

Chapter 13

Cassandra had been utterly exhausted by the whole day. She had a peaceful, dreamless night, surrounded by warmth and the soft scent of the verbena plants that had been put in their room for a good night's rest.

Kairen made sure to position his arms in the most comfortable arrangement for her before falling asleep himself. He was even more cautious than usual, as his concubine was recently struggling to get a good night's sleep, often waking up throughout the night due to her nausea.

Cassandra slept straight through until the morning, no one daring to wake her from the much-needed respite. When she finally awoke, she was feeling well-rested and refreshed. Her body was still a bit sore, but nothing unbearable. She sat up and stretched a little. Feeling the Prince's side of the bed was a bit cold, Cassandra confirmed she had been alone for some time. How long had she slept?

Outside, music from the ongoing festivities flowed through the window and, judging by the accompanying warmth from the sunlight, Cassandra guessed it was quite late in the morning.

She grabbed her robe and walked to the window, glancing down. Indeed, she could see the lake and the garden flooded with people again. Some had probably been there all night, but she was too far away to recognize anyone.

"Lady Cassandra! Did you sleep well?"

Dahlia had just walked in carrying a new dress for her, while two other servant girls entered right behind her with hot water and some oils. They started preparing her a bath, which immediately filled the room with a refreshing citrus smell.

"I did, thank you. I slept late, didn't I?" Cassandra said with some concern in her voice.

"His Highness insisted we let you sleep, my Lady. It's almost midday now, but Imperial Concubine Kareen said she would like to have a late breakfast with you."

"She's been waiting for me?" Cassandra was a bit embarrassed.

“She knows you were sleeping, my Lady. She said she was fine with waiting as long as you got some good rest. His Highness the Third Prince agreed to it too, and insisted we wait on you to wake up.”

“My Lord is with his mother?” asked Cassandra while undressing to get into her bath quickly.

“Yes, My Lady, Princess Shareen, and Lady Missandra as well.”

Cassandra felt a bit flustered at the thought of everyone waiting for her. Moreover, they weren’t even attending the celebrations, but just waiting to have breakfast at Lady Kareen’s apartments? She wondered if Shareen was still implicitly banned from them, or if Kareen was the one who refused to go again. Both mother and daughter definitely shared the same fiery blood.

As she didn’t want to keep anyone waiting much longer, Cassandra asked the servants to help her get ready after the quick bath. She let Dahlia pick the jewelry for her and put on her diadem before walking out hastily. Only Dahlia followed her, as the two other servants stayed behind to clean up the room.

Cassandra was grateful to be spared of her usual nausea as she hurried to Kareen’s apartments, not quite running but still not walking too slowly. She arrived only a few minutes later and walked in as she knew Kareen didn’t need her to be announced.

It was a large room with panels on one side that opened onto a large garden for them to admire and allow the sunshine to come in. However, unlike the warm sunlight, the atmosphere was icy inside. She walked up to the large table where Kareen, Shareen, Kairen, and Missandra were all seated and strangely quiet. To her surprise, the young Prince Anour was seated with them too, though he had obviously just arrived as his plate and cup were empty and clean.

They all raised their heads when she entered and Cassandra noticed both Missandra and Kairen were unhappy, while Kareen was pointedly ignoring them, drinking her tea.

Shareen rolled her eyes. “Finally!”

“Good Morning!” said Anour, who was apparently the only one not sulking or upset.

“Sorry, I’m late...” muttered Cassandra, confused by what was going on.

Kareen stood up and walked to her, gently smiling and taking her hand.

“It’s fine, my dear, a pregnant woman needs a good night’s sleep. I’m glad you rested, you look better than last night. Now, come. You must be hungry.”

Indeed, she was. Her baby and his dragon stomach were already starving, and the large display of food on the table made it worse. She sat next to the Imperial Concubine, greeting everyone as she was served some of her favorite lemon tea.

“What’s going on?” she finally dared to ask.

“Oh, well,” said Shareen. “That dearest brother of mine is fighting with our mother and your just-as-stubborn sister. For the record, I’m on their side as well, but it’s been like this for over an hour, so I do hope you can talk some sense into him.”

“A fight? About what?” asked Anour, curious.

“Their wedding.”

Cassandra was speechless! Their wedding? He had already discussed it with his family and Missandra? She suddenly remembered! She said she wanted his mother’s approval. But she hadn’t really thought he would go ahead and ask her straight-out, or so soon! It wasn’t exactly a breakfast topic. Anour too, had his mouth open, visibly shocked. He was about to say something, but Kareen gestured for him to be quiet and eat, like a child.

Cassandra sighed, putting down her cup.

“I guess you didn’t answer the way my Lord wanted?” she asked Kareen.

“Of course not. But you don’t seem too surprised by that, dear. You already knew I’d be against it, didn’t you?”

Cassandra sighed, glancing at the War God’s furious expression. He was quiet and still, but she could tell he was furious. He had a frown, and his dark eyes were glaring at everything nearby. This was going to be a complicated one.

“If something happens to me,” Cassandra said, “My Lord won’t have any chance for another child.”

“Finally, someone with some sense here!” Shareen declared. “Kairen, let her lead your army next time, this one knows how to think!”

Her words were met with another deadly glare from her brother, but of course, she wasn't one to be so easily intimidated by him, crossing her arms with a proud expression.

"Kairen, stop being a child and listen to Cassie," said Kareen.

"I won't marry another woman," he growled.

"We are not asking you to, you stubborn child! Just to wait until you two have several children. Do you need me to remind you of what happened to Anour's mother?"

The Sixth Prince immediately nodded, looking resolute. Indeed, his mother had died in childbirth. If it wasn't for Kareen, he probably wouldn't even have reached his teenage years.

"I'll protect Cassandra."

Seeing his resolute expression, she stood up and walked to him, taking his face in her hands, and forcing him to look at her. She knew he couldn't resist her for long and gently brushed his beard with her fingers.

"It's not that I don't trust you to protect me," she said softly. "But anything could happen in the next four months. So many people are opposed to me having this baby. Even if there weren't any external threats, this is my first child. I could face complications or die while giving birth. Those things happen, even with all the medical knowledge."

"Cassandra is only eighteen," added Kareen. "She's still young and not as durable as us."

Talking about her possible death wasn't exactly comforting for Cassandra, but she needed him to understand. If something went wrong during this pregnancy or after it, she didn't want her Prince to lose his opportunity to become the Emperor because of it.

"Still... I won't want anyone other than you," he growled.

"You can't think like that," Cassandra replied. "You could make a great Emperor... If you have a son."

"I only want the children you'll bear."

She sighed. He was being too stubborn. Shareen let out a long sigh of exasperation.

“Do you two have to be so cheesy and mushy at breakfast, seriously? We are still here!”

“I’m against it, too!”

Everyone turned to Missandra, surprised to hear her speak.

“Can someone please remind me who she is?” asked Anour, confused. “She looks like Lady Cassandra.”

“Her younger sister.”

“You have a younger sister?” he exclaimed, his eyes wide in surprise. “How come I didn’t know? It was you at the celebrations yesterday, right?”

“Anour, it’s a secret,” said Kareen with a serious expression.

“Yes, but...”

“A secret,” Kareen repeated firmly.

He opened his mouth again, but seeing his adoptive mother’s glare, he shut it and nodded. Cassandra couldn’t help but chuckle at their little interaction. Kareen was obviously a good mother to her children, no matter how strict she could be.

After a few seconds, Missandra crossed her arms.

“I am still against it. And I don’t understand your weird practices, anyway. The dragon people are strange. One man can bed as many women as he wants, but women can’t? And this whole wife-concubine status thing, too! This is just...”

“Missandra, calm down,” said Cassandra.

“Wait, I’m curious,” says Shareen. “You girls are from a different country, after all, tell us about it.”

“It’s not a country,” replied Missandra. “We don’t own the land or anything on it but ourselves. You people see a square of land and declare it yours. It’s ridiculous!”

Cassandra was waiting for Shareen to get mad, but she just looked genuinely surprised. Kareen too was rubbing her chin with her finger, looking interested as she grabbed her tea.

“Tell us more, child. I’m curious too. None of us have ever heard about other cultures or tribes besides the Eastern Republic and the Northern Barbarians.”

Missandra seemed surprised to hear her interest and looked around, a bit perplexed. She glanced at Cassandra, unsure, but seeing her older sister give her a little nod, she proceeded to speak, blushing a bit. For once she looked her age and shyder than Cassandra.

“W...well, I was only seven, so I don’t remember too many things... But I know we only lived by the swamps, and in our shacks. ”

“Shacks? Not real houses?”

“The soil was too uneven for stones like it is here, it would have gotten muddy and moldy in no time,” explained Cassandra, who remembered it better. “We used special types of wood, and grew creepers around it.

“Us children played all day in the rivers, catching fish, swimming and diving,” Missandra reminisced, smiling.

“You were the best at catching fish,” noted Cassandra with the same smile.

“You were the best swimmer! My sister could dive the deepest and stay the longest underwater. All the kids always followed her around and tried to imitate her. I was always so proud to be your sister .”

Missandra blushed a bit after saying that, and Cassandra was touched. Indeed, she remembered the cheeky little Missandra, always following right behind her, playing around and going on adventures in the swamps. She wasn’t afraid to get dirty or climb high up into the mangroves.

“You mentioned that your mother taught you about herbs?” Kareen probed.

“Everyone in our tribe knew all about the basic herbs. We cooked with most of them, but we also used some for hygiene, medicine, or cleaning. Most of our knowledge was based on what the Elders passed down to us. They were our main resource.”

“Our Grandfather was the Chief of the village, as the eldest of the adults,” explained Missandra. “Mother was the best doctor. She taught my sister a lot, and the other children who were old enough, too.”

“You kept making everyone eat tingling leaves once you discovered their effect,” chuckled Cassandra. “You even put it in Paba’s tea when he was nagging you.”

The sisters laughed at the memory, making everyone else chuckle too.

“Paba?” repeated Kareen. “I noticed you two can talk in that strange language. What is it?”

“Our mother tongue,” explained Cassandra. “It doesn’t really have a name. Paba means Grandpa.”

“You call each other Linue and Hinue,” said Shareen.

“It’s ‘little sister’ and ‘big sister’ . They can also be used to address other girls, even if they are not from the same family, as long as they are close.

“Interesting.”

“How do you say husband?” asked Kairen.

Everyone was surprised to hear him speak. Missandra immediately frowned.

“We don’t say it,” she said. “And we don’t get married to men who take concubines!”

“Missandra,” sighed Cassandra.

The little sister pouted, crossing her arms, visibly unhappy. Cassandra turned back to her Prince.

“We don’t really have a word for ‘husband’ since we don’t get married like you. We do have a union ceremony, though. Partners call each other Almien.”

“Almien?”

“It means ‘who is mine’,” sighed Missandra. “You can only ever do that with one person though!”

“So lovers do this?”

“It’s not just lovers, but people who are promising to unite their lives forever. You cannot change or take another one after!”

“Missandra, I think they understand,” said Cassandra. “Anyways, it’s...”

“Let’s do that.”

She turned to Kairen, confused.

“Do what?”

“You and me, let’s do that thing from your tribe. Almien.”

Cassandra laughed nervously. Though it was meaningful to her, their tribe’s union ceremony would have absolutely no legal recognition in the Dragon Empire, it would only be something symbolic. Now he was interested in that too?

“That’s... ahem... We did say that getting married is...”

“Actually,” interjected Shareen, “you shouldn’t get married yet under our country’s law, but...I guess a foreign ceremony would be alright. Mother?”

To Cassandra’s surprise, Kareen seemed to actually be considering it. Were they serious? The Imperial Concubine took a couple of minutes to reflect on the option before nodding in approval and grabbing a biscuit.

“Mh, Shareen is right. If my son is going to be stubborn about this, I suppose a little ceremony would be fine, as long as it’s kept secret! We have yet to hear what this whole ceremony entails though.”

Cassandra was speechless! Really? It would be like a secret wedding, but would hold a deeper meaning for them. She turned to her Prince, a bit baffled.

“Do you really want to do this? It would have no legal bearing here.”

“It would have meaning to you, right?” asked the Prince.

“Of course. It was one of my tribe’s most sacred rituals.”

“Then I want to do it.”

Would a secret ceremony really be enough for Kairen? While they couldn’t get married in the Dragon Empire until her son was born, would this make them feel more secure about their future? For now, there were too many things that could throw off the balance. One of the biggest being that the heir to the throne was still yet to be named and, while he had limited interest in succeeding his father, Kairen was obviously the best fit. Sephir would also be a good choice, but Vrehan would make

things go from bad to worse. There needed to be some security in their future before they could plan for it.

So they just couldn't marry legally, for now, Cassandra had to side with Kareen and Shareen on this one. It was a bit selfish of her, but she would rather stay the War God's favorite than be his wife right now - for her own safety. She didn't want him to have another concubine, but she also couldn't predict what was going to happen with so much uncertainty about the future of the Empire.

"Cassandra dear, don't overthink it too much," said Kareen. "My children are clearly very stubborn. If this is enough for my son to hold on to, until an actual wedding is possible, and if you're fine with it, let's just go ahead with it."

"Mother, you're just thrilled to organize something like this behind Father's back, aren't you?" mused Shareen.

"What are you talking about? I don't need that old man's permission, regardless! And anyway, we are organizing this secret ceremony, aren't we? Cassandra, dear, what does it involve exactly?"

"Hinue!" protested Missandra. "Are you sure?"

Cassandra sighed and stood up.

"Can I have a minute with my sister?" she asked.

Kareen nodded.

"Of course, dear."

Cassandra took her sister by the hand and guided her out to the garden. It was large enough where they could walk to the opposite side and be far enough away so that the other's couldn't eavesdrop, even with their enhanced hearing.

Once she felt they were an acceptable distance, Cassandra gently released Missandra's hand and faced her.

"Missandra, I understand your doubts, but..."

"No, you don't understand. Hinue... We only just found each other. We missed almost ten years together, and now you're...you're almost one of them."

"How so?"

“You act like them, you speak like them. I don’t know, I just thought things would be different when we reunited. I dreamed about it so many times! But now, you’re carrying a baby and you’re talking about getting married to some Prince... to the... the War God. I feel like I’m going to lose my sister all over again. I don’t like these people involving you in their schemes and everything.”

Cassandra sighed.

She often acted more mature than her age, but Missandra was only sixteen. She had experienced so many hardships since she was seven, being sold to one brothel after another. She didn’t have a good childhood or grow up with family, and she probably only made a few friends, if any. Typical girls her age in the Dragon Empire were all about meeting boys and having fun, but no matter how she had grown up, Missandra had always been different.

The only thing she likely held onto was their past, the memories she had from her early childhood with the Rain Tribe. It was probably the best way she had found to deal with all the craziness going on around her. Holding on to the idea that, maybe, she would find a way to get back there again. That idea had probably been ingrained deep inside her, along with the memories of her older sister. Cassandra could tell how much Missandra still missed the Rain Tribe, even after all these years, by the way she held on to a language she had learned when she was so young and hadn’t even had anyone to speak it with.

Cassandra sighed and gently took her younger sister’s hands.

“Missandra, I am not going to leave you alone again.”

Her sister seemed relieved by her words, looking at her with wide eyes. After a few seconds of silence, something in her expression changed and tears slowly appeared. Her little emerald eyes grew awfully red and watery before Missandra broke down into heart-wrenching sobs.

Cassandra drew her into a tender embrace, letting her younger sister cry against her shoulder and gently caressed her hair, soothing and whispering to her. She must have been holding it all in for a long time.

“I promise we won’t be separated again. Just because I will become a mother or someone’s partner, doesn’t mean I won’t still love you. I’ll be by your side, anytime you need me, I promise Missandra. We’ll always be together.”

Her sister kept sobbing, showing her weakness for the first time in years, and the flow of tears didn't show any signs of stopping. Eventually, Cassandra drew back and put her hands on her sister's shoulders as she was met with her sister's emotional, green eyes.

"Missandra, I am sorry, but our tribe is gone. What you remember from our childhood... It's fine to hold on to those memories, but you also have to let your anger go. What happened to us was a tragedy, but you can't keep blaming everyone for it. You have to grieve, and let it go. Our mother, Paba, all our friends...they are gone, Missandra. I am really sorry, but Linue, you need to accept it now."

Missandra cried some more, but despite her runny nose and puffy eyes, she nodded, as she tried to calm herself down.

"I know...I know it won't...won't be like before, but..." she stuttered. "I just...hoped...I don't know... I was afraid... You had left it all... And forgotten... and didn't care..."

"I haven't forgotten anything, Linue. I carry them all with me in my heart, and I treasure each fond memory. I have sung our people's old prayers many times in my head. I'm still happy when I feel the water on my body, I still eat as we ate in our childhood. I couldn't forget all of that. But I won't be able to enjoy the present if I still hold onto too much of the past."

Her sister nodded again, clumsily wiping her tears. It was a bit embarrassing for a teenage girl to cry so much, but it was time she let it out. Cassandra gently helped her get rid of her tears and brushed her hair behind her ear.

"We need to look forward to the future. You're no longer a prostitute and I'm no longer a slave... The future won't be all bad. It's alright to remember our past but think about where you want to go from now on. I know I want to have a healthy baby, this baby, and be with the man I love."

Missandra begrudgingly accepted.

"He'd better treat you well."

"Do you think he doesn't?"

Both sisters glanced quickly at the breakfast area. Shareen and Kareen were chatting, but Kairen had his eyes on them, watching them from afar like a hawk. Missandra sighed.

“I’ll admit, he’s doing fine so far.”

Cassandra chuckled. Her younger sister was as stubborn as ever.

“You can keep an eye on him too, alright? But please, try to go a bit easier on him, and his sister and mother, too. They... He saved my life, Missandra. For real. And since I met him, I’m happier than I’ve been in a very, very long time. I want to keep it that way, and I would be happier if you could be happy with me.”

Her younger sister nodded again, grabbing Cassandra’s hands with a bit of a sorry expression.

“Hinue, I’m sorry... I should have congratulated you on your baby. But I just was too upset. I really am happy you’re pregnant, though. I’m so excited for you to become a mom.”

“You’ll be an Auntie, too.”

Missandra smiled and nodded, excited at the prospect of her new title.

“I’ll make sure to protect it. I mean him! It’s a boy, you say? How do they even know that?”

Cassandra chuckled and explained the whole situation about Krai’s egg as they were making their way back to the breakfast area. Just as they were halfway there, the sun was briefly blotted out as a dragon-sized shadow passed over them.

Krai softly landed right next to them after letting out a loud growl, causing Missandra to scream and hide behind Cassandra, utterly terrified.

“Missandra. He won’t do anything...”

“You can’t be sure of that!! He eats humans.”

“He eats pigs!” yelled Shareen from the table, as they were now close enough.

“I saw him eat a man just yesterday!” Missandra retorted back.

“Isn’t that exactly what I said?” Shareen laughed.

Missandra frowned. But to their surprise, Krai kept sniffing and wiggling closer, showing some interest in Missandra. She kept hiding behind Cassandra, making a comedic scene of the dragon and her circling around the young concubine for a while.

“Why does he want to sniff me?!” she cried.

“He’s just curious,” Cassandra guessed. “Here, scratch him there, he loves it.”

“I am not scratching a dragon! My arm would just be a little snack for him!”

“I promise, it won’t,” said Cassandra, encouraging her younger sister in front of her.

Missandra was trying hard not to scream while Krai’s body was encircling her, but the dragon indeed seemed curious about her. It kept sniffing and gently pushing her arm with its snout until Missandra had no choice but to give it a shy scratch in the spot her older sister had pointed out. Immediately, the dragon started acting a little sprightly, growling softly and moving its head so she’d scratch more.

After a minute, Missandra’s terrified expression softened a little.

“Oh... alright...I guess you might not be so...dangerous after all,” she said.

Cassandra chuckled and left her sister and Krai to get to know each other as she walked back to the breakfast table. Shareen and Kareen were laughing at Missandra’s awkward introduction to the dragon, but they undoubtedly hadn’t forgotten the previous matter.

“So?” asked Kareen with a knowing smile.

“Alright, we can do a Rain Ceremony,” Cassandra conceded. “But we’ll need to prepare a few things and it’ll have to be a simpler version. It also needs to be done on a rainy day.”

“Oh great! The next rainy season isn’t due for months here!” growled Shareen.

“Stop fussing,” her mother scolded her. “We’ll do this at the Diamond Palace, my city has far more rainy days. What else, darling?”

“We will need some Borean ink, purified water, a silk thread...”

“The water flowers, too!” Missandra shouted from where she was still rubbing the scales of a very contented Krai.

“Yes, and we should find green outfits.”

“Green? Like servants?”

“It’s the color of happiness for our tribe. We usually make traditional wedding clothes with green fabric and embroider them with prayers and symbols with a white thread, but I guess we can skip that...”

“What are you talking about?” protested Kareen. “Even if it’s a secret, a ceremony is a ceremony! We will go by the book, so make a list of anything you need for your Rain Ceremony, and I promise this old woman will get it right on time for the next rainy day in the Diamond Palace! You’ll see!”

They resumed breakfast after that, Kareen asking Cassandra a lot of questions about the Ceremony, making sure she knew absolutely everything they’d be needing. It was obvious she was only too happy to organize all of this, and Cassandra started to suspect Shareen was right when she said her mother was happy to have something to do behind their Father’s back. She repeated several times that it would be her responsibility to gather everything Cassandra had mentioned so they could plan the most perfect ceremony possible once they’d be back in the Diamond Palace. They were still a few days away from that, though.

The New Year Celebrations had to go on. For the next few days, Cassandra felt like there was nothing to do but watch shows, eat, and sleep. She was surprised by how the guests did their best to attend as much as they could, despite being obviously tired. The concubines attended if their man attended, but anyone who had a chance to improve their status made themselves seen. However, there were very few unusual events after that. It seemed like the Second Prince had found his perfect excuse to not attend any more of the celebrations, while Shareen was back.

Cassandra however, had something extra to attend to. As promised, she visited the First Prince’s apartments and examined him. If she wasn’t an Imperial Physician, it would have been inappropriate for another Prince’s concubine to go into another Prince’s chambers. It was obvious no one could be suspicious of her for visiting the First Prince, however. His poor health was no secret, and the Emperor had personally approved of Cassandra examining him.

Sadly, she had no good news for him or his worried concubines. Even after chatting quickly with Missandra, who was still hiding her appearance under a veil and cloak, the sisters had reached the same conclusion. She turned to the Prince, who was sitting in his bed, waiting for her to speak.

“His Highness suffers from a chronic respiratory disease called the Sickness of Dust.”

“The Sickness of Dust?” repeated the only concubine wearing pink.

“Yes. It’s something that makes his lungs extremely sensitive to any sort of dust, smoke, bacteria... Unfortunately, it’s a birth condition that can never be fully treated. His Highness needs to be in a very clean environment, dry, and not cold. Also, you should avoid going out in the next few weeks.”

“The next few weeks?” asked the First Prince, frowning. “Why?”

“With the New Year Celebrations, a lot of smoke is going to be in the air for a while. Also, the pollen will be back soon, and may make you worse.”

“Can’t you do anything about it?” asks one of the concubines.

“The tea you had us give him yesterday helped a lot!”

“There are several medicinal herbs that will help improve his lungs condition, I’ll write them out for you. If you feel like coughing again, you should put them into a pot and breathe them until you calm down. Just sit down and inhale until it goes away.”

The concubines looked disappointed, but the Prince raised his hand before his women could speak.

“Thank you, Lady Cassandra. None of the previous Imperial Doctors were able to give a name to my condition or speak to me honestly about its gravity before you did. At least now I know how to do better.”

“You’re welcome, Your Highness,” said Cassandra, bowing politely. “I will be taking my leave now, but I will definitely come back and visit you before leaving if you’ll allow me.”

“Of course, of course. Enjoy the celebrations.”

With that, Cassandra turned around to leave, Dahlia and Missandra following closely behind her. She let out a little sigh. She felt sorry for the First Prince. There truly was no cure for his condition, none that she knew of. He would have to live with it his whole life. If he took her recommendation seriously, he could at least potentially avoid any life-threatening crisis, but even her medicinal herbs had their limits.

“I wish I could do so much better here,” sighed Cassandra as they were about to walk out of the First Prince’s Apartments. “There is such limited knowledge about the properties of plants.”

“The doctors here are rip-offs,” said Missandra. “I sold my unguents to the girls for much cheaper and with better effects.”

“Why don’t you continue?” asked Cassandra.

“What?”

“You wanted to make a living for yourself, didn’t you? Why did you sell tea instead of medicine?”

Missandra sighed, shaking her head with a little smile.

“Hinue, you overestimate me! I don’t have your knowledge or your patience. I wouldn’t treat people, I would just fight with them continuously. With tea, people can just come, order what they need, and leave. With medicine, people while arguing, tell you you’re wrong and women know nothing about it. The only customers I ever had were prostitutes who knew me well. But even when I did start to sell, I had some concurrence, you know. Those jerks of retailers just don’t like competition, they made a fuss so I would stop.”

Cassandra stopped and turned around, surprising both of the girls behind her who almost ran into her.

“So you... You know the people who sell the abortion potions in the Red District?”

“Of course. I lived there for years! Why that question, though?”

“I...”

“Lady Cassandra!”

To their surprise, two of the first Prince’s concubines were trying to catch up to them, walking hurriedly despite their long dresses. Cassandra wondered if anything had happened, but the two girls bowed.

“We wanted to thank you deeply for treating our Lord,” said the lady in pink.

“Oh, you’re welcome.”

The two of them stood straight up.

“I’m Berissa, and this one is Chiara. The two of us were hoping to get closer to you, Lady Cassandra, and if...you’d accept to have some tea with us later on?”

Cassandra was a bit surprised, and it took her a few seconds to understand.

“Yes, of course. Please let me know when you’d like to spend time together.”

The two women’s faces brightened, and they thanked her profusely before Cassandra insisted she had to leave, after which both went back.

Missandra and Dahlia exchanged glances, both confused by what had just happened.

“Hinue,” said Missandra. “Why would these women be interested in having tea with you? They are already concubines with their own Prince.”

“I think they were acting on the First Prince’s behalf,” said Cassandra. “If his concubines are close to me, the War God’s pregnant concubine, it could show he is close to his brother, and supports the Third Prince as heir to the throne.”

“Maybe they were just looking out for themselves,” said Dahlia. “It isn’t rare for concubines to befriend concubines with more power than they do, just to increase their chances to survive in the Imperial Palace. With the news about His Highness the First Prince’s health being bad, maybe those two thought it would be good for them to get close to you, just in case anything happens.”

“What? I don’t want them to use my older sister like a stepping tool!”

“It’s alright, Missandra,” said Cassandra. “I actually hoped to befriend some concubines within the Imperial Palace. So far, the Emperor and First Prince’s concubines are the only ones who haven’t been mean to me.”

It was the truth. Cassandra felt like Kairen and her couldn’t have only enemies within that Palace. The differences between all six Princes were obvious, but there were definitely some who were close to one another. While Vrehan and Kairen were clear enemies, she still hoped they could find some support among the other brothers.

“Oh right, Hinue,” said Missandra as they were walking back. “What did you want to ask me before? About the abortion portion or something?”

Cassandra realized she was so lost in her thoughts about the First Prince’s concubines, she had almost forgotten! She nodded, and talked softly, as they were walking down several corridors and could easily be heard.

“Yes... Someone got one of those, and I wanted to know who they got it for. I thought there would be no way to know.”

“Of course you can!”

“What? Really?”

“Sure,” said Missandra with a nod. “You know, the people who sell such stuff in the Red District have to keep a strict record, because the establishments’ owners want to know if the girls get pregnant, in case the father is someone rich, they can make them pay for it. Also, if someone outside of the Red District orders one of those, they need to know, they want to avoid trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“You know, from rich families. If one’s daughter or wife orders one of these, the Head of the House has to know. But if the girls don’t say a thing, what do they do? They run to the Red District to make a scene and threaten to behead the seller if they don’t give a name. Trust me, I’ve seen this situation happen so many times. Any wise shop owner keeps their buyers’ list as tidy as they can!”

Cassandra was speechless. She didn’t expect her sister would be able to help them in such a way! However, Missandra seemed sure about what she was saying...

“So, who was it?”

Cassandra explained to her the whole situation as they were going back to her apartments, her younger sister nodding and frowning all this time. Once they reached Cassandra’s new private garden, she knew about the whole situation.

“I see. Of course, I could find out! The only problem is I risk my life if I go back there, though.”

“Could you go with Princess Shareen?”

Missandra frowned.

“Mh...I don’t know if I could endure her for so long.”

She sighed.

“Can you let me send a few letters, actually? I still have friends there. They could definitely ask for me, and I wouldn’t have to leave the Palace!”

“Of course. I think my Lord has ink and parchments in our bedroom, though he never uses it.”

“Alright, I’ll go and borrow it then!”

Missandra left the garden like that, leaving Cassandra with Dahlia, who looked a bit upset, watching Missandra go. Cassandra was a bit surprised. What was wrong between Dahlia and her sister? They had barely met.

She took a few leaves she needed for the First Prince’s decoction, watching her young female servant.

“Dahlia?”

“Yes, Lady Cassandra?”

“Do you perhaps...not like my sister?”

Dahlia immediately blushed, looking down in embarrassment.

“It’s nothing like that, my Lady! I don’t... Hold any hard feelings against your younger sister, really. I just... I... I’m a bit jealous of her.”

Jealous? Cassandra was perplexed. Was it because she had taken her younger sister as a servant? It seemed like a rather foolish issue for Dahlia to be jealous of, though.

“Jealous of Missandra? Why?”

Dahlia blushed a bit more, looking down on the basket she was holding for the leaves, blushing.

“It’s that... P...Princess Shareen seems very interested in Lady Missandra, and... I... I like Princess Shareen very much...”

Cassandra was completely caught off guard. So that’s what it was! She had almost forgotten Dahlia said she liked someone in the Imperial Palace. But of all people, it was Lady Shareen!

Cassandra was completely caught off-guard. She hadn’t expected that.

“Really?”

“I know it’s shameless of me to be thinking about one of the Royal Princesses in such a way! I just... I’ve always admired her since I was a little servant. Lady Shareen is such a strong-willed woman, and she knows how to fight, too... I swear I am fine with

admiring her secretly! It's just... I was a bit surprised by how quickly she seemed to like Lady Missandra.”

It was rare for Dahlia to open up with her feelings like this. Cassandra felt a bit bad, as since she had found Missandra, she hadn't paid too much attention to Dahlia. She chuckled and took her hand gently.

“It's fine, Dahlia. I wish you'd be more open with me like this. I'm glad I have you as a friend here.”

“A friend... Lady Cassandra, do you really think of a lowly servant like me as a friend?”

Cassandra was taken aback. Not because of Dahlia's reaction, but because her words echoed her own, not too long ago. A lowly servant, or a lowly slave. It was something she would say often about herself, notably when her Prince tried to get his feelings across to her. Now that she was thinking about it, their relationship had been so awkward and unprecedented from the start. Back when she was sitting against that throne, with some of his fur cloak covering her, she would have never guessed the position she would be standing in today.

“Dahlia, don't call yourself that. You are no lowly servant. You are a servant, and my friend, if you'll accept.”

The young woman's eyes immediately got filled with tears, and she bowed profusely.

“Thank you, Madam! I'll treasure our friendship!”

Cassandra still felt like this was a bit different from what a friend should say, but she understood Dahlia's long years of service in the Imperial Palace prevented her from saying what she wanted, or changing her habits in a few days. It would most likely be a gradual change. Self-confidence couldn't be built in a few days after years of serving others.

“About Missandra and Shareen,” said Cassandra. “You know, I don't think they see each other in a romantic way. My younger sister is a bit stubborn, and I think Princess Shareen just enjoys watching her because she is entertaining. She rarely sees someone of a lower rank rebel like Missandra does. Princess Shareen is someone who enjoys strong characters, but from what I have seen, her lovers are more... submissive types.”

Cassandra felt a bit shy talking about Shareen's tastes, but after all, she had seen it first hand. Their first meeting had left quite a strong impression on her, not necessarily in a good way. However, since then, she had learned to understand Shareen a bit better. The Princess was stubborn and hated when someone resisted her. She enjoyed mostly teasing people she liked, like her brothers. And lastly, she had very low standards of decency.

"I see," said Dahlia, blushing a bit more.

"I don't think my younger sister would be interested at all, either," added Cassandra with a sigh. "They bicker nonstop. Plus, though neither of them look like it, Missandra is half Shareen's age."

Indeed, sometimes, Cassandra wished her younger sister wouldn't act so defiant when she was just a sixteen-year-old girl. Missandra had grown too mature and stubborn, but if it wasn't for Cassandra, she wouldn't have survived in the Imperial Palace with such behavior.

"I feel a bit bad for being jealous," said Dahlia. "I'm already well aware that Princess Shareen has taken many lovers. The servants talk, you know. I know she likes to play around, but somehow, since Lady Missandra was different from them all, I just got... a bit worried."

"I guess it can't be helped. We feel jealous when someone gets close to our loved one."

"Is it the same for you, my Lady?"

Cassandra nodded. They were slowly tending to all of her plants, as Cassandra didn't really feel like going to the Celebrations yet. Moreover, her Prince was busy at the moment, and she didn't want to go there without him. So, she was just taking her time, taking care of her garden, and collecting some leaves in the basket Dahlia carried for the First Prince's decoction.

"Yes... I guess one can never feel at ease," she sighed.

"You should! His Highness the Third Prince obviously only has eyes for you!"

Cassandra chuckled, picking another flower.

"Thank you, Dahlia."

However, Cassandra felt somewhat awkward discussing her personal feelings with someone else. It was part of her personality, she was still incredibly shy about her own relationships. She felt like Kairen and her shared something she wouldn't have been able to share with anyone else. Cassandra liked thinking of their bond as something...special.

A little while later, Missandra came back with a little smile.

"Alright, I sent it! I hope they can answer soon."

"I hope so too," said Cassandra. "We planned to leave for the Diamond Palace as soon as the New Year Celebrations are over."

"So soon?"

They turned around. Immediately, Cassandra frowned, pulling her younger sister.

Phetra was standing at the entrance of her indoor garden, with a nasty smirk. She was wearing a very revealing purple dress, and a little golden diadem.

"I believe you have no right to be here, Your Highness," said Cassandra.

"No right? If a slave can be in the Imperial Palace, why can't a Princess be?"

Cassandra tried to remain calm and composed. Phetra wouldn't be stupid enough to do something to her in the Third Prince's apartments, would she? Moreover, was she ever going to let go of the slavery thing? This was really getting old, even for her.

"Ah... I guess my older brother really went the full way for you," she said, glancing all over at Cassandra's garden.

Calmly, she stepped forward and pushed one of the plant pots onto the floor, making it break on the ground. Cassandra clenched her fist. There really was no end to that woman's childishness.

"Have you just come to mess around, Princess Phetra?" she asked.

"Well, I was bored... And hearing that you didn't have your usual pet around... I couldn't help but come and visit."

She stepped forward, breaking yet another two pots.

"Please stop!" yelled Dahlia. "Those plants are important to My Lady!"

“Shut up, servant,” retorted Phetra, crashing another pot onto the floor.

“I wonder if his Highness the Second Prince knows of your presence here?” said Cassandra.

Phetra froze. Cassandra had hoped her brother’s name would somewhat make her react, and she was right. She had noticed long ago how Vrehan was cold to everyone, including his concubines and sisters. Phetra probably only had a very limited amount of trust and liberty from him, too. Moreover, from what she had witnessed, the Second Prince hated confronting Kairen or Shareen directly. He had abandoned one of his concubines to her death because she had acted on her own with that snake. Though he probably wouldn’t want his sister dead, he certainly wouldn’t see her actions in a good light either. Any time Phetra had stirred up trouble or fought with Shareen, the Second Prince had stayed out of it, leaving Phetra in her own mess.

“Don’t you dare talk about my brother!” growled Phetra.

Cassandra was scared of her, but not to the point she would step back and let Phetra act however she wanted. Not in her garden, and especially since this part of the Palace was part of Kairen’s apartments. Half-siblings or not, she knew no Princess or Prince who wasn’t Kareen’s child was allowed here.

“These are my Prince’s apartments and my garden. Please go back,” said Cassandra.

“Don’t you give me orders, either! You know what? Actually, this gives me an opportunity. I could have your head for acting up and thinking you can order an Imperial Princess around!”

“I am his Highness’ The War God’s concubine,” retorted Cassandra in the coldest voice she could. “Don’t think your threats can intimidate me any longer, Princess Phetra. The Emperor...”

“Oh? You want to go and cry to my father now?” said Phetra.

She took the diadem she had on her head and threw it to Cassandra’s feet with a smirk.

“See? I have dozens of those. Do you think you’re special because my father gifted you one? Don’t you realize? concubines like you are replaceable. Do you think wearing a pink dress makes you even remotely close to an Imperial Princess? You’re wrong. You’re a low-born, good for nothing.”

“Good for nothing?” repeated Cassandra. “I think you keep misunderstanding something. I am an Imperial Physician. I contribute to this Empire’s well-being. One of those pots you just knocked over contained a plant to heal the First Prince’s cough. Shall I tell his Highness Prince Sephir that I can’t heal him now? Because Princess Phetra came over to act up in my herbal medicine garden?”

Phetra got red, staring at the mess at her feet, and glancing at Cassandra, unsure.

“You’re lying...”

“The first plant was blue limonea, a plant to improve blood flow,” suddenly said Missandra. “The second one was demonis helebora, a plant that whitens any fabric, and can be used as makeup. The third one is wild chloriane, its flowers produce a perfume that helps clear the lungs’ impurities. You’re a Princess and you don’t even know this much?”

While Phetra, in awe, looked down at her feet, Cassandra turned to her sister.

“Linue, stay out of this,” said Cassandra in their mother tongue.

“As if I’d stay put and watch this snake woman insult my sister!” replied Missandra, annoyed.

“How dare you talk to me, you low servant!” yelled Phetra, sounding very pissed off.

“This low servant is more educated than her Highness,” Missandra shouted back. “Next time you can think about that before you come and destroy someone else’s precious medicinal herbs on a whim!”

“I want that servant’s head!” yelled Phetra, furious. “I will kill you, now!”

She took out a little dagger, furious, and started walking towards them. Cassandra was totally panicked. She was no fighter, and anyway, none of them could injure a member of the Imperial Family without being punished or worse, executed. Krai couldn’t enter the garden, and Kairen was busy elsewhere. She pulled Missandra and Dahlia behind her, hoping Phetra wouldn’t dare attack her, a pregnant concubine.

As she kept stepping forward, Cassandra reacted by reflex. She took one of the buckets at her feet and threw its content to Phetra’s face. It was full of dirty water, one she had prepared with fertilizer for the plants.

As soon as the water hit her face, Phetra stopped and screamed horribly. She tried to wipe the dirt off of her face, and in this short time, Cassandra slapped her hand for her to let go of her dagger. The blade fell, and Missandra immediately took it away, dropping it in one of the fountains.

“You...” hissed Phetra, having managed to wipe some off her face.

She lifted her hand to slap Cassandra, but the young concubine wasn't going to stand still. She was scary when she had a weapon, but without it, Phetra was nothing but a woman who was about Cassandra's size, and certainly didn't have any fighter's reflexes or speed. In a hand movement, Cassandra pushed her hand away. It was still a bit painful as Phetra slapped the back of her hand, but it was better than taking a slap in the face and doing nothing.

As her move had been blocked by Cassandra, the Princess looked even angrier, pointing a finger at her.

“You're dead! You're as good as dead! You won't get away with this!” she screamed as she stormed off.

A few seconds after she was gone, Cassandra let out a long sigh of relief and fell down on her knees. Both Dahlia and Missandra jumped to her side, worried.

“Hinue!”

“My Lady, are you unwell!”

“It's fine... I just got a bit too agitated. I didn't think she'd go away.”

“Lady Cassandra... we will be in trouble. Lady Missandra, you shouldn't have gotten involved! What if Lady Cassandra is in danger because of you!”

“In danger? That crazy Princess was here to stir trouble anyway! I wasn't going to stay still and watch her insult my sister calmly! Do you think it gets better if you let them mistreat you? It just gives them an excuse to be worse the next time!”

“Enough, you two,” sighed Cassandra. “Help me go to Lady Kareen's apartments. It will be safer there until his Highness comes back.”

All the way to Kareen's apartments, Cassandra couldn't shake off those worried feelings inside her heart. What if she had pushed it too far? What if Phetra took her revenge on Missandra, or even Dahlia? The girls were bickering non-stop behind her,

but she just headed right to Lady Kareen's apartments, trying to get there as fast as she could.

"This was foolish and reckless of you, Lady Missandra! What if Lady Cassandra gets blamed for what happened? You went too far!"

"You didn't do anything to help my sister!" Missandra retorted back. "So what, I should have let her be insulted? That woman had no right to come and pick on her! I can't stand bitches and bullies!"

The girls just kept going at it until Cassandra reached Kareen's place. Their argument somewhat made her panic even more, and when she finally spotted the Imperial Concubine, who was taking tea in her garden, Cassandra ran to her, falling at her feet, in tears.

"Cassandra, dear! What happened?"

But Cassandra had given too much of her strength in that little confrontation with Phetra, and for some reason, her nerves couldn't take it. She had been so scared for her sister, for Dahlia, scared for herself and her baby, and she was angry all at once...

"Servants! Get some fresh water!"

"I'll prepare..."

"Don't you two dare move from here!" roared Kareen, furious. "You two girls better not move an inch before telling me what in the world happened!"

Kareen was glaring at both Dahlia and Missandra, making the girls white with fear. The two of them were experiencing the Imperial Concubine's wrath first-hand for the first time.

While several servants helped put Cassandra on a chair and brought her fresh water and dried fruits to help her recover from her emotions, Dahlia and Missandra told Kareen what had happened, bickering a bit in the process. She seemed to be caring for Cassandra more than listening, but Kareen wasn't losing one word from them.

When they were done, Missandra was angry again, frowning while looking at Cassandra.

"I can't believe that Princess dares to pick on my sister like this! She..."

Before she could end that sentence, Kareen stood and slapped her.

The noise resonated loud and clear in the little garden, making the servants run away like scared mice. Dahlia, too, had her eyes open wide in shock.

“I’m fed up with your reckless attitude!” yelled the Imperial Concubine. “You are not in the Red District anymore! This isn’t some girl’s fight where you can talk back and get away with some light punishment! You are in the Imperial Palace! When are you going to realize that your childish attitude is putting your sister in danger?”

Missandra was completely speechless. She put a hand on her burning cheek, unable to say one word, staring at Kareen. The Imperial Concubine was absolutely infuriated with her.

“You can’t be stupid enough to provoke an Imperial Princess and think you’ll get away with it! Your sister has done her best to survive so far, you’re here for two days and you piss off an Imperial Princess! Do you think everyone here will let you get away with it, as my children do? Kairen and Shareen are only putting up with your attitude because of their love for Cassandra!”

“But she... that Princess is the one who came...”

“Yes, she did, and you should have left it for Cassandra to handle! If you hadn’t provoked her, Phetra wouldn’t have dared to pull out a weapon in my son’s apartments! Now you put a target on your back, and there is no guarantee we will be able to save you! Do you think it was smart to retort back if you lose your head for it? This isn’t a child’s game! Stop acting like a brat and thinking you’ll always get away with that attitude! Whether you like it or not, this is a Dragon’s Den! Our Palace, our rules! Stop trying to apply your logic here, before you get all of us and your sister killed!”

Missandra was on the verge of tears, now, and took a few steps back before running away, crying. Kareen gestured for a few servants to follow her, making sure she didn’t leave her apartments. She sighed, sitting back by Cassandra’s side.

“I didn’t say anything until now, Cassandra, but that sister of yours needed to hear it sooner or later.”

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry,” sighed Cassandra. “I should have been harsher with her earlier...”

“You just found your long-lost sister. It can’t be helped that you didn’t want to scold her too much. I hate having to fight with my children, too.”

Cassandra still felt sorry for Missandra. Somehow, she regretted forcing her younger sister to come to the Imperial Palace when she wasn't prepared for it.

She couldn't stop worrying. What if Phetra really managed to kill Missandra? She would never forgive herself.

"Do you think... Phetra will..." she asked, not even able to bring the words to her lips.

"Don't worry, Cassandra. That little bitch won't get away with threatening you and my grandson this time. Just you wait until my son hears of this, he won't sit still. Just because he seems so calm, those people shouldn't forget he is the War God."

Cassandra nodded, despite not feeling much better. However, she knew she needed to calm down. So much worrying was not good for her baby. Truth was, she had such a fright earlier. She tried to relax a bit, drinking the tea brought by the servants, but nothing could chase away the darkness in her heart. Kareen stayed by her side, caressing her arm gently.

To their surprise, Krai arrived first. The big black dragon showed up all of a sudden, popping its head above one of Kareen's walls with a growl.

"Where have you been, boy?" scolded Kareen.

Cassandra would never get used to the Imperial Concubine treating a humongous beast like Krai as she would a mischievous child. The dragon ignored the mother, and scooted to Cassandra's side, sniffing her frantically. She sighed and put her hand on the dragon's warm scales, feeling a bit better by its contact.

"Where is your Master?" she sighed.

Krai growled softly, lying down next to her, though it was big enough for Cassandra to still caress its head. As she was waiting for her Prince to arrive, Cassandra remembered something she had meant to ask Kareen.

"Some of the first Prince's concubines approached me earlier."

"Did they?"

Cassandra explained their brief exchange to Kareen in a few words, looking for her opinion on the two concubines. The Imperial Concubine stayed silent for a few seconds, but she didn't seem too surprised.

“I don’t think those two have any ill intentions,” she said. “They are aware Sephir is weak, and could die in the upcoming years. If it happens, those women will need someone’s protection in the Imperial Palace. They are probably thinking you might be the next Empress, and are taking an early start on befriending you.”

“Why would anyone want to attack widows?” asked Cassandra, confused. “No concubine can get on the Empress throne without their Prince becoming Emperor first...”

“They may lose their Prince, but those two have children. When a new Emperor gets on the throne, he often gets rid of the potential competition, as much and as fast as he can. That includes his brothers’ male descendants. Those women are probably hoping you’ll watch out for their children if anything happens.”

Cassandra hadn’t thought of things that way. Kairen’s nephews were also potential rivals. If she remembered correctly, he had seven of them already. Prince Sephir had one son and two daughters so far, but he could still have more. Those concubines were probably seeking her protection, just in case... However, Cassandra doubted Kairen himself would take any action against the children unless he had a good reason to.

Cassandra realized she had never seen any of the Princes’ children. Were they all staying with their mothers, out of harms’ way? Maybe in different locations than the Imperial Palace? She knew she wouldn’t want her son here unless she had no choice. It was too dangerous for a young heir. Just like her son, Kairen’s nephews probably each had young dragons, too.

“How many dragons are there in total?” asked Cassandra.

She had just realized, not only did the young Princes’ have dragons, but also, like Srai, some dragons had probably outlived their masters as well!

Kareen seemed hesitant.

“As far as I know, about twenty. There are only seven adult dragons, that I know of for sure, but the old schmuck might be hiding more.”

Cassandra realized Kareen was right... The Emperor could have kept some of his dead brothers’ dragons, or some of his nephews’. No wonder the Dragon Empire was so strong compared to other countries. Not only do they have dragons, but their enemies couldn’t even know how many there really were!

She wondered if all the rumors she had heard about the army of dragons were true. Cassandra couldn't help but think it would be a truly beautiful sight to see all seven flying together.

"Cassandra!"

She sat up at the Prince's call.

Kairen came in like a storm, headed right her way, looking half-worried, half-furious. Shareen was behind him, but Cassandra only got a quick glimpse of her. Her Prince immediately grabbed her in his arms, carrying her like she weighed nothing once again.

"Are you injured?" he asked while scanning her all over.

"No, no I'm fine, I just got a bit of a fright..."

"That sister knows when to get her in trouble," said Kareen.

In a few words, Cassandra tried to explain what had happened, from the moment Phetra had appeared in her garden. At each sentence, the War God's eyes darkened scarily. Cassandra was worried he would get mad at Missandra, while she thought Kareen had already scolded and scared her enough.

"So?" said Kareen. "What are you going to do now?"

"That bitch Phetra needs a lesson", hissed Shareen. "A real one."

"Wait, Missandra provoked her," said Cassandra. "What if she gets punished?"

"Actually," said Kareen, "your sister could use some punishment."

Right after that, she walked off, leaving the siblings and Cassandra alone in the garden. She was worried.

"I know I shouldn't have let Missandra provoke Phetra," she said. "But I just couldn't stop my sister, and things got out of hand so fast..."

"Don't worry," whispered her Prince. "You don't have to apologize. I shouldn't have left you alone."

Cassandra could have argued she wasn't alone, but in that case, it probably wasn't what he actually meant. Kairen seemed relieved to see her fine, as he kept gently caressing her, refusing to let go of her for one second.

After another minute, Kareen suddenly returned, followed by Dahlia and Missandra. The younger sister looked deeply sorry, looking down and with her eyes all red and puffy. It broke Cassandra's heart to see Missandra in such a state, but she couldn't do anything at that point. She had no choice but to let the Imperial Family deal with it.

"Let's go," said Kairen.

"What? I am not going!" suddenly claimed Missandra. "You said this woman would have me dead!"

"Missandra, enough!"

It was the first time Cassandra got mad at her or even raised her voice. The younger sister was speechless. However, she saw in Cassandra's green, angry eyes that this time, she wouldn't idly sit by and let her act however she wanted. Missandra finally understood. She had gone too far, and she couldn't oppose her sister or anyone there. She nodded, defeated.

To Cassandra's surprise, Kairen carried her out, and even refused to let her walk by herself as they left the Imperial Concubine's apartments.

"I'm fine," she said, trying to convince him.

"Cassandra, you could barely stand earlier," Kareen reminded her.

Cassandra felt embarrassed nevertheless. Thinking about it, she probably hadn't eaten properly earlier. With all the discussion about their secret ceremony, she had barely touched breakfast, and her appetite was unpredictable these days. Plus, with the earlier fright, her nerves had too much for one day.

Kairen was getting more protective of Cassandra any time something happened. His eyes had a murderous glare since Phetra had been mentioned earlier.

Their little group, including Missandra, Dahlia, and some of Kareen's servants, walked quickly through the Palace towards the Imperial Chamber. Seeing Kareen, Kairen, and Shareen altogether was a way to make any servant turn around and leave as quickly as possible.

For a while, Cassandra thought they were going towards the garden where the New Year Celebrations were still being held, but she soon realized she was wrong. Their group was heading to the inner part of the Palace, where the Emperor gathered all the ministers, generals, and scholars to officiate and discuss the Country's future. Despite the ongoing event, the upper ranks probably still had to work and make sure everything in the country was going smoothly.

Once they arrived, Kairen finally put Cassandra down, letting her stand by his side, and brutally opened the large gold doors. Everyone inside the room jumped in shock, and all eyes converged their way. There were at least fifty people inside, all men. All of them looked shocked to see the War God making such a brutal appearance, and their glances went back and forth to the Emperor and his son, trying to figure how bad this situation could turn out to be.

The Emperor probably had his mouth open the widest of them all. His eyes went to Kairen, Shareen, Kareen, Cassandra, and Kairen again, as his son was leading the group.

“Son, what is...”

However, the War God made his way towards the men gathered, and without warning, grabbed one of them by the collar. Cassandra recognized, a bit late, the Second Prince Vrehan, struggling to get away from his younger brother's grip.

The strength difference was painfully obvious. Kairen held him by the collar, at arm's length, well above the floor. Despite his pitiful attempts, Vrehan didn't manage to make him move one bit.

“Where is your damn sister?!” roared Kairen.

Even Cassandra had never seen him that furious. As if to support his Master, Krai made an appearance with a terrible growl, making the whole building shake. The terrified scholars went white, as the black-scaled head appeared above, in the usual open roof.

The Emperor had absolutely no control over the situation. His eyes went from Kareen to her son, again, and he tried to step forward, looking unsure.

“Kairen, son...What is...”

“I said, bring out your damn sister!”

“Let me go,” hissed Vrehan.

“Your sister. Now.”

He didn’t even need to ask precisely which one he was talking about. With an annoyed look, Vrehan gestured for two servants to run out of the room. Meanwhile, Krai was trying to get inside, the growling getting louder and louder. The room wasn’t exactly too small for the beast, but the opening definitely wasn’t made for a dragon to squeeze through. It could only get one front paw inside and with just that, the closest wall was dangerously scratched.

The Emperor slammed his hand against his throne.

“Kairen, enough! Put your brother down this instant!”

“I’ll put that vermin down as soon as I get his sister.”

Everyone was shocked. No one ever opposed one of the Emperor’s orders, but apparently, that rule did not apply to the War God. Kairen’s wrath was blindly aimed at Vrehan and his sister, enough to completely oversee his father’s authority.

The Emperor, maybe, didn’t seem as surprised or angry as he could have been. Putting his hands on his hips, he turned to Kareen and Shareen, who had been patiently waiting to the side.

“May I know what this ruckus is for? Kareen, dearest, I’m glad to see you, but...”

“Oh, don’t worry, you’ll soon be very aware of the situation, dear.”

Apparently, Kareen’s cold smile and use of a pet name were enough to have the Emperor blush and distract him completely from the current situation. Cassandra wondered exactly how much influence the Imperial Concubine could have on him.

A short while later, the servants returned, looking a bit embarrassed and bowing.

“Her Highness Princess Phetra re...refuses to come, your Highness...”

The Emperor rolled his eyes, annoyed. Meanwhile, Kairen’s grip on Vrehan’s throat, who was already getting red from being held like a ragdoll, got tighter.

“Your sister better change her mind quickly, or I swear you’ll pay in her stead.”

“Tell Phetra to come here immediately!” yelled the Emperor. “Since when does she dare ignore us!”

The servants left again. Cassandra was speechless. The Emperor had taken things personally, already? He sighed, and waved his hand, dismissing most of the high-ranked officials immediately.

The little crowd was only too happy to leave, as Krai had been raining some grated marble on their heads for a little while already. None of them wanted to stay in the area when the War God was that angry, either.

As the time started to get longer and neither Phetra or the servants were coming, Shareen took her sword out.

“Shall I go get that bitch myself, brother?”

“Shareen, enough! Put that thing away, you know I hate when you use weapons inside! And will someone finally explain what is going on here, by the Great Dragon!”

“It appears, dear, that your seventh daughter thinks she can threaten the War God’s Favorite, an Imperial Physician, and get away with it by not coming here,” slowly explained Kareen.

The Emperor immediately frowned, his eyes switching from Kareen to Cassandra, who was standing next to her. His face turned red.

“What! What is Phetra thinking?! Someone go get her! Right now!”

Of course, the Second Prince had already sent two servants prior, but two more Imperial Servants swiftly left the room. If Phetra didn’t come after all that...

While waiting, Kareen even ordered a chair to be brought for Cassandra, insisting she shouldn’t stand for too long. She took one for herself, actually, installing herself like a queen in the middle of the Palace.

“How...How have you been, dearest?” asked the Emperor.

Cassandra was still amazed to see a man his age blush so much when addressing Lady Kareen. The Imperial Concubine nodded and wiped off some invisible dust from her dress.

“I have been fine, aside from the children’s endless bickering.”

“I know, right? So tiring, so tiring!”

“It would be better if their father monitored them more closely.”

After that, the Emperor’s mouth closed, looking a bit contrite. Cassandra couldn’t help but feel a bit sorry for him. Kareen really didn’t cut him any slack.

Finally, the servants returned, but they were followed by Phetra’s furious screams. Kairen put Vrehan down, who breathed out, readjusting his clothing with a bitter expression.

The War God’s anger had already shifted to Phetra, who barged in screaming.

“Vrehan, Father! Why are you summoning me?! What is...”

She stopped when she saw Kairen’s furious glare. Her face went immediately white, her eyes displaying endless terror. She unconsciously took a step back, and Krai’s loud growl got her attention, too. Phetra turned around, to try and leave, but the servants immediately stood in her way, and though they were all bowing, it was obvious she wouldn’t get through that way.

She turned around again, shaking her head.

“Third Brother was looking for you,” said Vrehan, still looking pissed.

Cassandra realized he was angry at his sister as well. He probably didn’t like getting involved and having to face Kairen.

However, something felt wrong with Phetra, too. Unlike her revealing dress from earlier, she was covered in a purple shawl, covering her body and even a bit of her face. Cassandra wondered why she had put that thing on?

“I...I only...”

Kairen wasn’t going to show any patience with her. He walked the distance that separated them and grabbed her throat, just like he had her brother earlier, making her squeal like a pig. She panicked immediately, trying to free herself and screaming like crazy.

“Let me go! Let me go! You can’t hurt me! You can’t hurt me!”

“Phetra, will you stop screaming like this, it’s extremely disagreeable to my ears,” said the Emperor, annoyed. “Kairen claims you threatened his concubine, what happened?”

“Her...her bitch servant insulted me! Father! That dirty servant insulted me, and the slave concubine attacked me!”

“Who attacked who?” said Kareen, frowning. “Phetra, you lying little snake! Didn’t you draw a sword in the presence of a dragon’s son!”

Phetra ignored her, still screaming, begging to get her Father’s attention and for him to take pity on her.

“Father, they disfigured me! Look what that witch did to my body! Father, you must have justice for me!”

Indeed, the shawl had slid down with Kairen holding her in the air, and now, everyone could see the large red rashes on her skin. Kareen sneered, visibly satisfied.

“What...What is that?” said the Emperor, lost.

“An allergic reaction, I believe, your Highness,” sighed Cassandra. “I did throw some dirty water on Princess Phetra.”

“Why would you do that? Kareen, dearest, what was that about a sword?”

“Princess Phetra came to my Medicinal Garden earlier, your Highness,” explained Cassandra, stepping forward. “She acted recklessly, and I got scared. My servant tried to defend me, but Princess Phetra took out a sword to attack me. I reacted and threw... ahem, some water on her, which certainly caused her...current condition.”

The Emperor took a minute to take it all in, but meanwhile, Phetra started screaming again.

“Her damn servant attacked me! She insulted me! I want her head, Father! Father, you can’t let me be insulted like this! I am an Imperial Princess!”

Krai growled, and it was obvious the dragon was trying to get to her. It only made her panic and scream even more.

“Father! Father! He will kill me! Brother! Brother help me!”

However, Vrehan remained silent, ignoring her as if this situation was completely unrelated to him. Cassandra hated that, he was abandoning his sister in such a situation.

As she kept screaming, Kairen suddenly tightened his grip, choking her a bit. He wasn't suffocating her, but at least she had to stop screaming if she wanted to breathe. Truth was, Cassandra hated seeing a woman mistreated like this, but Phetra had gone over a limit this time.

The Emperor shook his head.

"Kairen, son, enough. I don't want you killing your siblings in the middle of my Imperial Chamber!"

"She insulted and assaulted Cassandra," hissed the War God. "I will not let this go."

"Calm down, calm down, will you! Cassandra is fine, isn't she? She's just..."

"Since when do you know anything about pregnant women, you old man!" roared Kareen, making the Emperor jump. "Fine? Do you know how fragile she is at the moment? What if she had lost her child? What if Phetra had injured her!"

"Calm down, dearie, I will handle this. But first, Kairen, let her go, please, Son."

"Kairen..." said Cassandra, gently.

She was afraid things could go wrong if he ignored the Emperor's orders any longer, and killed Phetra in such a place.

Kairen opened his hand all of a sudden, and Phetra fell to the floor brutally. A *crack* sound was heard, announcing nothing good. She started screaming in pain, again, but now holding her injured ankle. The War God suddenly grabbed her wrist, forcefully dragging her and throwing her to his Father's feet. The Emperor sighed, his hands on his hips.

"Phetra, you unruly child. You never listen, do you? I guess I have been too lenient with you. Attacking a pregnant Imperial Concubine! How could you be such an idiot?!"

"They are the ones you should punish, Father!" she sobbed, trying to act pitiful, pulling on his clothing. "They made me like this! You can't allow a servant to treat me like this!"

“Enough! Enough of you, Phetra! You really need a lesson! Guards!”

Imperial Guards appeared all of a sudden, but none of them actually dared to approach Phetra and the furious War God next to her.

“Take her to the Imperial Prison for her to stay... Mh... Fifty days! The prisoner’s treatment! Yes, fifty days sounds like enough time for me to find her a husband.”

“A hus...husband?”

“Yes. You’ve annoyed me enough. Time to send you away, you can marry some scholar or whatever. You’ll be stripped of your title as an Imperial Princess, too. I’ve had enough of you stirring trouble.”

“Father! You can’t do that! I was born an Imperial Princess, I’ll die an Imperial Princess!”

“Looks like you just expired your first life, Phetra,” sneered Shareen, satisfied. “Brother, if I remember correctly, the Imperial Prison is... this way.”

She was pointing a finger, and a second later, Cassandra understood what she meant. He was going to...

Kairen grabbed Phetra once again and, despite how much she screamed, hysterical, he suddenly threw her out of the window Shareen had shown. Cassandra and her servants were shocked, covering their mouths in horror.

“Don’t worry, dear,” said Kareen. “It’s only two or three floors down until she lands on the building.”

Landing wasn’t exactly the right word!

Kareen and Shareen were almost smiling as if Phetra’s screams had been some pleasant melody. Cassandra couldn’t help but feel a bit bad for her on the inside. From the way she was piercing their ears, she must have been in such horrible pain.

The Emperor’s mouth was still open, as he was still processing what had just happened, staring at the window. He finally turned to Kairen, angry.

“Kairen, when I ordered for Phetra to be taken to the Imperial Prison, I actually meant for her to be taken there through the door, the damn door!” he exclaimed. “Why is it that you children are always only thinking of fighting and killing each other?!”

His yelling had no effect on his son. Kairen turned around and walked back to Cassandra, looking almost satisfied. At least, the murderous look in his eyes was gone.

“Well, from what we can hear, Father,” said Shareen. “She is still pretty much alive.”

The Emperor glared her way, not amused by her antics this time. He sighed, massaging his temples and looking truly exhausted by all this ruckus.

“Anyway, someone go grab her from... wherever she is now, and get her an Imperial Physician immediately. She’s still going to the Imperial Prison. Now I have to find someone who’ll be willing to marry this pest... Ah, what a headache... Those children...”

While the poor Emperor kept rambling, the guards subtly glanced Cassandra’s way for a second, but after thinking about it twice, figured it would probably be better to find another Imperial Physician. With the current state of things, the Imperial Concubine probably wouldn’t even have agreed to treat the Princess’ rashes.

Once the guards had left, Cassandra let out a little sigh of relief. Things weren’t over, though. Vrehan turned to their father, looking very serious.

“Father, we still have an issue to solve.”

“What? What now?”

When his eyes surreptitiously went Missandra’s way, Cassandra’s heart sank. She knew this wasn’t good. She had thought that man had been too cold, watching his sister being thrown out of a window without saying a thing, but now, it was clear he had been waiting for this moment all along. Not caring about Phetra, just this moment.

“The servant. She still insulted an Imperial Princess.”

“She did it to defend me!” said Cassandra, immediately standing in front of her sister in a protective stance.

“The Imperial Law does not care about the reasons for her actions,” hissed Vrehan. “No servant, slave, or anyone else outside the Imperial Family can be forgiven for insulting an Imperial Family member. Isn’t that right, Father?”

The Emperor sighed, visibly annoyed by the situation. He knew the law, of course, but he could tell that the servant had only acted to protect the young concubine.

“Whatever,” he said. “Bring this servant forth.”

“Your Highness, please!” claimed Cassandra. “She isn’t an Imperial Servant, she is my family!”

It was her last resort. Maybe, if Missandra couldn’t be considered as part of the staff in the Imperial Palace, the Emperor would forget about punishing her. However, she could see Kareen frowning, and that didn’t announce anything good.

“What is that now? Your Family, my dear White Lily? How so?”

Missandra, trembling, stood forward and took off the veil she had been using to cover her face outside of Kareen or Cassandra’s place. Her appearance was revealed, and she bowed lowly, acting docile for once.

“She is my younger sister, Your Highness,” explained Cassandra. “We reunited not too long ago.”

“I invited her as my guest,” added Kareen.

“Oh, is that so...” started the Emperor, but Vrehan interrupted him.

“Guest or not, Father, no one in the Dragon Empire is allowed to defy a dragon’s family member. Those who do should be punished, regardless of their rank. Wasn’t my sister just punished for insulting the concubine? Why should the concubine’s sister get away with insulting my sister then?”

Cassandra was going whiter with each word. No matter what, she didn’t want Vrehan anywhere near her sister, or able to do anything to her. She couldn’t stand that man, his rat face, and his cunning words. Kairen moved his position, putting himself between Cassandra and Vrehan, and Krai’s anger was now directed at the Second Prince.

However, it was clear that the dragon wouldn’t be able to injure him in any way from that position, and so, the Second Prince ignored it completely. Vrehan kept his eyes on his father, with an accusatory stance.

“Are you going to let everything go my brother’s way, Father? If you are so tired of seeing us fighting, how about showing some equality for once? That favoritism of yours for the concubine has to stop, Father.”

The Emperor had no answer to that, and for once, Kareen and Shareen had nothing to retort, either. It only worried Cassandra more. She had to hold on to Kairen’s arm so as not to fall, as her heart was going crazy.

After a long while, the Emperor, who seemed hesitant, eventually sighed and nodded.

“That’s right... I need to go by the rules. Sorry, my White Lily, but Vrehan is right, I cannot let it go so easily. A punishment seems befitting of the situation.”

“May I suggest, Father,” said Vrehan.

Whatever he was about to say, Cassandra knew she wasn’t going to like it. Something in that horrid face of his told her he was about to come up with something she didn’t want to hear.

“I think... Being whipped for... let’s say five hundred and six times should do it.”

“Five hundred and six? Why would you come with such a ridiculous number!” said the Emperor.

Missandra was appalled, but Cassandra was even worse. She knew what that number was for. It was the number of times Phetra had whipped the concubine she had tried to defend, months ago.

She realized Vrehan was doing all of this on purpose. While pretending he didn’t hold it against them, he was clearly getting revenge for his sister. He was just not letting his emotions show at all, so as to not seem revengeful.

“Father! This is too much!” said Shareen, furious.

“Will you stop yelling! I’m thinking!” replied the Emperor, annoyed.

Cassandra’s heart was beating like crazy. He couldn’t agree to that. If Missandra was whipped five hundred times, she would die for sure! She exchanged worried glances with Kareen, but there wasn’t much the Imperial Concubine could do at this point. With Vrehan’s words about the favoritism they already benefited from earlier, she couldn’t say anything.

After a while, the Emperor nodded.

“Alright, we will do this. The young servant will be whipped a hundred times. That will be enough.”

“Your Highness!” screamed Cassandra, on the verge of tears.

She couldn’t believe it. Missandra would have to suffer the whip a hundred times! She didn’t even want them to touch a hair on her sister’s head. She almost collapsed, but Kairen grabbed her before that, holding her.

“Enough, enough,” said the Emperor, leaving the room.

As the Emperor left, Vrehan was staring at Cassandra. He didn’t seem happy or unhappy, his expression was indecipherable, aside from his eyes as cold as ice.

“A hundred times...” cried Cassandra.

“Hinue, don’t worry!” said Missandra, running to her side. “I can stand it. Don’t worry, please, please. Don’t cry. I...I did this to myself, Cassandra. Lady Kareen was right, I’ve been getting ahead of myself, this is my punishment. Don’t cry, please?”

However, Cassandra’s tears wouldn’t stop. She felt horribly guilty for all this. Missandra had only tried to defend her, and now she was being punished! Her younger sister had never been whipped in her life!

Kareen came to her side, too, rubbing her back and consoling her.

“Don’t worry, dear, it will be alright. His Highness won’t allow them to go too hard on her.”

Meanwhile, Shareen was still standing, on the side, glaring at Vrehan along with Krai. The dragon was still growling at the Second Prince from earlier, even more frustrated to not be able to attack him.

“Are you satisfied, now?” hissed Shareen. “Go and scrape up whatever is left of your bitch sister!”

Vrehan stayed silent for a while and actually left the room without saying a word. Shareen clicked her tongue, pissed.

As they were left alone in the Imperial Chamber, Kareen insisted that they go back. Cassandra didn’t want to return to her apartments, so they headed once again to the Imperial Concubine’s apartments. Missandra felt more sorry for her sister than she actually was for herself. She had caused this, and now Cassandra was worried sick for

her. She couldn't even stand by herself, her Prince had to carry her all the way back. She understood that she had to go through this, and how light the Emperor's punishment for her really was. Neither Kareen or her children had looked at her since it had been announced.

When they returned to Kareen's garden, Cassandra had stopped crying, but she was still devastated about what her sister would have to go through. Kairen gently put her in the chair, and Missandra immediately sat on the grass next to her, taking her hand.

"Hinue, please, don't worry, okay? You've suffered so much more than me already, I can stand this much, trust me!"

No matter if she could stand it, Cassandra was already sick at the simple thought of her younger sister, her flesh and blood, being injured.

A servant came running, bowing politely.

"Your Highnesses, Imperial Concubine Kareen, Concubine Cassandra, my greetings. His Highness the Emperor has ordered for the servant Lady Missandra to be brought to the punishment cell for her sentence."

Cassandra almost broke down in tears again, but Missandra confidently stood with a resolute look.

"I'm coming," she announced, determined.

"I'm coming with you," said Cassandra.

"Certainly not!" roared Kareen. "You are already sick enough, you are not going to watch that, too!"

"I don't want to leave her alone through this!" she insisted.

"I will go with her, Cassie," sighed Shareen. "Don't worry. They won't dare go too hard on her if I am there. I promise, I will bring her back as soon as it's over. Just stay here with Mother and Kairen."

Cassandra wanted to protest, but no one would side with her. On the side, even Dahlia silently cried too, feeling sorry for Missandra. She internally regretted she hadn't been braver earlier and said something to stop her or the Princess before things escalated.

Cassandra stood and hugged Missandra, holding back her tears.

“Don’t grind your teeth, and don’t get tense,” she said. “It’ll only make it worse. T...take deep breaths, and... and... I’ll heal you when you come back. I promise.”

“I know. My sister is the best healer in the world.”

Despite her confident smile, everyone could tell Missandra was just trying hard not to break down and cause her sister more pain. After a while, they let go of each other, and Cassandra stumbled back. Kairen helped her to sit back in the chair.

Missandra gave her a weak smile and turned to the servant and Shareen.

“I’m ready. Let’s go.”

