

Chapter 12

Cassandra didn't know much about the New Year Celebration in the Imperial Palace. In most modest families, a little dinner was prepared, prayers of thanks were uttered to the Dragon Gods, and families spent the night in their garden or the streets looking at the stars. Street fairs would appear everywhere around the Capital, for people to go out and enjoy the festivities. There were plenty of tents around full of hot food, prayer candles, incense, and decorations. In the rich or noble families, the festivities came to them. They would have their garden set out for a great reception, where they would invite friends and family to watch entertainers and spend the night together. They definitely wouldn't mix with the commoners, though.

Cassandra was pretty sure most of the same festivities would take place within the walls of the Imperial Palace as well. So she wasn't surprised when the Prince took her to a large garden surrounding a beautiful lake. With the night slowly falling, the colors reflecting off the water under the moonlight were absolutely gorgeous. It was a very flowery garden, and the servants had hung hundreds of decorations, paper lamps, and dragon puppets.

All the ladies wore their prettiest gowns. The women lounging around wore thick makeup and flaunted every piece of gold jewelry they owned. Their dresses appeared brand new and extra fancy. A lot of people turned their heads when Cassandra and Kairen walked by. Everyone except the Imperial Family had to bow, and that's when Cassandra realized there weren't many outsiders invited. She recognized a handful of generals, some ministers, and the Emperor's Counselors. Aside from those people and their families, the whole Imperial Family was present. Around a hundred people were there in total, including all the Princesses and concubines.

The servants were working hard, constantly bringing food and drinks to the tables, while serving the whims of everyone and being careful of each guest. For once, there were no dragons in sight, but truthfully, there wouldn't have been much space for anyone to sit if they had attended. The whole garden was filled with people and tables surrounding the large shimmering lake.

Cassandra was stunned by the beautiful scene in front of her. She stayed close to her Prince, holding on to his arm while he guided her towards his mother. Kareen and Shareen were already there, and no one dared to approach the duo. The Emperor's favorite Imperial Concubine had picked a simple dark magenta dress and some gold

jewelry for her hair, but that was it. Cassandra knew she didn't want to look like she had put too much effort in for the Imperial Emperor.

Shareen had simply put on one of her purple dresses, and her military belt to keep her sword by her side.

"You two took your sweet time. Did you get lost?" she growled when they arrived.

Cassandra bowed respectfully as she was required, and Kareen gestured for her to come closer and sit next to her. The Imperial Concubine had her own table big enough to seat eight or nine people, but everyone knew that all those seats wouldn't be used. She had probably been given a large table and seated so close to the Emperor out of respect, as she was his favorite and the mother of a favored Prince.

The Emperor hadn't arrived yet, so the four of them were able to drink and chat freely. The conversation was mostly led by Shareen and her mother. Instead of sitting with them, Kairen stood behind Cassandra with his arms crossed, not engaging in the conversation before him.

"What are the usual celebrations for the Imperial New Year like?" asked Cassandra.

"Oh, that old man will give a speech about it. Afterwards, we will get to enjoy a few shows, some of the concubines might sing or dance, then we can eat and drink the rest of the night away, until we are too tired."

Cassandra was surprised to hear that some of the concubines might demonstrate their talents tonight. She hadn't expected that. The women usually watched professional performers along with the Imperial Family, but she had never seen any take the stage. She hoped she would be left alone, though. She hated having any form of attention on her, and would rather go unnoticed, staying by her Prince's side.

"The ministers and generals usually use this occasion to have their daughters or younger sisters noticed by the Emperor or the Princes, too," said Shareen. "You should expect some fighting between the concubines and the greedy newcomers."

Cassandra understood that perfectly. No wonder all the young concubines had gone the extra mile to appear prettier than ever. They were probably hoping to eclipse all their opponents. Indeed, some younger girls by the generals' side were dressed in their best outfits and with lots of jewelry, already sending glances here and there. Cassandra couldn't help but frown, seeing some of them sneakily eyeing her Prince.

“Those little pests,” grumbled Shareen. “As if the concubines weren’t annoying and petty enough, they give them kittens to play with.”

“Do the Princes usually...notice them?”

“You bet,” scoffed the Princess. “Our Fifth Brother is a real dog when it comes to beautiful women, he just wants them all.”

Indeed, she could see the Fifth Prince already talking to two young ladies, despite the numerous concubines glaring behind him. How could he handle so many women?

She heard one of the servants behind Kareen Psst quietly and looked over to see a woman smiling. Missandra had been given a cloth to cover her hair and most of her face and she wore a large servant’s dress. It wasn’t uncommon for the young servant women to hide their appearances, to remain unnoticed. She was a bit relieved that her sister was hidden that way, and still able to be close.

“So shameless,” she sighed, swiftly going behind Cassandra.

“Try not to be noticed, Missandra, please?” she whispered.

“I will, don’t worry, big sister. Who wants to be in those leeches’ way!”

“I still think you should have left the girl in your apartments, Mother,” Shareen commented disapprovingly. “If she gets killed...”

“The one who got tricked by a sixteen-year-old girl does not get to speak on the matter,” retorted Kareen.

Shareen’s red and ashamed face was an unusual sight, Cassandra could barely hold her laughter. Even Missandra made a little sound to show she was proud of herself, and thankful to the Imperial Concubine that she mentioned it. Apparently, Kareen had managed to win a bit of her trust in that short lapse of time without Cassandra.

Cassandra could tell her younger sister was silently checking their surroundings and everyone present, but she wordlessly prayed Missandra wouldn’t do anything crazy or put herself in danger.

Suddenly, the usual music announced the Imperial Emperor’s arrival, and everyone stood to welcome the most powerful man in the Dragon Empire. It was quite strange to see him arrive last, in his purple and gold outfit, and without his dragon or anyone to guard him. He silently stepped forward, everyone lowered their heads as he took his

place upon the large Golden Throne. His magnificent throne was perched atop a small hill that allowed him to oversee the entire garden.

“Please rise, dear family and friends. It is my greatest pleasure to welcome you all tonight as we burn the ashes of the past year and open our arms to a new one, full of prosperity for your beloved Empire.”

After everyone stood, he began a long speech about the past and difficulties the Dragon Empire had faced that year, but also praising its greatest accomplishments. Cassandra was surprised to hear him mention some uncomfortable topics like war, disease, and poverty in a speech, but also congratulating some great medical discoveries, new markets, and new alliances found with neighboring countries. She had expected a much more shallow speech and found herself entranced by the deep sentimental words he spoke.

“In the light of our past mistakes, it has come to my attention that we shall shift, improve our ways and in doing so, enrich our culture and people. We shall no longer turn a blind eye to the misery and suffering of others. No longer lavishly enjoying the blood sacrificed by others for our own selfish comfort. The sons and daughters of the Dragon Empire shall grow wise, strong and fair. I, the Emperor of this Empire, am Justice. I am the Golden Dragon who rules over this Empire. For the new year, Your Emperor has a new edict to proclaim. Hear my words, my dear children, and obey.”

Cassandra was astounded, she wasn't the only one holding her breath either. What changes did the Emperor demand his people to follow?

“From this year forth, let it be known that the Dragon Empire will no longer ignore the misery of its people. Each and every child, woman, and man in the Dragon Empire, are my people. As such, I declare from this day forward, that no man or woman will be labelled the property of anyone but the Dragon Empire and the Golden Dragon! Let it be known that the Golden Dragon will not turn a blind eye any longer to the innocent blood spilled and lives taken.”

Like Cassandra, many people around the garden were quite puzzled. Only the scholar and a few of the Princes and Princesses understood enough to be shocked. Cassandra couldn't understand what was going on.

She turned to Kareen who had a knowing smile on her face. Next to her, Shareen was smirking, too.

“Lady Kareen, what do the Emperor's words mean?” whispered Cassandra.

“He’s referring to the slaves,” replied Kareen. “From now on, no one will be able to own any human being. The slaves will be the property of the Emperor and the Empire only.”

“But that...”

“Father wants no one to be able to kill a slave,” whispered Shareen. “You cannot kill or harm the belongings of the Empire. Our people will have to request them from the Emperor, which allows close monitoring of the slaves. And he’s made it, so no one will have the authority or permission to kill their slaves freely.”

Hearing the speech explained left Cassandra stunned. She felt like crying, but she couldn’t. It was too much of a shock for her. If she hadn’t been seated already, she would have most likely fallen to the ground.

But then she caught the eyes of the Emperor who was staring directly at her.

“This year has been a year of great change in my heart. The Golden Dragon has seen many things and heard even greater things. Because the most beautiful treasures can be hidden away from the bright eye of a dragon. Because the weak, frail demeanor of a simple slave woman can hide great knowledge and the ability to save hundreds of lives. Tonight, this Emperor is most proud of his Third Son! For the Black Dragon was wise enough to discover a raw diamond, even disguised as she was, amongst the coal. Our Nation’s God of War has performed spectacularly, both in matters of war and in matters of the heart. All rise in my son’s name, Kairen, War God and Third Son of the Golden Dragon.”

In a split second, every person present was bowing, not towards the Emperor, but towards Kairen. Cassandra’s breathing hitched. Witnessing all those people rise and bow to her Prince was an incredible sight. Aside from his father, everyone else had no choice but to obey and show their respect to the War God.

She felt her heart could not possibly bear any more emotions. As she was about to bow to her prince herself, Kairen placed his hands firmly on her shoulders, holding her in place so she couldn’t.

“Let them bow to you, too.”

Her heart was overwhelmed with emotions. Cassandra stood speechless, and hesitant. How could all those people bow to her? The most powerful beings of this Empire were all gathered here!

She could understand them bowing to Kairen. He was the Third Prince, the War God with many achievements behind him. It wasn't just about his parents' relationship, he was truly a remarkable man by himself. No matter how much the Emperor loved his concubines, he wouldn't have been so proud of a useless son no matter who his mother was.

Cassandra, however, didn't feel like she had achieved enough to deserve such treatment from the Emperor. Her medical accomplishments had been restricted to only the military camp for a few weeks.

Once the Prince was sure she wouldn't move, he released her shoulders and instead held her hand tightly, gazing at her with that determined look in his eyes. He would not let her bow.

So, though a little frightened, Cassandra didn't bow, despite her trembling hands and that little burst of fear growing in the back of her mind. As she looked around, the only other person not bowing was, of course, the Imperial Emperor himself. To her disbelief, as their eyes met, he gently smiled at her.

That was the most heart-warming, unexpected exchange she had with that man so far. With just one look, he gave her the confidence she needed to keep standing, to wash away the fear that had been engraved into her from the many years she endured as a slave.

"All right, you may all rise," announced the Emperor shortly after.

As everyone stood up, Cassandra only had one thought. She turned toward the Second Prince with his entourage, and sure enough, the whole group gathered there was glaring at them.

Cassandra wasn't clueless about what the Emperor had just done by putting one of his six sons forward. Though he couldn't be named as the official heir yet, Kairen was clearly his favorite, and the fact that Cassandra was bearing his child was bringing the most joy to the Old Emperor. As soon as their son was born in a few months' time, the Third Son would be appointed as the official heir.

She tried to understand the reactions of his brothers. Sure enough, the Second Son Vrehan had a sullen look on his face that said it all. Anour, as expected, was as happy as usual, speaking to one of their sisters. The Fifth and Fourth Princes didn't seem phased at all, for one was gawking at the young ladies, and the other looked bored to death. The First Prince however, was looking in their direction with a gentle smile.

Cassandra had heard little about the First Prince Sephir, but he was clearly in favor of Kairen being picked. Even during the usual banquet dinner talks, which she tried to listen to a bit, he was often on Kairen's side and supportive of him. She wondered how their relationship was so good.

"Your Highness, this is too much! A lot of nobles won't accept this change," suddenly said one of the ministers, stepping forward. "Slavery is an essential part of our Empire's economy. Besides, we are already doing a great favor to all those war prisoners by giving them jobs, and a chance to stay alive! We should..."

"How many slaves do you personally own, Minister?" asked the Emperor.

"I...I would say roughly thirty, Your Highness, but my wife manages such things in my stead, so..."

"How much do you pay your slaves?"

"I...I am not sure. The usual amount for a lower servant, I guess."

Several people sitting around clicked their tongues. The Emperor sighed.

"My dearest, White Lily, come here please."

After a few seconds, Cassandra realized that the nickname didn't belong to one of the Emperor's concubines, but to her. Kareen gently pushed her forward, and Cassandra shyly walked up to the Emperor, who was holding out his hand. A bit hesitant, she put her hand in his, and he caressed it, like a grandfather would have shown affection to one of his grandchildren.

"Do you see this beautiful young Lady, Minister?"

The man had his mouth open, clearly confused. Despite her gorgeous pink dress, and the jewelry she was wearing, Cassandra's scars were visible. Thin white lines on her pale skin, like the disturbing canvas of the perfect beauty she could have been. He seemed to slowly understand, but didn't dare say a word yet.

"My son took her as his concubine a few months ago, and she is now carrying my grandson."

"C...Congratulations, Your Highness."

"Thank you. But before my wise Son picked this flower, do you know where she was blooming?"

“N...No...”

“Tell him, White Lily.”

“I was a slave,” said Cassandra.

The guests around had no idea and gasped. Some may have remembered the unusual incident that had taken place during the dragon’s offering at the Red Moon Festival, and were able to make the link between the frail slave back then, and the beautiful young lady now standing before the Emperor. Due to her Prince’s care and her pregnancy, Cassandra had regained a few pounds, and she was nowhere near the dirty and scrawny girl they had remembered from before.

“Exactly. This young Lady was a slave in the house of the previous Minister, the exact same spot you acquired six months ago.”

Cassandra was surprised. So her former Master had been replaced by this young man. He was as shocked as her, and bowed, a bit ashamed.

“I had no idea, Your Highness.”

“My White Lily, how much did you earn back then?”

“N...Nothing, Your Highness.”

“Not a coin?”

Cassandra shook her head, a bit embarrassed by the memory of those days. Not only did she not get any money for herself, but she also had to beg for scraps from the kitchen, and considered herself extremely lucky on the days she could have a hot meal, or fill her stomach.

“Do you think this young Lady is a war prisoner, Minister?”

“I... I would think it’s unlikely, Your Highness,” admitted the man.

Indeed. Any scholar present knew who the enemies of the Empire were, and none would include white-skinned people. Aside from that, a young woman like Cassandra would have nothing to do with war prisoners who were enemy soldiers, usually captured on the battlefield. She was proof that the slavery system was unfair, and put innocents in shackles for the sake of the wealthy.

“See,” said the Emperor, “a young woman was made a slave. Not because her country lost a war, but because some greedy scum captured young innocents for profit. Then, she was sold to the house of one of my subjects, and made to scrounge for years to survive. No wages, only whips and work.”

Cassandra was blushing. She was standing next to the Emperor, the old man holding her hand firmly but gently, hearing him tell her story, with all eyes on her.

On the side, the First Prince coughed a few times, breaking the heavy silence after the Emperor’s words before he resumed.

“And yet, did you know that this woman is a doctor? A precious, knowledgeable healer, with new techniques our own doctors are struggling to understand. Instead of resenting this Empire, who treated her worse than livestock and brought her to the very brink of death, she worked along with my Third Son. Despite being a young woman, she willingly went to our Army Camp to heal our soldiers. Our people, Minister! Not just a handful, but hundreds of them were sent back to their units! I still receive her praises, day after day, from men on the front, from our own Generals. Now tell me once again, Minister, I dare you to tell me just how much your slaves are paid!”

Despite the shock, the young Minister seemed reasonable enough to acknowledge his wrongs. He bowed lowly, not only to the Emperor, but to Cassandra as well.

“Not enough, Your Highness. I thank Your Highness and the young Lady for opening my eyes to such unfairness. I promise to pay closer attention to my household’s slaves from today on, and will give Your Imperial Majesty my full support on the changes to be made within the slavery system of our beloved Dragon Empire.”

Cassandra was surprised. Most people would have been terrified by the Emperor’s anger, but despite his obvious fear, that man was also truly acknowledging his mistake. Not only because the Emperor had been angry, but because he seemed shocked by Cassandra’s story as well.

Behind him, some other people bowed, stating they would do the same, and bring more support to the Emperor for his reform.

Meanwhile, the young Minister stood and bowed again, clearly to Cassandra alone this time.

“My Lady, please accept the apologies of this blind man for underestimating these issues. I am grateful for this lesson, and hope you haven’t been hurt by my ignorant words earlier.”

“It...it is all right,” said Cassandra, unsure of what she was supposed to say in this situation.

“The Third Prince is truly wise, for picking such a precious jewel,” said the Minister.

Behind him, many more people praised Kairen too, and Cassandra realized this was a political move on their part. They wanted to make sure the Third Prince knew he had their full support early on after the Emperor had pointed him out.

“All right, all right!” declared the Emperor. “Please, all of you now enjoy the celebrations. No more politics, we will have plenty of time to discuss those topics later! Enjoy yourselves!”

A wave of applause and praises rose before all the guests went on to chat, drink, and eat. The Emperor, however, still held Cassandra’s hand, not letting her go, so she turned to him.

“Are you having fun, White Lily?” he asked her.

“Your Imperial Majesty, thank you for your generosity. That matter is truly important to me,” Cassandra replied, trying to hold back her tears of gratitude.

“I know, my dear White Lily. It is for me too. Now, tell me, how is my grandson growing?”

“Just fine, Your Highness,” she said with a smile, rubbing her little bump.

“Good, good! I can’t wait to meet him. Be sure to rest often and bring him to me as soon as he’s born! You make sure to give my son a daughter or two, after that! I want a granddaughter as cute as her mother!”

Cassandra chuckled. Did the Emperor want granddaughters to dote upon instead of Shareen or Kareen? He smiled back at her.

“I have a present for you, my White Lily! Wait just a moment...”

He gestured for a servant to approach, who was carrying a little chest.

“Look at this!”

Looking very proud of himself, the Emperor opened the chest. It contained...a golden tiara.

Cassandra was speechless. The design was thin and intricate. It was beautifully made. Despite the little tiara being so thin, she could tell it was a valuable item. Aside from the gold there were little lilies made of white jade with pink diamonds in their center, making her realize why he had gifted that item for her.

“Your Highness...”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful...”

“Isn’t it!? I had one of our best Imperial Artisans craft it especially for you. Now, you must wear it, let’s see how it looks!”

She was a bit overwhelmed. Was it alright for her to wear a tiara? That kind of item was usually reserved for the Imperial Family only! Regardless of her uneasy thoughts, she couldn’t refuse the Emperor. She lowered herself down to allow him to place the precious tiara upon her head.

Despite looking so thin and delicate, the precious piece of jewelry felt quite heavy on her head. Cassandra stood up, and the Emperor looked proud.

“Perfect, perfect! I knew this one would be perfect for you, my precious White Lily! Now go, enjoy the festivities! That stubborn son of mine will get angry at me if I monopolize too much of your time here. He and his sister never learned how to share!”

Cassandra chuckled politely before thanking him once more and walking away. Sure enough, she felt many, many eyes following her as she made her way back to her Prince, who was indeed waiting. He held out his hand for her but was staring at the item on her head.

“That old man,” he sighed.

“You don’t like it?”

“I don’t like you wearing another man’s present.”

His jealousy was really something else. Cassandra smiled gently though, and gave him a quick kiss to appease him. It worked, as he helped her sit back with their little group. She heard her younger sister step closer.

“Hmpf. I guess that old man is not completely rotten to the core after all...”

“Are you admitting His Highness might not be a villain?”

“I’m still deciding,” replied Missandra.

Cassandra knew just how stubborn her sister could be, so having her revise her judgment, even just a little, was quite an achievement after only one day in the Palace. She smiled at her younger sister, who blushed under her hood.

“Oh...so the wild kitty can be tamed, I guess,” joked Shareen, who had watched the whole scene.

Missandra frowned and turned away from Shareen, ignoring her. Meanwhile, everyone had resumed their socializing and drinking. The first performers had arrived, playing songs and singing hymns to the glory of the Dragon Empire.

“What language was that, with your younger sister?” asked Kareen, whispering to her side.

“Our native language, from the southern tribes. All tribes spoke the same language, though each had their own slightly different dialects.”

“It’s very impressive that you both remember the way of your people after you lost them at such young ages,” admitted the Imperial Concubine.

“I used to sing,” Missandra suddenly said. “I remembered our mother’s prayers and sang them over and over again, so I’d never forget.”

“I did the same,” whispered Cassandra, surprised her younger sister had the same sentiment that she had.

In their tribe, children learned a lot of the language through songs and prayers. It was an important part of their culture, to show their respect to the Nature Gods, who Cassandra still firmly believed in. Whereas, the songs the musicians were currently performing only sang about men. About the glory of the past warriors, Emperors, and scholars of the Dragon Empire.

Cassandra hadn't sung out loud in years. Her previous master had heard her sing once and beat her half to death for it. She accused Cassandra of cursing her in a savage language, most likely because she had no idea what her song was about.

Cassandra was looking at the performers, and something silent and painful was blooming in her heart. She missed her homeland. Reuniting with Missandra, who had changed so much after all these years apart, had brought back memories she had buried deep in her heart. The familiar sounds of the water, the smell of the seaweed and soaked wood, were still engraved in her. She loved the rivers surrounding her village; the wild streams, fresh winds, and peaceful waterfalls. Playing barefoot in the mud, diving with her sister, and swimming with the fish, learning from their mother about every treasure the Nature Goddess had to offer.

"Are you alright?"

Kairen had put his hand on hers, scrutinizing her with a concerned expression. Cassandra nodded, smiling in reassurance.

"I was just lost in my memories," she admitted.

She was about to add something, but not far from them the First Prince started coughing loudly again, so much so that people were distracted from the performances, and turned to watch him. The closest woman to him that was patting his back, looked genuinely worried.

Cassandra frowned in worry as well. This cough sounded really horrible. She turned to Kairen.

"Do you mind if I...?"

"It's fine, I'll come with you."

Kareen frowned, but she didn't say anything to stop them. They both stood up and walked over to the First Prince, who was having difficulty catching his breath. Cassandra politely bowed to him.

"Are you all right, Your Highness? Do you need any help?"

"Ah... Lady Cassandra. If... if you don't mind?"

"He's been coughing more than usual," explained the lady in pink next to him. "He had a bit of a fever, too..."

Indeed, he looked extremely pale. Kairen pulled a chair up to help his older brother sit, as the First Prince's concubines were gathering around. Kairen's glare kept them at bay though, leaving only the first concubine next to them.

"His Highness was born with weak lungs," she explained. "Usually, he only gets sick once in a while, but..." She trailed off, not needing to finish.

Cassandra was careful, but she had to check him out. She put her fingers on his forehead, confirming his fever, and put a hand on his back and chest as he was coughing again, closing her eyes.

"What are you doing?" asked the concubine, confused.

"I'm trying to sense how his lungs are reacting to his coughing. The sound resonates through his thoracic cage."

As the Prince's cough subsided, Cassandra's expression was becoming gloomier. She knew this kind of chronic disease. It wasn't so rare, but unfortunately, it had to do with his weak respiratory system, and she knew there was no definitive treatment.

She stood up, looking around.

"This kind of environment will make His Highness' symptoms worse. The air is too cold, and the smoke from the food and candles will make him sicker."

"What do you suggest, Lady Cassandra?"

"Put him in a very clean room, with fresh sheets and not one speck of dust. I'll write down a recipe for a herbal tea, make sure he drinks it with a bit of honey and at a warm temperature, not too hot or too cold. Let him rest and sleep, I'll visit tomorrow morning."

"I will do, Lady Cassandra. Thank you so much!"

As soon as she was done writing the recipe down, the worried concubine escorted the First Prince out. Compared to the other young ladies who were reluctant to leave the party and follow them, Cassandra could tell that one following genuinely loved and was worried for her Prince.

A lot of people who weren't watching the First Prince's exit, had their eyes on Cassandra once again. The concubines rarely cared for anyone but their own Prince,

yet she had spent several minutes checking over Prince Sephir, and chatting with his favorite concubine, too.

She walked back to Kareen and Shareen, trying to ignore all the eyes on her. There were way too many people around.

“Father!”

All heads turned to Phetra, and Cassandra stilled. Whatever that woman was about to say, she knew she wasn’t going to like it.

“Isn’t it time for the young ladies present to show off their skills? It would be boring to only have professional entertainment, right? Fifth Brother, didn’t you mention some of your ladies just yesterday?”

It wasn’t like Phetra to praise anyone else. Shareen and Cassandra exchanged a look, unclear of the Princess’s motives.

“Let me guess... This one is as cunning as a snake?” whispered Missandra.

“Dieni. Stay away from her, Lihue.”

Missandra nodded. She had already noticed how that woman was often glaring their way. It was indeed a nest filled with venomous serpents.

“Oh, I know!” replied the Fifth Prince, Lephys. “Where is the redhead? Show them!”

Cassandra was absolutely disgusted. He didn’t even bother to call her by her name! It was no wonder though, when he had over two hundred. Actually, he had only brought about forty or fifty women along to the party, which still created a huge feminine crowd around him.

Cassandra exhaled, glancing over at Kairen.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Watching your brother reminds me just how lucky I am,” she whispered.

Kairen clicked his tongue. He could overlook Cassandra touching Sephir for medical reasons, or getting close to Anour as he was younger, but he wouldn’t ever let his concubine near that pervert Lephys. He was notorious for his complete lack of self-control when it came to women. He had even forced himself on two of the Emperor’s concubines, who were executed as soon as word got out.

The red-headed concubine stepped forward and bowed lowly, but did not introduce herself or say anything. Cassandra immediately noted how short her red dress was, and that she wasn't wearing any jewelry. She looked very unsure and embarrassed to be there. Nonetheless, she took out two long, red ribbons and started dancing. It was stunning, and the musicians soon began playing to accompany her.

Minutes passed by, and Cassandra realized the concubine's two ribbons had started to burn. She kept dancing, causing the flames to dance through the air. The people present in the garden were having fun watching the show. It was mesmerizing to watch fire snakes dance around the air, threatening to set fire to the grass under her feet or her red hair.

When she was finished, she threw her ribbons into the lake, the flames extinguishing in the water. Everyone around applauded, and the young lady bowed before going back to the Fifth Prince, her head down. Cassandra could tell she had not done this out of her own desire.

"That was a bit boring, Brother," scoffed Phetra.

Even though most people didn't agree with that statement, no one dared to speak against an Imperial Princess. Cassandra felt uneasy. Phetra then had her brother put forth six more of his concubines to dance or sing. One after the other they obliged, but no matter how talented they were, Phetra appeared dissatisfied.

After the seventh one, Lephys was aghast to see her still so unhappy.

"Aren't you too hard to please, Phetra? Why don't you suggest a performer since mine are not to your satisfaction!"

Her victorious smile appeared right away.

"Should I? I mean, I would be curious to see our Third Brother's concubine perform. If she is as talented as everyone praises her for, surely she should have a talent to show us all?"

Cassandra's mouth pulled to a slight frown. So that was what Phetra had intended from the beginning...to have her perform in front of the whole crowd, reminding her she was just a mere concubine. Kairen furiously put a hand on his sword, but Cassandra stopped him.

Next to them, Shareen clicked her tongue.

“If you need a show, I’m very good at throwing knives, Sister. I would love to show you how skilled I am.”

The threat was so obvious, no one dared to even breathe too loudly in the immediate area. However, Cassandra stood gracefully.

“If you want a performance, I’ll give you one,” she announced fiercely.

“Cassandra,” said the Prince, holding her back. “You don’t have to...”

“Don’t worry,” she said with a gentle smile. “I’ll be quick.”

Cassandra didn’t care for Phetra’s childish ways, but it was high time that woman stopped underestimating her, treating her like some toy she could freely play around with. If she were to hide behind Kairen and ignore her again, Cassandra would forever be seen as a weak concubine who couldn’t stand up for herself.

It was time to get rid of that image. For good.

As she walked up to the center of the crowd, every pair of eyes were on her. Most people were eager to learn more about the War God’s Concubine, the young lady the Emperor himself was so fond of.

Despite being alone, Cassandra’s frail figure looked very proud and confident in that moment. With her elegant dress, sparkling jewelry, and those gorgeous, emerald eyes, no one could deny her beauty. If it wasn’t for the scars that she never bothered to hide, no one would have even known she was a former slave.

The young concubine walked up to the lake, but instead of stopping at the edge, she continued on, taking off her shoes and stepping barefoot into the water. The fresh sensation on her little feet was very welcoming.

Cassandra stood still there for a few seconds, making people wonder if she was going to dance. Contrary to their expectations however, she sat down on her knees. All of her lower body was now immersed in the water. She put her palms face down over the top of the water, her hands not breaking the surface, as if to merely get a sense of its untold secrets.

Shareen peered over at Missandra, who was smiling. It was apparent the younger sister already knew what Cassandra was doing. Shareen thought about asking, but then decided against it. She would rather see for herself.

After a few seconds of silence, Cassandra opened her lips and began to sing softly.

No guest could have guessed this. Not only was the language Cassandra sang in completely unknown and very strange to them, but her voice was deeper and much clearer than they had expected. It was entrancing, almost like an echo. Her silvery voice spread quickly around the garden like a cold wind. There was something sort of eerie and unreal about it, which left the crowd speechless.

As Cassandra continued singing, people exchanged uneasy looks, hardly believing their ears. Was this haunting voice even human? It sent shivers down their spines and left goosebumps appearing on their exposed flesh while their heart beats accelerated. Some people felt strangely drawn to it, while others found it...scary. As if the woman sitting there was singing some forbidden chant...a chant that didn't belong in this world.

As her song continued, something else started happening. One of the concubines saw it first and gasped, pointing it out with her finger without a word.

The water.

Something was happening with the lake. It was flat and calm moments ago, but slowly, little circles were now appearing at random on the surface. At first, it was very subtle, making people think it was just a coincidence until they realized the truth. One by one, little ripples started appearing, and the precision in which they matched Cassandra's voice left no doubt that the young concubine was actually doing this.

With her eyes closed, Cassandra kept on singing, and it was as if the lake was echoing her beautiful song. The circles started growing bigger and bigger, crossing each other, matching every note she sang. No one dared to speak or even move. They were absolutely mesmerized by the foreign lullaby.

When they believed they had seen it all, another guest pointed to something in the water. And sure enough, under the clear rippling surface, another phenomenon was occurring before their eyes.

Small, swift movements were seen atop the water. The hypnotized guests eventually realized those quick movements were fish. As if they were dancing, hundreds of little and middle-sized fish were swimming around the surface but not crossing it. Moving in shoals, the underwater creatures were gliding in circles and curves, so synchronized it was incredible to witness. As unbelievable as it was, they were definitely reacting to Cassandra's song. Most of them were gathering close to her in such large numbers that all of the water around her was filled with fish of various sizes now.

Bigger fish started to appear as Cassandra's voice became deeper, taking the majority of the audience by surprise. Among the arriving fish, a large white carp was dancing around in the middle of the lake, following the currents created by the others. With the song taking a new turn, the ripples increased, smaller ones, but more agitated.

Something was getting a bit creepy about her song now. The clear surface suddenly broke and little waves appeared randomly, chasing the smaller fish back into the lower levels of the lake. The larger fish stayed.

At that very moment, Cassandra opened her eyes, staring directly at Phetra.

The Princess was visibly uncomfortable with that. There was something threatening about this song; the more she heard, the more she wanted to run far away from Cassandra.

She was shivering uncontrollably, feeling frightened and worried. The lake, too, was getting dangerously violent. The little waves grew bigger, like an angered sea ready to swallow its surroundings. The young concubine didn't feel like a frail useless woman anymore. She felt more like a water creature, waiting to trap her victim.

When the song came to a sudden end, it took a few moments for everything and everyone to settle down.

The lake returned to its quiet state, and only a few fish hung around to circle Cassandra. Some little ones were brushing against her legs and feet with curiosity. The crowd stayed speechless for an entire minute. No one dared to break the silence as if the magic would be washed away.

The first claps came from the Imperial Concubine Kareen. The sharp slaps had many people jump as if they had been awoken from a trance. Kareen's applause was joined by her children and the Emperor. Since the most powerful man in the Empire was clapping, the rest followed in his stead.

While everyone was cheering loudly and applauding her, Cassandra rose gracefully, sending one last glance at Phetra before turning around to leave the water.

"Beautiful! Absolutely heavenly!" complemented the Emperor.

Cassandra bowed, before walking back to her Prince. Kairen stood to go and meet her halfway.

In her chair, Shareen let out a long breath.

“What the heck was that? This is divine power!”

“It’s called the Mermaid’s Chant,” explained Missandra. “In our native tribe, every child begins to learn it when they turn seven. Our people have this ability to modify our voice to have it match and change the water’s natural rhythm.”

“You’re telling me this was all a...water trick?”

“That was no trick! It takes years of training to master it! My sister was naturally gifted with a great voice, she learned it in a few short months. Some people practice their whole lives without success. Your people could never even attempt to master it.”

“Missandra, please,” said Cassandra as she arrived at their side.

“What? It’s true! The Rain Tribe is one of the very few tribes who descend from a Mermaid and inherited her voice. People in the Dragon Empire can’t imitate that.”

“That’s only what the legend says,” chuckled her sister.

While Cassandra and Missandra kept bickering, Kareen was still utterly amazed. While the Imperial Family had inherited the gift of Dragon Taming, she had never suspected other people could have characteristics to rival it. Underneath her meek appearance, Cassandra had kept quite a precious gift hidden. Today’s demonstration was a real shock.

“Well, well!” exclaimed the Emperor. “Phetra, after that, I don’t think you could claim you’re unimpressed any longer! My White Lily, what a gift you have! You need to come and sing for this old man sometime, I would be delighted to hear that beautiful song again!”

No one around said a thing, but they were clearly shocked. Why did the Emperor make it seem so normal? That woman had just sung something so strange and shook up the whole lake! No one could look at Cassandra with the same presumption as before. That song was heavenly! And whether people had felt fear or bliss while listening, they all shared the same strange feeling of wanting to hear the song again.

The Emperor ordered for more entertainers to come, but after Cassandra’s song, everything following her felt quite bland in comparison.

However, there was an unexpected effect from Cassandra’s performance. While Shareen went on to chat with the ministers present and Kareen slipped away to

converse with another Imperial Concubine, a group of young concubines quickly appeared to greet and compliment Cassandra.

“Lady Cassandra! Your song was marvelous!”

“I didn’t realize you had such talent!”

“Your dress is so beautiful, it suits your skin tone perfectly!”

“Is that the Emperor’s gift? How lucky!”

While she was taken aback by the sudden wave of praises, Cassandra answered politely, but nothing more. She hadn’t forgotten the cold treatment she had received previously from those very women. Cassandra couldn’t trust any of them, regardless of their words and smiles. She was actually grateful to Kairen, as the War God’s presence next to her discouraged those women from standing too close to her. They didn’t dare get within a five foot radius of him. Cassandra was sure they all would have been overwhelming her otherwise.

They didn’t even mind her clipped answers much. Most of their chatter was amongst each other, about how beautiful and smart she was, or how surprising it was that she could sing so well, as if Cassandra needed to hear them repeat it a hundred times in order for her to believe their words.

“What a bunch of annoying leeches,” sighed Missandra behind her.

“What did that servant say!” yelled one of the concubines who had heard her.

“Nothing that wasn’t true,” replied Cassandra, standing up. “If you are done, I’d like to eat in peace, ladies.”

In other circumstances, the concubines wouldn’t have let that remark go. They would have complained to their Princes, maybe got the servant killed and perhaps even Cassandra punished. However, it had been made very clear that the War God’s favorite was not someone they could even consider punishing. Hence, they had no choice but to bite their tongues and swallow their pride.

“Where are you going?” asked Kairen.

“Just going to take a stroll. I’ll get sleepy if I just stay here, laze around and eat.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Cassandra shook her head, glancing pointedly at the group of men decked out in uniforms. She knew they had been waiting patiently to the side for an opportunity to approach.

“Aren’t you going to talk to the ministers at all? It’s alright, I’ll take Mie and Dahlia with me.”

The War God pouted. It was the expression he always made when Cassandra was making a reasonable suggestion he wasn’t very fond of. He reluctantly nodded, glaring the poor ministers’ way.

“Fine. But be careful, and stay where I can see you.”

“I’m not leaving the area,” she promised, giving him a quick peck on the lips.

The area was indeed crowded with people gathering in little groups to chat. Cassandra soon noticed most of the groups consisted of concubines gathered around their man, or men talking amongst themselves.

Much to Cassandra’s surprise, many of them paused their conversations to greet her. Whether it was her relationship with Kairen, the Emperor’s speech earlier, or her song, something had changed in the way people looked at her. The women started actively trying to befriend her, while the men were a bit... extra. She didn’t care for either performance and did her best to avoid the groups. All the young concubine wanted was to take a quiet stroll, but she hadn’t thought it would be so complicated.

Missandra played the part of her servant, carrying a small tray of food, and providing excuses to avoid people who were acting too obnoxious. Compared to Missandra, Dahlia was being much quieter and somewhat awkward. Cassandra had realized that the young woman had become a lot more shy since Missandra had appeared, but couldn’t figure out why.

As she was talking with both of them, a duo she hadn’t expected to encounter walked up to her, followed by a crowd of concubines - The Fifth and Sixth Prince.

“Lady Cassandra! That song was terrific!” exclaimed Anour, polite and smiling as usual. “I had no idea you could sing so well!”

“Indeed,” sighed Lephys. “None of my concubines could sing half as well as that, not even the best ones! I’m a bit disappointed. I thought our older brother’s tastes were odd, but now I realize he might actually have a good eye for women.”

Cassandra didn't like the way he spoke or how he was talking about his concubines. The ladies behind him were all strikingly beautiful, and visibly desperate to win his attention, wearing splendid red outfits and lots of jewelry and makeup. However, no matter how rude she found him, Lephys was the Fifth Imperial Prince, and so she couldn't afford to offend him.

She bowed politely.

"Thank you for the compliments, Your Highnesses, I am glad you both enjoyed it."

"Isn't this your first New Year Celebration at the Palace, Lady Cassandra?" asked Anour. "I need to show you the dragon burning flames! Wait here for a second!"

The young Prince ran off to get something, followed by two servants who were struggling to keep up with his energetic pace. Meanwhile, Lephys smirked as his eyes pervertedly swept over Cassandra's body.

"Actually, now that I can look at you up close, you are quite fine, aren't you? I'll revise what I said earlier, my older brother has an eye for women. After all, sometimes it's not all about the outer appearance!"

"Thanks..." Cassandra said indignantly.

Lephys winked at her, making her feel even more uneasy. She could feel Missandra's disapproving glare from behind her but hoped her younger sister could stay quiet just a few more minutes before causing a scene.

"You know, I'm amazed that such a feeble-looking woman like you was able to seduce my older brother. Your voice probably isn't your only skill though, is it? Do you have other secret talents my brother enjoys? Come on, feel free to tell me, I'm curious! I realize women have many secrets I have yet to..."

"Women do have secrets, your Highness, and sometimes it's best to respect that," replied Cassandra coldly.

She'd had enough of his attitude. Treating his concubines like toys, and implying that she was some cunning whore who only acted innocent to seduce Kairen into sleeping with her was more than she would tolerate. No matter how patriarchal and sexist the Dragon Empire was towards women, there were limits. The Emperor himself treated his concubines better than that.

Lephys, however, didn't seem to take the hint. Whether she was too subtle or he was too sure of himself, he was oblivious to Cassandra's anger.

"There's something about foreigners. Maybe I should try more foreign women? I'm getting awfully bored, always seeing the same faces. I can always... Ouch!"

He suddenly doubled over, grabbing his foot and making a horribly theatrical scene, wailing about being stung. Cassandra knew exactly where to look, but Missandra was playing innocent, pretending to be absorbed in the non-existent details of her dress.

"It hurts! You! Aren't you a doctor? Do something!" he yelled, still gripping his foot.

"Sorry, Your Highness, I'm afraid a woman like me is not skilled enough to treat you," replied Cassandra.

Meanwhile, his concubines crowded around him, asking how they could help and showing pity for him. They were mostly useless and noisy, but in a matter of seconds, the wall of women between Cassandra and the Prince was deep enough for her to walk away without being impolite.

Missandra was laughing behind her, unable to hold back any longer.

"What did you do?" asked Dahlia, at a loss.

"She dropped some stinging nettles onto his foot," chuckled Cassandra. "I didn't see you do it but I recognized the leaves on the ground. They definitely weren't in this garden before."

"I always have some with me, just in case. You have no idea how many men I have needed to use them on... Actually, that guy should consider himself lucky, I don't usually use it on their feet."

Dahlia gasped in shock, while the sisters laughed together.

After that, Cassandra made sure to keep her distance from the Fifth Prince, who continued to complain for the next hour before an Imperial Physician was called to treat him. Anour, however, finally came back to show her the interesting little candles he had gone to retrieve that were shaped like dragons and would burn blue when lit.

Though Anour was twelve years younger than the War God, he still had an air of youthful innocence, despite having been raised by Kareen. Or, she wondered if the

Princes had such different personalities because they had actually been born from different mothers.

Cassandra chatted with him for a little while longer, happy that no one dared to interrupt them. The Sixth Prince was still a bit too young to be of much interest to the single ladies. Instead, they all focused their attention on his older brothers.

Although she had seen it before, Cassandra still couldn't believe how desperate some women were to enter the Imperial Harems. Some girls younger than her were making eyes at the Emperor or shamelessly throwing themselves at the Princes' present. The only two who were free to walk without being harassed were the War God and Anour.

Cassandra exchanged a quick glance with the War God from where he was standing and chatting with some ministers and scholars. She had seen him frowning and glaring a lot during her brief exchange with Lephys, but Missandra had solved the problem before he had needed to intervene.

No matter where she stood, Cassandra could feel his warmth shadowing her. The War God was protecting her from a distance. It was the best and made her feel so safe, though she liked it better when he stood where she could actually feel him.

After another round, Cassandra couldn't stand the distance anymore and headed back to her Prince. He was still not done talking with the ministers but welcomed her silently, putting an arm around her and kissing her temple causing her cheeks to flush a shy pink. The men present acted accordingly, nodding politely to the young concubine.

They were speaking about war and matters of the North. Cassandra knew exactly what was being discussed, and listened carefully. Most of the men thought she was standing there simply for decoration, not understanding anything that was being said, but they would be wrong. The few weeks she spent at the camp had taught her everything she needed to know. She didn't say anything, however, as she didn't particularly care what those men thought.

Ironically, those days in the camp were among the best she ever had in her entire life. She couldn't help but blush as she remembered the snowstorm and the long, long hours with Kairen in his tent. Their child had likely been conceived during that storm, too. Cassandra couldn't repress a soft smile while thinking about it.

Lost in her thoughts, Cassandra didn't realize that her dreamy expression had caught the attention of all the men. The young concubine was truly too charming at that moment, with her skin as pink as her beautiful dress.

Unfortunately for the ministers present, the War God had seen it too. He dismissed them with a glare and turned to Cassandra, putting his hands on her hips.

“Don’t do that in front of other men.”

“Do what?” she asked, confused.

He frowned, but whatever it was, he couldn’t express it. Eventually, the War God just sighed and held her closer.

Cassandra chuckled and gave him a quick peck on the lips, brushing his growing beard with her fingers. She didn’t care for the curious crowd around them anymore. Actually, she wished they were alone as they had barely spent any time together all day. She sent a glance back and Dahlia understood her completely. She grabbed Missandra’s hand and dragged her to Kareen’s side, ignoring the younger sister’s complaints. Cassandra then turned to her Prince again, giving him a shy smile.

“Is it alright if we... step out for a little while?”

The Prince took a few seconds to understand her request. He was elated as Cassandra’s pink cheeks and bright eyes confirmed what he thought she meant. It wasn’t like her to be this...forward. Was it because of the pregnancy? Or was it her sister’s influence? In any case, there was no way he was going to complain.

Guiding her out of the garden, Kairen walked to the closest corridor and found an isolated and deserted salon where no one was likely to walk in on them. As soon as he closed the door, both lovers turned to each other and kissed. Cassandra was rarely this bold, but she had missed him so much. Her whole body was craving this. Her thoughts became blurry and she could only focus on his lips on hers, the touch of his hands exploring her body, lifting her dress’s skirt to caress her legs. She brushed his spiky cheeks, his neck, and every inch of his skin. The simple sensation of him under her hands was spreading an incredible warmth through her entire body. The little flame that had ignited earlier was growing into a wildfire, something she couldn’t and didn’t want to stop, and it was consuming her flesh with an intense burning desire.

Kairen wasn’t able to hold back either. He gently steered her towards the luxurious couch off to the side, unable to stop touching her. He wanted to get drunk on her perfume and lost in her soft skin.

This woman was a mystery, yet he knew her far better than he had known any other woman before. Mermaid or woman, Cassandra opened up her arms to him. He didn’t

care how many more secrets she had. He loved her and all the mysteries she held close, and all those she had yet to reveal.

He pulled her onto his lap, one of her favorite positions, and gently moved the straps of her dress down her shoulders. The dress continued to slide down past her waist, revealing her perfect breasts. Kairen loved that they had become larger and rounder since Cassandra had become pregnant. He started kissing her, the movements of his tongue making her moan. Every sound she made was like music to his ears and, while he hadn't forgotten her song from earlier, his favorite tune was the sounds she made when she was excited by his touch. No one knew that song but him.

Cassandra shivered, feeling her skin warming up too quickly under his sizzling touch. Her cheeks were red as he played with her breasts, breathing loudly and closing her eyes to fully take in and enjoy the sensations. Could he hear her heartbeat going crazy when he was this close? It felt like it could burst right out of her chest! Cassandra moved her hands from his shoulders and struggled to undo his armor. She desperately wanted to feel his bare chest against hers.

Once the armor finally fell to the floor, Kairen smiled and reached out for her lips again. He teased his fingers through her hair, playing with the free strands and caressing her nape, keeping her close. His other hand playing between her legs, his fingers driving her crazy and making her wet. He knew exactly what to do and obviously took pleasure in watching her tremble and react to his every move. Cassandra felt him growing harder. She wanted him. She wanted him, now.

Kairen was just as impatient as she was. Lowering his pants, he finally sprung free, and slowly positioned her. Feeling his manhood so close to her entrance caused Cassandra's legs to tremble and her core to tighten in anticipation. She was hot, moist, and too excited to bear it anymore. She slowly lowered herself onto him, exhaling loudly with pleasure. It took a few seconds for both of them to adjust, but those seconds were filled with kisses and lustful touching.

It was the best sensation. Him, filling her, spreading his warmth like fire from head to toe. Cassandra had gotten addicted to this sensation. She was panting a bit, but his lips soon found hers again, keeping them busy with another wild kiss. They were both impatient and unable to wait any longer. Kairen started thrusting his hips and Cassandra responded naturally, trying to tame the beast under her. He was wild, savage, and unpredictable. She moaned, gasped for air, and moaned again. The writhing of her body on his had something terribly indecent about it, and yet, she loved it. She wanted more, crying out his name and holding on to his neck. His fierce rod plunging into her was driving her crazy. Something broke free in her, and she couldn't hide her pleasure anymore. Her own voice was becoming hoarse, loud, and

feral, but she didn't want to stop it. Kairen didn't give her a second to catch her breath. He just wanted more, so much more of this woman. He'd grab her hips and pull her closer, thrusting in and out of her, guiding her shaking body to relish in this ecstasy. It was carnal, primal sex. The oldest dance in the world, a man and a woman together indulging in the pleasures of the flesh.

Cassandra's skin was flushed and sweaty from the blood rushing to her extremities and her limbs were numb from the exertion. She kept calling his name, like a prayer, her voice so embarrassingly sexy and raw. The War God was like an untamed beast, mating with his queen and unleashing his desire for her. Cassandra felt it coming. She knew his body all too well and immediately recognized when he was about to completely let go - that incredible, final moment of fierce pleasure where he'd accelerate, pant and groan, and deepen his thrusts inside her. Cassandra relished every last second as she moaned even louder, feeling him release deep within her. Her own voice broke into a hoarse moan as they came together, satisfied and exhausted.

The heat began gradually decreasing, but that short session had been intense. Resting her head on her Prince's shoulder, Cassandra took a minute to catch her breath and wait for her heartbeat to slow down. Her body was still quaking a bit, and Kairen's warm hand caressing it was soothing her.

He gently pulled away, making her flinch a little, and kissed her skin gently. Cassandra let out a long satisfied sigh, her desire appeased. They didn't need any words as she kissed him gently, savoring his taste just a bit more.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Much..."

It was as if he knew she had needed this. A little break away from the world, just the two of them, indulging in their desires.

They stayed like this a while longer, just caressing and kissing each other, gently and slowly, savoring the moments alone. Neither of them felt like leaving their little bubble and going back yet. After a short minute, though, Cassandra exhaled.

"We have to go back."

Kairen nodded, looking at her with his dark eyes.

"You look content."

“I am,” she admitted, still flushed.

She did her best to dress again, making sure nothing looked too out of place. Somehow, she felt like their intimate moment was going to show one way or another on her, and felt a bit bashful. She helped Kairen put his armor back on to keep her hands busy instead of fidgeting, and he adjusted the little diadem on her head with a frown.

“What is it?”

“I don’t like it.”

“The diadem? It’s very pretty though.”

It was curious that he didn’t like something she was wearing. He usually seemed happy whenever she had an occasion to dress up a bit. However, it seemed that the little diadem actually offended him.

“You really don’t like it? But it’s from the Emperor.”

She couldn’t refuse to wear something the Emperor had personally gifted her!

“I don’t like you wearing something from another man.”

Cassandra was rendered speechless! Again? Did his jealousy know no bounds! How was she supposed to respond to that? From his expression, she could tell he was going to be stubborn about this. After thinking about it though, she shouldn’t be surprised, the man bickered with his own dragon after all. And his father had some concubines that were her own age, too.. She sighed.

“I have to wear it tonight, though, His Highness personally gifted it to me.”

Kairen’s frown deepened. He obviously didn’t like it, but the situation was unavoidable. She let out a small exasperated laugh before giving him a quick peck on his lips despite his sour expression.

“I’ll leave it in your mother’s apartments when we leave, alright? I don’t need to wear it outside of the Imperial Palace, it should be kept safe here.”

“Fine,” he growled petulantly.

Cassandra smiled, happy she had placated his jealousy. She was getting better at handling him. She took his hand, trying to distract him.

“Let’s get back,” she said with a gentle voice.

They walked back to the big area where the festivities were still going on. There were so many people in attendance, it was unlikely anyone had even noticed that they were gone for those few minutes.

As she walked beside the War God, things were different for Cassandra. People would glance their way, but no one dared to stare or stand too close. A new performance of exotic dancers had also begun which had captured most of the crowd’s attention.

Cassandra and Kairen returned to their table. After their little cardio session, she needed to rest a bit. She let out a sigh of relief while sitting down, although her body was still clearly buzzing from the vigorous activity earlier. Sitting next to her, Kairen dared anyone who came too close to her with a threatening glare.

Cassandra couldn’t have been more grateful though. She was hungry again and enjoyed being able to eat in peace.

Her favorites had changed once again. The cheese cubes she used to love now made her feel nauseous, and she was now unexpectedly craving...red meat.

She whispered to Kairen about it when she heard a peal of familiar laughter behind her.

“Ah yes, carrying a dragon’s child will do that to you,” said Kareen while taking her seat back at the next table.

She gestured for a nearby servant to come and ordered them to bring an assortment of cooked meats for Cassandra. The young concubine felt a bit strange letting Kareen take care of things for her, but this was a first. She usually didn’t eat red meat. She was more used to a pescatarian-like diet largely dominated by fruits and vegetables.

“Don’t eat raw meat though,” Kareen instructed. “Your stomach is still human, even if it tells you to eat like a dragon.”

“It feels so strange. I feel like a different person.”

“You still have a few months to go, dear, you better get used to it. And once your son is born, prepare to feed a carnivore. Kairen could eat almost as much as his dragon when he was a baby and was horribly grumpy when he was hungry.”

Cassandra laughed thinking of her Prince's younger days. She wondered what kind of child he was? And if their son would be like him.

She caressed her little baby bump. She couldn't hide it under her dresses anymore and it was only getting more obvious as the days went on. However, she didn't mind. She had developed new curves and started filling out a bit more, her hair was shinier, and her skin was glowing. She was grateful to be so well cared for though. Having to deal with her nausea and growing appetite would have been terrible if she didn't have Kairen or the servants of the Diamond or Imperial Palace.

"Brother!"

Shareen was returning with a frown and her hands on her hips.

"Did you listen to that annoying minister on the War Affairs? Should I have punched him for you, too?"

Indeed, behind her, the poor man was on the floor with half of his face looking very, very painful and purple. No one dared to come to his aid though and all kept a careful distance from him until some servants came to help him up.

"Shareen, I already told you not to make your fights too obvious, didn't I?" chided her mother. "You could have hit him somewhere less obvious, but you just had to go for the face."

"He should walk around like that, Mother, I don't care. That idiot was disparaging brother's army, calling them lazy for maintaining the border and not crossing over!"

"Oh. You should have completely knocked him out then. He looks too fine for me."

Shareen ignored her mother and turned to Kairen, waiting for his answer.

He didn't say anything though, not out loud anyway. Just as Cassandra was wondering what was wrong, she heard the flap of wings.

"Krai!" she shouted, happy to spot the familiar black silhouette.

However, the dragon didn't stop, only briefly turning its head towards her with a light familiar growl. It was obvious Krai wouldn't be able to land in this area, not without crushing a few people. The dragon extended its giant claws, causing people to run away in fear, and flew just low enough to snatch that same minister up from the ground. The man's screech was so high-pitched, people were covering their ears from

the pain. Whether they had heard the fight with Shareen earlier or were too scared to ask, no one dared to comment on the incident, as the dragon flew away with its prey.

Shareen smiled, looking satisfied, and helped herself to some wine.

“Kairen! Son, what was that?” asked the Emperor.

“Taking out the trash, Father.”

Several people couldn’t help but laugh at the sentiment, though they were smart enough to hide it. Others were more terrified; they avoided Kairen’s vicinity at all costs, and their faces were white as a sheet. Meanwhile from his throne, the Emperor sighed in exasperation.

“Make sure your dragons behave, will you? How can the party go on if there are no more guests!”

“Dragons tend to be wilful, Father,” said Shareen with a sneer. “Who knows, if they get too hungry they might come looking for snacks again.”

“Don’t make us laugh, Shareen,” the Second Prince suddenly growled. “As if he doesn’t control that Black Dragon perfectly...”

Shareen didn’t appreciate the Prince speaking out against her and she immediately glared back at him.

“How about you teach us about controlling dragons then, Brother? Call yours out now, let us all see how much of a dragon-tamer you are!”

Right as she finished saying that, a threatening growl echoed from somewhere in the Palace. No matter where it was, the Red Dragon was clearly echoing its master’s anger. Cassandra couldn’t help but be concerned. What if he really called it all the way here? Wouldn’t it get in a fight with Krai or injure people? Every time she had previously seen the Red Dragon, it was securely caged, but what if it was actually freed? The animosity between the brothers would definitely have it target Kairen. She trusted Krai to respond immediately, but...

Just as she was lost in her thoughts and worrying, Kairen gently put his hand on hers. He wasn’t looking at her though, he was still glaring Vrehan’s way, but his thumb was gently caressing her skin, helping her calm down.

Vrehan paused for a few seconds and then, to her surprise, a disturbing, reptilian-like smirk spread across his face as he glared at Shareen.

“Why would you need me to teach you anything about dragons, Shareen? Women don’t need to know about dragon-taming.”

The insult was evident, and even Cassandra felt outraged. He clearly looked down on the Princesses, because unlike their brothers, they had no dragons of their own. Shareen became red with anger, but just as she was about to say something, the loudest growls yet were heard.

Though she wasn’t surprised to see Krai return, Cassandra had not expected to see the Golden Dragon make an appearance too. Glahad was growling even more furiously and clearly glaring at Vrehan with its ruby eyes. The arrival of the two biggest Imperial Dragons was enough to scare a lot of guests away, many of whom, for some reason, thought the wisest place to hide would be inside the buildings. Cassandra considered differently as the walls looked like they were about to collapse under the weight of the two beasts.

Even Missandra and Dahlia had run back towards her, both of them hiding behind her seat afraid. She couldn’t blame them. She probably would have been just as terrified if the War God hadn’t been holding her hand all this time. The dragons’ angry growls were deafening, in line with their anger.

Shareen was unphased by the chaos going on around them and stood up, furious, while pulling her sword from its hilt.

“I dare you to say that again, Vrehan.”

“Enough!”

The Emperor was standing up now and glaring at both of them.

“Enough of your squabbling! This is the New Year Celebrations. I want no fighting in front of our guests! Not tonight, not tomorrow, not for the next few days either! Vrehan, Shareen, enough, you two! Both of you go back to your apartments for the night!”

Shareen was about to protest, but her mother clicked her tongue. The two of them exchanged glances for a second, almost as if they were having a silent conversation until Shareen cried out in frustration. She violently swung her sword through the air in protest then put it back before turning to leave without another word.

Cassandra felt bad for her, and couldn't help but glare in Vrehan's direction. The Prince was watching Shareen go, but hadn't moved himself. He was about to say something, but the War God opened his mouth first.

"Father told you to leave, Vrehan."

The ice and enmity in his voice were so intense, the whole area became as cold as the Onyx Castle for a few seconds. Cassandra wondered if the Second Prince would argue or try to fight Kairen.

After a long scowl, he stood up silently and walked away in a strange silence. The air was thick with tension, so much so that absolutely no guest dared to say a word for several minutes after the Prince was gone. Cassandra, who hadn't realized she was holding her breath, suddenly exhaled. She felt sorry for Shareen, but couldn't help but be grateful that Vrehan was gone too - at least for the night.

Just as the awkwardness and tension began to settle, the Emperor took his seat, looking drained. Glahad and Krai, who were obviously faster to calm down, seemed unwilling to leave now. Both dragons were overlooking the area with curious eyes, their front paws on the roofs of the building. They looked like they were speculating if they could fit into the area if they climbed over. The answer was a resounding no. Even if the area were clear of people, there would still be too many food stalls and tables left everywhere.

The braver of the guests were slowly trickling back in, since the dragons had stopped growling like feral beasts. Cassandra, who had just been delivered a humongous platter of meat, grabbed one of the big chunks by the bone and stood up, walking over to Krai.

"Hinue! What are you doing?" asked Missandra, skeptically following behind her.

She kept glancing back at Kairen hoping he would stop Cassandra, but he wasn't even looking their way. Meanwhile, Cassandra was still walking over towards the building Krai was on, waving the piece of meat through the air as it sniffed out the aromas drifting through the wind with deep interest.

The dragon growled softly and lowered its head as much as possible into the garden so that Cassandra could throw the meat. Krai caught it, happily eating the little snack with a satisfied expression. When it finished licking its lips, she smiled and extended her arm, making Missandra squeak.

"Hinue, are you crazy!? That is a wild creature! He can eat you!"

“He won’t,” said Cassandra with a confident smile.

Indeed, Krai only touched her hand with its snout, eyes wide open, curious as to what its favorite human was playing at. Cassandra scratched the dark scales a bit before stepping back and grabbing Missandra with her other hand.

“Oh, no, no, no,” said Missandra, “I am not going to do this.”

“It’s alright, he’s a good boy.”

Missandra did not believe a dragon several times her size could be anything close to a “good boy”! However, she only half-heartedly struggled as Cassandra confidently pushed her in front, talking to the dragon.

“This is my younger sister. Can you try not to eat her? Please?”

Krai was staring at both of them, sniffing with curiosity. Of course, there was no way to know if the dragon understood. It tilted its head to the side and growled a bit, making a curious impression, as if chatting with her. Its claw was scratching against the roof though, so maybe it was just getting a little impatient.

Cassandra smiled, but it was time for the dragon to go before the building really collapsed. She wasn’t sure the Imperial Palace was fully dragon-proof.

“See you tomorrow,” she said to the dragon, before walking away, still holding Missandra’s hand.

Krai apparently didn’t understand as the black dragon was still on the roof, growling a bit and trying to grab her attention. Cassandra ignored it and walked back to her seat, where she couldn’t see it anymore. Releasing Missandra’s hand, she washed her other one that was full of meat juice and whatever dirt Krai had on his scales.

As soon as she let go, the younger sister’s legs turned to jelly, and she fell to her knees with a huff of relief. Dahlia crouched down next to her.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“I am not! That was the most terrifying experience of my life.”

The young servant girl chuckled. It was the first time Missandra had lost her fierce and feisty attitude like that. Cassandra laughed too and gave her a few minutes to regain her composure. Missandra kept pouting after that though, stating that her older sister had risked her life with the crazy idea of befriending a dragon.

The last of the guests were slowly coming back now at the Emperor's insistence, and attempting to resume the party as if nothing had happened and two enormous dragon heads weren't still hovering over them. Glahad and Krai soon grew bored though, and after a little while longer, both of them flew away. It was a magnificent sight to watch the Golden Dragon actually spread its wings and fly. Glahad was shining brightly in the moonlight, while Krai was like a black shadow, hard to follow while swiftly soaring through the dark blue sky.

The New Year Celebrations were supposed to last for a full week, all day long and into the nights, but of course, people had to take breaks. At the Emperor's party though, most people tried their best to stay as long as possible so as not to offend the host. And the Emperor seemed to have incredible stamina despite his age, not showing any signs of fatigue.

Kareen, however, was soon bored and decided to leave. She was obviously upset after Shareen was kicked out, and no one could manage to keep her any longer once she had made up her mind - much to the Emperor's disappointment.

It was especially true for Cassandra as her pregnancy was taking a toll on her. Several hours into the night, despite her best attempts at staying entertained, and eating and drinking, Cassandra kept dozing off and could no longer argue with Kairen about leaving. The Prince gently helped her up and took her in his arms, no one commenting on their early departure. Cassandra felt bad for being among the earliest to leave the party, but it couldn't be helped, she was already half-asleep.

Kairen dismissed both Dahlia and Missandra when they reached the room and placed her gently on the bed. Cassandra was completely out of it, she didn't even feel him undressing her and removing her jewelry. She was just relieved to be finally laying in bed. She hadn't even realised her back was hurting so much until then.

Finally, the War God laid down next to her, wrapping her up in his embrace, and once she felt her skin against his, she let go and fell into a deep sleep.

