat us! That dragon is...”

“A friend! I promise he won’t hurt you,” yelled Cassandra, desperately trying to cover the dragon’s loud growls. “Krai, hush! I’m fine, calm down, please!”

The dragon, apparently unhappy or confused, kept growling over their heads, its huge claws tearing some of the furniture around them. The red eyes were glowing in anger at Missandra, despite Cassandra's attempt to hide her behind herself.

Right then, the door was blown away from the only wall left standing, and Shareen appeared looking furious, followed by Dahlia.

"What the hell is going on?!"

"Shareen, are you fine?" asked Cassandra.

"Fine? I wake up in the middle of an empty street with you gone, and that big scaled ass making a mess of the place looking for you! What the hell happened? Wait, don't tell me that's really your sister?"

The Princess had finally realized the striking resemblance between Cassandra and the terrified young woman standing next to her. Missandra, after a few seconds of surprise, jumped in front of her sister, taking a little dagger out, glaring at Shareen and obviously getting ready to defend herself and Cassandra, despite her own fear. Cassandra sighed again, totally exhausted by the turn of events.

"Yes, it is. Sorry, she's the one who..."

"I drugged you, how come you're already awake?" asked Missandra with a frown.

Despite glaring at Shareen, she couldn't help but also try to keep an eye on the dragon too, wondering which would be the bigger threat. The Princess rolled her eyes, crossing her arms.

"I have dragon's blood. You think your little sleeping potion can knock me out for so long? I only needed a few minutes for my blood to get rid of it. Don't do that again though, or I'm slicing your pretty little neck next time. And keep that toothpick away. With the way you are holding it, I can tell you'll only manage to injure yourself."

"Hinue, li yunja ya..." whispered Missandra.

"Ya men da paerins da Linue," replied Cassandra. "Alshenjei li. Missandra, bato kaichira."

"Kaichira? Hinue, li snaira!"

"Alra, mai li ya hensan. Linue, bato... almere."

What was that? Shareen and Dahlia exchanged a look, completely baffled. They had never thought Cassandra could speak another language! Whatever they were speaking, the sisters' sounds were completely different from the Dragon Empire's language. They couldn't understand a single word they had said.

Whatever those words they exchanged meant, Missandra was still sending doubtful glances at Shareen, refusing to leave her sister's side. Cassandra, though, was obviously trying to have her calm down.

"What the hell was that?" asked Shareen, baffled.

"Alshenjenui, Hinue. Li ghen..."

"Missandra, it's alright. Please. I promise Shareen won't hurt me or you," replied Cassandra, switching back to the Dragon Empire's tongue.

"I still haven't decided on that, actually," said Shareen, clicking her tongue and glaring Missandra's way.

Apparently, she was still not over the drug incident. Cassandra sighed.

Missandra, next to her, couldn't take her eyes off Krai. Upon Shareen's arrival, the dragon had finally stopped growling and was simply looking at them, its red eyes filled with curiosity, with one paw on the last wall that remained standing. The large nose was sniffing Cassandra, as if to check if everything was alright. She gently patted its snout.

"That B... Black Dragon. That's the War God's..."

"His name is Krai," said Cassandra. "He's my friend, and sort of my bodyguard too, as you can see."

"He just destroyed my house!"

"Yeah, he tends to do that when you kidnap his favorite toy," sneered Shareen.

"Kidnap? You're the ones who took my sister away! Snaira!"

Shareen frowned, annoyed, and turned to Cassandra.

"Whatever she is calling me, I do hope that chick knows being your little sister doesn't give her an extra life, Cassandra."

“Missandra, please, calm down. We should go back to the Palace, now. We have caused enough trouble. I don’t want His Highness worrying about where I am, either. And we need to talk where we can both be safe, alright? I need you to trust me, just this once.”

“Hinue, I don’t want you going back there.”

For a second, she recognized the eyes of the little Missandra, the little sister she had been separated from many, many years ago. It was heartbreaking to see that scared expression of hers again. Despite everything, Cassandra understood her younger sister’s concerns. She had survived all on her own until now. She was scared, just like Cassandra had been, before she had met and learned more about Kairen. Moreover, the terrifying rumors about the Imperial Family that Missandra had probably heard were sadly true, for most of them.

She took Missandra’s cheeks between her hands, trying to have her focus on her instead of the Imperial Princess or dragon.

“I promise it will be fine,” she said in their native tongue. “I just need you to trust your big sister this time, alright? We just found each other, Missandra, I am not risking losing you again. Come with me to the Imperial Palace, I’ll explain everything.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am, Linue. Now, come.”

As they arrived back at the Imperial Palace, the doors opened wide thanks to Shareen’s purple outfit and Cassandra’s pink dress, but her younger sister couldn’t stop frowning and being wary of everyone they crossed paths with. She stuck right behind Cassandra, checking everything around them as if she was ready to hide, fight, or run away at any moment.

Shareen walked ahead, as usual, to head back to her apartments, not far from her brother’s. She was still pissed about getting drugged in the middle of the street, enough that she didn’t even want to mention that incident.

Cassandra, however, had other worries in mind. For some reason, she wasn’t feeling too good about her sister being in the Palace. Missandra would be an easy target for anyone who wanted to harm her, and she clearly remembered Phetra’s evil ways. The cruel Princess couldn’t attack Cassandra as long as she wore an Imperial Title and the

symbolic pink dress, but Missandra, on the other hand, was a mere commoner. She could be killed without blinking.

As soon as she and Shareen had come back, an Imperial Servant had informed them that the War God was still in a session with the Emperor. Hence, instead of going back to her Prince's apartments, Cassandra decided to go to the one place she thought would be safer.

Her apartments in the Palace had nothing to do with her own Diamond Palace, but Kareen was still ruling over the place like a Goddess over her temple. The servants, used to seeing Cassandra go in and out on a daily basis, didn't even question her. Surprisingly enough, the War God's concubine had less trouble meeting with the Imperial Concubine than the Emperor himself.

"Where are we going?" asked Missandra in a whisper.

"Don't worry, Little Sister, everything is fine."

Behind them, Dahlia was following the sisters closely, still very confused to hear them speak another language. She knew that the Third Prince's concubine had grown up outside of the Empire's borders, but she had never heard about the southern tribes or their culture. It was a very unexpected reminder of the Lady's unique background.

"Cassandra, dearest! What are you doing here?" said Kareen, surprised to see the young woman come in at that time.

Cassandra bowed politely.

"Sorry, Lady Kareen, I hoped I could stay here with my sister until His Highness is back?"

The Imperial Concubine glanced at Missandra after her sentence, not hiding her surprise to see Cassandra's sibling there. She had heard Cassandra mention a younger sister a couple of times, but she had no idea she had been searching for her since she was back in the Capital.

Seeing Cassandra's worried expression, and her younger sister looking terrified behind her, the Imperial Concubine understood quickly what was going on. She gestured for a servant to approach.

"You two must have quite a lot to catch up on. Feel free to use the tea room."

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Just like that, the servant led Cassandra and Missandra into a different room. Kareen watched the women go, well aware of why her grandson’s mother had chosen to come here. She immediately gave instructions for Missandra, too, to be monitored closely, and for Kairen to be informed.

Meanwhile, Cassandra and Missandra were finally alone in another room.

The younger sister couldn’t relax, however. She grabbed Cassandra’s hand.

“Big Sister, how come you’re here? Who was that woman, and how...how did you become a concubine, of all things?”

Cassandra took a deep breath. She understood Missandra’s concerns, but it was time she explained everything. From the first time she was bought and sent to work for her first master, up until her meeting with the Prince, and everything that had happened afterward. Cassandra told her sister everything.

A servant had brought them two cups of tea, but neither of the sisters touched it. They were too absorbed in their conversation, trying to patch together the pieces of their past. When Cassandra finally arrived at the present, Missandra was crying.

“I...I can’t believe you’ve been through all of that. A slave! I...I thought you might have been freed, like me. You’re so much smarter, and...educated. I hoped you’d found a good man and married early...”

As she talked, she kept glancing over all of the scars on Cassandra’s body, her lips trembling. The concubine was so used to seeing all those scars, she didn’t care much about them anymore. They had healed long ago, and even her Prince never reminded her about her damaged body.

However, for Missandra, this was the brutal vision of her sister’s hardships. She felt almost ashamed of her own body, spotless and well-nourished.

“Missandra, what happened to you? I told you what we heard, but...I need to know.”

The younger sister nodded, trying to wipe her tears away.

“It’s mostly as you heard. I was...sold right after you, to a brothel. Until I was thirteen, they simply trained us, groomed us to be beautiful and seduce men. I had my first customer when I was thirteen, but I wasn’t tamed. I didn’t want to lay and be a

toy for them to play with. So whenever I could, I would rebel, cause a ruckus, and make sure I was locked away from the customers for a while. I stole as much money as I could without being noticed. I had intended on buying myself out of slavery, but I didn't think someone would pay my debt for me."

"Was that...the husband they mentioned?"

Missandra nodded.

"A good man, actually. He was a scholar's son. We got along because he was smart, my favorite customer. With the money he borrowed from his family, he convinced my last workplace to sell me to him, and he bought my freedom. Marrying him was part of the deal, but I didn't mind."

"What happened then?"

"His father got mad when he learned what I...that I was a former slave and prostitute. He chased both of us. I wanted us to just go and buy a house, but he kept wanting to go back and convince his family. He went there four times and...the last time, he didn't come back. I thought he had abandoned me, but then I learned one of his father's concubine's sons had killed him. So I never appeared in front of his family again."

"So that's when you decided to open your shop?"

"Exactly. Truth is, I thought many times about leaving the Capital, but...I've been here since I was seven. I wouldn't even know where to go."

Cassandra let out a long sigh, disheartened. She was glad Missandra hadn't suffered too many hardships, but it didn't take anything from her pain as an older sister to hear that she had been made a sex slave.

"I am so glad we are together now," she said.

"I still do not trust those people," replied Missandra with a frown. "They are murderers, big sister! They won't hesitate to murder their own blood!"

"Missandra, I promise he's different."

Her younger sister shook her head in disbelief.

"They take as many concubines as they want, they toy with them, and they throw them away like trash! Do you know how many times I've seen this, in the Red

District? Some women are dying to be made concubines, and then a few months later, we find their bodies outside of the gates!”

“I am his only concubine.”

“He probably killed the previous ones.”

Cassandra stayed silent. Sadly, that was the truth... She had been aware of it since long ago, from her first time at the Onyx Castle. Kairen hated the women thrown at him by his brothers or father and had killed them without thinking twice.

However, she still knew she was different.

“We can leave, Cassandra,” insisted her sister. “We can leave and have a normal life, just the two of us. As commoners, away from the Capital!”

Cassandra was about to reply, but rushing steps came from the outside. Dahlia, who had been waiting outside, walked in and opened the door wide for the War God to come in.

Immediately, both sisters stood up, each with a different expression on. Cassandra walked up to him, and Kairen naturally put his arm around her waist, while staring at Missandra. The younger sister had a ferocious look in her eyes, and her hand on her dagger’s handle, ready to take it out.

“Your sister?” he asked in a cold voice.

“Yes. This is Missandra.”

The two of them didn’t say anything, staring at each other with a burning animosity between them. Cassandra wasn’t too comfortable about this situation, either. Her heart felt uncomfortable, and she turned to her Prince, trying to repress it.

“Can she stay with us for now?”

“Big sister, I don’t want to stay here! You should leave and leave that man!”

“Missandra, I promise you will be fine. But I am not leaving him.”

Kairen was surprised to hear the younger sister use another language, and even more surprised to hear Cassandra speak it back, just like Shareen had been. He looked down at Cassandra.

“What is it?”

“Let my sister go!” suddenly said Missandra, not hiding her anger.

Kairen replied with a glare, and his arm holding Cassandra a bit closer to him. He was judging her younger sister, so young but so fierce. Missandra was obviously terrified, but seeing Cassandra close to that man, she refused to back down.

“I don’t trust you to protect her; people like you made her a slave!”

“Missandra, my Lord is the one who freed me!”

“I won’t hurt her,” said Kairen, still glaring at Missandra.

Cassandra couldn’t tell if he was unhappy about her sister’s tone, or her thinking he would harm her, but his murderous glare was not lessening one bit while saying those words. She was terrified he would kill her if he ran out of patience, and put a hand on his torso, hoping to have him calm down.

“I’ll explain to her...Missandra, I promise, you can trust him.”

“Trust him?” whispered her sister in disbelief. “Trust him? The last man I ever saw you with, dragged you by your hair across our village to sell you! I am never entrusting my sister to any man again!”

The instant Missandra had let out those words, the War God’s eyes darkened, turning to Cassandra, furious.

“Who did that?”

“What?” asked Cassandra, confused.

“Who dragged you by your hair?”

She shook her head, baffled he had been angered by something that had happened to her long before he had even known her.

“I don’t remember, it was such a long time ago,” she said. “The men who raided our village and sold us. Calm down, please, it is not important right now.”

He kept himself from asking again, but Cassandra could tell by the look in his eyes, that the matter was far from over. She turned to her younger sister, who also seemed

baffled. The War God's reaction had obviously exceeded her expectations of him, leaving her confused.

"Missandra... stay for a few days at least, please? We have so much to catch up on, and I want to show you how safe and happy I feel with Kairen. Please?"

Though her sister seemed unsure, her eyes on Kairen had changed from a glare to a doubtful look.

"Fine. But I am not leaving your side."

"That's perfectly fine," a voice said from behind them.

Looking as regal as ever, Kareen appeared, accompanied by two servants. Shareen, who was sulking behind her, immediately rolled her eyes.

"Princess Shareen, did you not go back to your apartments?" asked Cassandra.

"That was my plan, however, Mother had her people drag me here to explain what had happened."

So Kareen was already aware of the whole situation? Indeed, she was now observing Missandra, with a little smile upon her face. Cassandra immediately turned to her.

"Lady Kareen, would it be alright for my younger sister to stay here? She'll be far safer with you."

"Of course, my dear," replied the Imperial Concubine. "I would love to get to know your only living family member. For now, she can act as one of my servants to blend in. She can even accompany me to the New Year Celebrations. That Old Dragon will make a fuss if I don't at least make an appearance."

"Older Sister, that's..."

"She's a good woman Missandra, you will be safe with her."

"Why can't I stay with you?"

"I have to be by My Lord's side during the ceremony. Plus, I would rather keep your true identity quiet in the meantime. Others could use you to get to me."

"So there are people who want you dead!"

“Yes, but don’t worry, I am fine,” insisted Cassandra, taking her hand. “Missandra, please? For me?”

The younger sister glanced at the three people behind her, still unsure. She eventually nodded, tightening her grip on her sister’s hand.

“Fine... but it’s only because I trust you, Cassandra, not them.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” growled Shareen.

Cassandra smiled and lightly caressed her sister’s cheek.

“I’m so glad I finally found you!”

They hesitated a bit before tightly hugging each other. Cassandra was on the verge of tears, though they would have been happy tears. After nine years apart, she had finally found her younger sister; alive and well. She could barely believe it, she had dreamt of this day for so long.

Even as they moved apart, both sisters were reluctant to let go of the other’s hand.

“Cassandra, you should go and get ready, dear, or you’ll be late,” said Kareen. “Don’t worry, your younger sister is in good hands. I’ll make sure no one notices her.”

“Where are you going?” asked Missandra, worried again.

“I’ll be right back, I promise.”

Cassandra smiled at her sister, before following her Prince outside. She felt anxious to be parting with Missandra, even if it was just for a short while. However, the Imperial Concubine was right, she had to get changed before the start of the ceremony.

The New Year Celebrations were special in the Dragon Empire, inciting joy throughout the entire country.

Upon their return to the Prince’s apartments, Cassandra was shocked to discover half a dozen Imperial Servants waiting to help her get ready for the ceremony. Before she could utter a single word, she was swept into a whirlwind of hands, pampering every inch of her skin and hair.

The War God’s fearsome aura, as usual, intimidated most of the servants, who all avoided his piercing gaze. He only required the assistance of one to help him put his armor on and so he was ready long before his concubine. As he waited for her to

finish, he silently watched her. A small smile gracing his face as he delighted in the sight of Cassandra being pampered and beautified by the servants.

Cassandra's shyness was adorably innocent, she kept blushing at any compliment and each accessory given to her. He knew his father had sent a lot from the Empire's precious treasury. Every piece of jewelry she wore was dazzling on her skin. It was mostly diamonds, gold, and emeralds that accentuated her pale skin and sparkling green eyes, along with her pink dress. The dress itself was exquisite. Little diamonds that were embroidered into the bodice sparkled when they caught the light, while several long layers flowed around her each time she moved. It was seductive enough for a concubine's apparel, yet the pale pink and delicate fabric left a hint of innocence and purity.

Cassandra felt relieved when all of the servants were finally chased out by her Prince. She had never been comfortable with crowds, especially not crowds of Imperial Servants all surrounding her to touch and manipulate her.

She looked at herself in the mirror, fascinated by the stranger gazing back at her. Was that really the woman who was a worthless slave a few months ago? Now, she truly looked like a Princess. Even her hair had been styled beautifully, with little braids and some sparkling gold jewelry in it. She turned to Kairen with a shy smile and walked up to him. She had noticed how much the Prince enjoyed seeing her getting all dressed up, compared to her usual simple looks. Cassandra knew it also satisfied him to see her adorned in pink, leaving no doubt of her current status.

"I want to take you right here and now," he whispered.

"Can we wait until after the celebrations?" Cassandra chuckled. "I think I really like this dress."

He smiled and pulled her in close to him. They exchanged a long, tender kiss. As he was sitting and she was standing, Cassandra wrapped her arms around him to caress his neck and hairline, a gesture she loved doing. After all the events that day, she was happy to be back in his comforting embrace. She was slowly realizing just how much she loved to have him close, and how much she missed him when he wasn't.

"Are you happier now?" he asked.

"I am. I finally found my younger sister...she's grown so much, but she's still a baby in my eyes."

Missandra was sixteen years old now, and Cassandra herself had turned eighteen only a couple of weeks earlier. She was glad they had finally found their way back to each other, despite all the years apart. It was better to have waited eight years than to have never been reunited at all. Cassandra was so grateful for this incredible reunion.

“All is good then,” whispered the War God.

“Are you still concerned that I am unhappy here?”

He nodded, putting his forehead against her little baby bump. She noticed he liked touching and caressing her growing tummy.

“As long as you are happy, your sister can come along with us anywhere.”

Cassandra couldn't help but smile, a bit moved by his words. She had worried to the point where it felt like a thorn was stabbing into her heart, but Kairen had extinguished that fear without even knowing.

“Truth is...I was a bit worried about you meeting my sister.”

He frowned and peered up at her, wondering what she could have been worried about. He never had any intention to harm Cassandra's kin or anyone she loved. He wouldn't even have thought of hurting Missandra, he just didn't care much for her. He couldn't understand her train of thought.

“I wouldn't hurt her,” he said.

“Oh, no, I didn't mean it in that way. I was more concerned that you might...like her.”

Cassandra flushed red as shame washed over her. She had just found her younger sister, yet that hint of jealousy in her heart wouldn't go away. Since she had been with Kairen, her heart had grown into that of a woman's, and some darker feelings came along with that. She couldn't help it, constantly seeing the other concubines all so pretty and dolled up, striving to get men's attention. Her own jealousy and fear had awoken within her, when those women had tried to seduce her Prince right in front of her.

Despite the joy of finding Missandra, she was also struck with the same horrible envy after seeing her sister's scarless body and natural beauty. Missandra had grown into a beautiful woman with lustful curves and a natural charm. She was sure to be the envy of many women.

“I thought...She looks a lot like me, but...prettier, and more womanly, too. I was afraid you would... become more attracted to her than me.”

The Prince remained silent, processing her words, looking at Cassandra with a thoughtful expression. She couldn't tell what he was thinking, which made her nervous. Did she seem self centered, or egotistical? She had never thought of herself as a woman who would need reassurance, but her words may have made her sound so...envious and selfish.

However, when Kairen finally spoke, his words were definitely not what she was expecting.

“She...looks like you?” he asked, looking confused.

Cassandra was speechless. Of course she looked like her, Missandra was obviously her duplicate! How could he not see that at all?

“You didn't notice that Missandra resembled me?” she asked.

“No.”

“Really?”

“I don't see the similarities at all.”

She couldn't help but laugh after the shock wore off. What kind of man says this? Even Shareen had said their resemblance was uncanny! They had the same green eyes, the same pale skin, practically the same faces! People had even confused them for one another in the Red District, too.

“So you didn't...feel attracted to her?” she asked, trying not to think about how childish that sentence might sound.

“Not at all.”

Cassandra didn't expect that at all. Her Prince had never seemed responsive to any other woman besides her, but Missandra was her younger, prettier and curvier sister. And yet, Kairen didn't seem to feel anything or even see the similarities between them!

She couldn't stop laughing, realizing how stupid she had been, and how incredible this man was. The whole thing seemed ridiculously funny now.

Kairen was still baffled by her laughter, but he couldn't stop himself from smiling too. Cassandra rarely looked so genuinely amused, and her musical laughter and sparkling eyes were beautiful.

"Does it make you that happy that I'm not attracted to your sister?"

She shook her head, kissing him softly. Then, she put her hands on his spiky cheeks, unable to stop her smile or the wave of pure love she felt for that man. She stared intently into his dark eyes, her feelings bursting out of her chest.

"I'm happy because you see me for me," she whispered in his ear. "Like I'm the only woman you can see...the only one you want."

He was a Prince. He could have any woman, slave or noble, from anywhere in the world; even the most beautiful ones. Yet, he only had eyes for her. Cassandra the Slave, with her scar-blemished skin, malnourished body, and pale complexion. She was among the least beautiful women in the Palace, in her opinion, but he never seemed to see that.

Kairen agreed that indeed, his eyes only admired Cassandra, but was more stunned that Cassandra hadn't realized this already. Truth was, he had barely ever looked at other women, except to satisfy his sexual desires. He knew what beauty in a woman was, of course, but Cassandra had come and destroyed every standard he had long ago. Ever since he had set his eyes on her, this inexplicable and unmeasurable attraction he had towards her eclipsed everything else. She was the only woman that appealed to him after that, and the more he learned about her, the greater his attraction grew. The numerous scars and her undernourished body that left her feeling so self-conscious were, for him, merely the infuriating reminders of what his woman had gone through. He hadn't even realized how other women no longer appealed to him until she had pointed it out. What he had become aware of, however, was the devouring desire to keep her all to himself, and the bloodthirst for any man who dared to touch or even look at her.

He nodded and stood up, holding her in his arms gently.

"I want to see you in a gold dress."

"A gold dress?" Cassandra asked.

She had never heard about golden dresses before.

"The dress used for Imperial weddings."

She was rendered speechless. So brides in Imperial weddings wore dresses in gold? How fancy! She had assumed they married in purple. Or maybe orange or yellow, like the commoners. She tried to imagine a dress of gold, but it only came through her mind as some strange sculpture.

However, she knew what he had meant by that statement.

“Can we ask your mother’s permission first?” she asked.

“My mother? Why?”

“I am not so sure that would be a good idea. I want Lady Kareen’s opinion.”

“My mother loves you.”

“I know, but she is also a very reasonable and smart woman. If I hear her opinion, I will make up my mind faster. Please?”

The Prince frowned. He didn’t like the idea of Cassandra needing anyone else’s opinion to become his wife. He wanted her to be sure, to say yes here and now, then get married right away. The fact she would want to include anyone else in the matter annoyed him.

However, the Imperial Concubine liked Cassandra a lot. The Prince was certain she would approve and so eventually nodded.

“Thanks,” said Cassandra, giving him another quick kiss.

