

Chapter 16

When she woke up the next morning, her senses immediately picked up the sound of the downpour, still ongoing outside. She smiled and turned around to face Kairen. However, she was surprised to find her Prince still deep asleep. This was a first! He would usually wake up the second she moved. Yet, Kairen was still obviously sleeping, with his slow, steady breath and serene expression. Cassandra bit her lip, only too happy to secretly witness such a precious moment.

He looked a bit younger when he wasn't frowning or glaring with those dark obsidian eyes of his. She loved being able to scrutinize him from up close. She often forgot their age difference. He was a grown man, while she had just barely gotten to adulthood. She brushed his beard with her fingertips. He hadn't cut it in a few days, but she liked it.

As Cassandra was still caressing his beard as gently as possible, Kairen swiftly moved to wrap his arm around her, his eyes still closed. The young concubine pouted a bit.

"So you were awake after all?"

"Hm."

She chuckled and came a bit closer to gently kiss his lips. Kairen smiled, but for once, didn't give in, letting Cassandra spread her kisses on his lips, on his beard, and on his cheekbones. He could tell she was just having fun teasing him. He let her do that until she got bored and pushed him over to get on top of him. Only then did the War God consent to open his eyes to see the face of his smiling concubine.

"Good morning, my Prince," she whispered.

"Good morning."

"It's still raining," she said with a smile.

"I hear that..."

Cassandra chuckled. She knew his faint answers were part of his character, not a lack of interest. She kissed him once more and got out of the bed. She was a bit more excited about this than she thought. The gentle music of the heavy rain outside was making her happy and the thought that they could finally do the Ceremony.

As always, the servants came in shortly after they had woken up, bringing a new set of clothes, and disappearing as soon as possible. Cassandra wondered how they always knew. She put on the new dress and tried to sort out her messy curls. The rain had done no justice to her chocolate brown hair. She had to spend some extra time taming it and left it untied, knowing it was no use in that humidity.

“Lady Cassandra?”

Dahlia was gently knocking at the door, bringing in another large tray of food for breakfast. The young girl smiled upon entering.

“Lady Kareen sent me to give you your breakfast! Did you sleep well?”

The young servant was apparently only too happy to be back to her old habits of assisting Cassandra. She even helped her arrange her hair a bit and put on the flower crown they had bought the previous day. As they chatted about the previous evening, Kairen was getting up and getting ready behind them. He walked to Cassandra’s side to give her a quick kiss and grabbed some of the meat on the tray before leaving.

Dahlia’s shoulder relaxed a little as soon as the War God was out of the room, making Cassandra chuckled.

“Are you still scared?” asked Cassandra.

“It cannot be helped, Lady Cassandra. I’ve been raised to always fear the Imperial Family. I understand that Imperial Concubine Kareen, the Third Prince, and Lady Shareen are different, but still...”

“Old habits die hard.”

Cassandra understood that better than anyone else. It had taken her weeks to fully trust Kairen, his sister and his mother, and even now, she was unable to approach any member of the Imperial Family without that fear automatically growing in her stomach.

She had no idea where he had gone, but Cassandra enjoyed the bit of time she had alone with Dahlia. Apparently, she and Missandra had gotten quite close and stayed together late into the night to chat. Her sister was still asleep, but the rest of the inhabitants were all up already. Most couldn’t sleep well because of the storm from the previous night. The thunder had only calmed down late in the night, but Cassandra was among those few people it hadn’t bothered at all.

“Lady Kareen has been very busy preparing everything for the Rain Ceremony!” explained Dahlia, her hands busily braiding some of Cassandra’s hair. “She said she wants to have it done before the rain stops. I don’t think it will stop so soon, but...”

Cassandra nodded while eating breakfast. She didn’t think so either. She could recognize when a downpour was going to last, and this was definitely one of those. The actual storm was over and the wind had calmed down, leaving only regular sounds of heavy rain.

She closed her eyes, letting Dahlia finish her hairdo while eating in silence, just listening to the rain. This sound was so familiar. She was born during a storm like the one on the previous day. Now that she thought about it, her baby had been conceived during a snowstorm. This was such a cute coincidence. Maybe it would take another of those for him to be born.

“Lady Cassandra? What are you smiling about?” asked Dahlia.

“I was just thinking a little. Are we finished?”

“Just a little bit more! I want to see if I can adjust this...”

“Hinue!”

Missandra showed up at the door looking tired, but tightly wrapped in a big fur cloak. She looked a bit cold, but her cheeks were of a rosy shade. She walked up to them, looking happy.

“I love those flower crowns. Hinue, did you have your breakfast? Do you want more? Prince Anour showed us where to find the kitchens yesterday!”

Cassandra chuckled.

“Aren’t you close to Anour now? For him to show you around?”

Missandra pouted.

“Don’t start treating me like a child!”

Sulking a bit, she grabbed some of Cassandra’s breakfast, biting into one of the cheese cubes hungrily. The older sister chuckled. Actually, she was happy whenever Missandra acted her age. She was obviously a lot more comfortable now that they were in the Diamond Palace, enough to befriend Anour at least. The rain probably raised her younger sister’s spirits, too.

After bickering a bit more, all three young women headed out of the room. Cassandra only had to follow Dahlia, who had apparently been woken up early too to prepare for the Ceremony.

Finally, they reached a large room. Cassandra recognized it instantly. It was one of Lady Kareen's favorite salons, one with an open roof and lots of green plants sprouting wildly from all sides. This time though, all the furniture had been taken out as the rain was pouring in. It was alright though; the floor had some crevices where the water would flow in, as dozens of little rivers headed towards the outer parts or the fountain on the side. Cassandra had always wondered how the Diamond Palace could have so many open rooms, but now, it was obvious that most rooms were properly conceived for the water to be expelled one way or another.

This one was actually rather perfect for the Ceremony. It had a square shape, was letting the downpour in, and yet the floor wasn't completely flooded, only a thin layer of water remained under their feet.

"How is it, dear?" asked Kareen, walking up to her in one of her gorgeous magenta dresses.

"It looks perfect, Lady Kareen. But do we have everything?"

The Imperial Concubine clicked her tongue.

"Don't you dare underestimate me, young lady! Dahlia, take her to the other bedroom where we have everything. And someone go wake up that sleepyhead daughter of mine!"

Cassandra was swiftly pushed to another room. She had thought she would get ready in her room, but once she walked inside, she understood why she couldn't. In front of her, a gorgeous green and gold dress was displayed. It was the first time in years she saw what looked like a real ceremonial outfit from her tribe, and tears came to her eyes right away. There was even the veil, and all the golden embroideries had obviously been handmade!

"Do you like it, Hinue?" asked Missandra, excited. "Dahlia and I stayed up late last night to finish it!"

"We had some help from other servants, of course," added Dahlia. "But we all followed Missandra's instructions down to the letter to have it as close to your real ceremonial outfit as possible. Do you like it?"

“It’s gorgeous,” whispered Cassandra, unable to find any more words to describe it.

Indeed, the dress was divine and just as beautifully made as her usual pink dresses. The gorgeous green silk was of the best quality, shimmering with several shades as she touched it, and the gold threads had been embroidered so well, to retrace the traditional arabesques she remembered all over it. The piece of cloth didn’t have a single gem on it, but it was shining and glowing better than any treasure.

The girls had even prepared, with Lady Kareen’s help, some jewelry to add to her outfit.

“Hinue, look! We couldn’t find borean ink, but I made something similar. I tested it, so your skin should be able to bear it just fine!”

Indeed, the blue ink in the little pot she was handing her looked very similar to proper borean ink. Cassandra put the pot aside, and took the two girls in her arms to hug them.

“Thank you so much... Dahlia, Missandra... Thank you for preparing all this for me.”

Both Missandra and Dahlia were surprised by this sudden hug, but happily responded to it. After that, all three of them chuckled, excited, and it was high time they helped Cassandra get ready.

A while later, Kairen was waiting outside, wearing a similar green silk piece of clothing. For the tall warrior, the girls had only made a large cloak, which he was wearing over his shoulders, with some black pants. Kairen wasn’t very familiar with anything about the Rain Tribe’s ceremony, but when Missandra came up to him, he listened to her.

“Could you just stand there? Right there, please. Alright, and if you can wait a bit, my sister is coming!”

She ran back inside and suddenly, Cassandra appeared. Everyone was completely speechless. The young concubine was more beautiful than she’d ever been. The long green dress was tightly wrapped around her body, showing her curves more than the usual pink dresses. It was only covering her chest, belly, and legs, so her back and arms were nude, only her hair running down. The visible pieces of her skin were actually shining with a strange light, like some thin silver shimmer. Anyone in the room could see that the emerald dress was absolutely gorgeous on her, and with that flower crown and the painting on her skin, she looked like she had just stepped out of a large painting, like a nature Goddess. Several male servants had their mouths wide

open in surprise and even the girls were blushing, shocked by how pure yet sensual she looked at that moment.

However, the most stunned of all was Kairen. The War God was looking at his young concubine with such a deep expression on his face. His deep black eyes were mesmerized by the vision before him. He was struck; not shocked by how beautiful she was, but how even more beautiful she could be. For maybe the first time, he wasn't just quiet. He was speechless.

Cassandra had always been a gorgeous young woman, a flower that bloomed in adversity, but that day, for the first time, she was able to shine in all of her glory. The War God, behind his impassible facade, was properly stunned. In terms of natural beauty, Cassandra was indisputably beautiful. All the jewels and attires of the concubines of the Imperial Palace couldn't beat such a natural beauty.

Though they were of different shades, the deep green of her dress was complimenting her eyes perfectly. Her brown hair was falling in natural curls on her shoulders and down on her back and belly, with that crown they had bought together on top. Several of the servants whispered about her looks, but the rain covered any sound, and the War God wouldn't have been able to hear them anyway. All of his senses had gone numb as he could only focus on the holy vision in front of his eyes.

Cassandra gracefully walked up to him, like a nymph, with a gentle smile on her face. He could barely recognize the woman he held in his arms every night. There was something unspeakably different about her, as if she was from another world, another realm. She took his hand.

"Kairen? Are you alright?"

"...You're beautiful," he whispered, as if saying that truth would release him from this trance.

Cassandra blushed, as always, feeling a bit proud. She hadn't thought she would be able to cause such emotion in her usually undecipherable War God. The rain was falling around them, but they didn't care. It was just as if the two of them had been alone. The green clothes were slowly getting wet, but they were still very pretty to observe.

Missandra walked up to them.

"Since I'm the only one aside from Hinue who knows about the Ceremony, I'll tell you two what to do. Dahlia, bring the thread, please!"

While Missandra took the silver thread and started gently wrapping it around both of their wrists, in a complex ensemble of knots, Kairen's eyes were on Cassandra's skin. The shimmering from earlier was actually that strange ink that she had used to paint herself with. From the look of it, those weren't simply lines and strange shapes, but obviously some foreign language he couldn't decipher at all. He frowned.

"What do those say?"

Cassandra blushed a bit, looking down, and her younger sister was the one to answer.

"The partners can paint whatever they want on their bodies as a sign of affection. Hinue put your name and titles with the symbols of protection, health, and strength."

Kairen was surprised. He kept looking at all those strange scriptures on her skin, unable to decipher what was which.

"Do it on me, too."

"What?"

"With that ink. I want to write her name."

Missandra sighed.

"But I'm almost done with the silk thread! Hinue, you didn't tell him earlier about the borean ink?"

"Just bring it to me, please," said Cassandra, with an apologetic look.

While Missandra pouted and kept doing her knots, Dahlia ran over, with an umbrella in one hand and the little bowl of ink and a brush in the other. There wasn't much left of what Missandra had prepared, as Cassandra had painted a lot on herself already. She took the brush with her available hand and pushed the cloak a bit to access his torso.

"What do you want me to write?" she whispered to him.

"Your name."

"Are you sure? Just my name?"

"Yes."

Cassandra chuckled, and proceeded to do as asked. It was so like him. No prayers, just her name. She knew Kairen wasn't a man to believe in prayers or divine will. He only trusted himself and the people he cared about. She wrote her name on his skin, as many times as she could before running out of ink. The ink Missandra had made wasn't as good as the real borean ink and was already starting to drip a bit because of all the rain, but this was good enough. The silver ink shined strangely on the War God's torso and arms. Maybe because of his natural musculature, they looked more like tribal fighting signs than his Favorite's name.

"Alright, I'm done!" said Missandra, looking satisfied.

Dahlia swiftly walked away, going under the little porch to shelter herself from the rain, close to Shareen and Kareen. Mother and Daughter were standing side by side and watching the Ceremony attentively, not saying a word. They were aware that although there wasn't anything official about this, this ceremony was sacred to Cassandra's people. As they knew nothing about this foreign custom, they were silently watching, curious.

Cassandra and Kairen's wrists were now tied together by that silk thread. The gentle fabric wasn't painful on their skin, but their wrists couldn't move, being tied so tightly together with those complex knots. Cassandra looked at her left wrist and Kairen's right wrist, with a smile. She had never thought she would get to have this ceremony ever, let alone with a Prince, and a man she loved. Kairen chuckled.

"Are you so happy?" he said.

"Yes...I feel a bit like it's a dream."

"Sorry, we can only do this for now."

"No, it's plenty," Cassandra whispered, her cheeks blooming with pink.

"Alright, if you two are done being so mushy," said Missandra. "I'll start... Hinue, should I translate it into our tongue or theirs?"

"Just do it in our tongue and I'll translate in the Dragon Empire's tongue, Missandra."

"Understood. Then..."

Missandra took a deep breath and took a couple of steps back, opening her hands, palms towards the sky, and closed her eyes. She started speaking, and Cassandra

repeated in words everyone else could understand. Both sisters talking in the exact same rhythm, one echoing the other.

“Today is the Day of Rain, the Sacred Day. As the Sky God is showering the Earth Goddess with love, their children are born with the rain. We are children of the rain, children of sacred love. O, God of Water, let your rain pour, and hear your children today, for they carry their faith, love, and joy in their heart too. O, God of Water, Son of the Sky and Earth, if love is your eyes, let them see. If love is your tongue, let it speak. If you can hear us, hear your children’s pledge of love today, as we share it with you.”

Cassandra was talking softly while staring at Kairen, their eyes not leaving each other’s a single second.

“O, God of Water, our ancestors taught us love. Help us teach our children too. We’ll share that love to all of your children, from all rivers they come, from all seas they come. Let us speak of love, and let our hearts beat together. Let your love flow in our veins and words, for you showed us how to love with your rain. Gather your children together under the rain, gather us, and remind us how to love if we forget. Teach us to be patient, kind, sincere, and truthful. Teach us love, teach us how to cry, and pray. Fill our lives with love, water, and grace. O, God of Water, your children are thankful today, as with love you teach us the way again.”

On the side, Kareen shed a little tear, impressed. Even the servants were all feeling sensitive to the words of Cassandra, and the prayer that echoed in the walls despite the rain. Both sisters took a little pause, breathing deeply before reciting again.

“O, God of Water, your children will remember. We will remember your love is patient, kind, sincere, and truthful. We shall not give in to anger, and we shall not give in to evil. We shall not lie, and we shall not betray. Your children promise to remember, each day the rain falls, how love is patient, kind, sincere, and truthful.

O, God of Water, your love has no beginning and no end. Your love is blind and deaf. Your love is infinite.”

Missandra’s voice suddenly broke into tears. Something in her memories kept her from going on. She kept hanging her hands in front of her, but she was crying, unable to continue. Cassandra understood why it hurt so much for her sister. She took a deep breath, and continued alone, while Kareen walked over to gently hug Missandra’s shoulders.

“O, God of Water, your children of the rain shall not lie, and they shall not hurt. I will be blind and deaf if I can’t see or hear love.

O, God of Water, your children gather today, in harmony, to love again.

O, God of Water, hear our prayer. Your children will give up their wealth, their bodies, and their mind for love.”

Cassandra took a deep breath and gestured for Kairen to take one of the ends of the silk thread, while she took the other.

“Rain has come to us blind and deaf. Rain will witness our love today. I give my wealth, my body, and my mind for this love of mine.”

She mimicked with her lips for Kairen to repeat her words.

“I give my wealth, my body, and my mind for this love of mine.”

“I will love eternally, in the eyes of my beloved, and in the eyes of the Water God.”

“I will love eternally,” repeated Kairen, “in the eyes of my beloved, and in the eyes of the Water God.”

“I swear to keep my love patient, kind, sincere, and truthful until I die. I swear to honor the Water God in every way, until I return into his arms, side by side with my beloved.”

Once again, the War God repeated without flinching.

“O, God of Water, love is infinite. Love is mine. You are mine.”

“Love is infinite. Love is mine... Almien.”

Cassandra was surprised to hear Kairen had translated the last word by himself. She was shocked and incredibly overwhelmed.

They stayed silent for a little while, staring deeply into each other’s eyes. There was no sound around but the rain, falling quietly around them, the downpour slowly turning into a gentle rain. Cassandra smiled and took his other hand, linking her fingers with his. Then, she stepped forward, and they exchanged a long, deep kiss.

Their kiss had a fresh taste of rain and eternity. Despite the cold around them, Cassandra’s heart had never felt warmer than at this moment. They exchanged that

kiss in a religious atmosphere as if they were sealing their promise. When they gently stepped back, a drop rolled down her cheek, but no one would have been able to tell if it was a tear or the rain. Cassandra was smiling, and it didn't matter much.

Then, they both pulled on the silk thread at the same time, and, to his surprise, it separated perfectly, leaving two little bracelets wrapped around their wrists. The people watching were confused. How did that long thread separate into two so easily, and in such perfect knots, too?

"We're done for today," whispered Cassandra.

"Done? Already?" repeated Shareen, surprised.

The young concubine walked over to her sister, hugging Missandra in her arms to try and calm her down. They went to shelter themselves under the roofed part of the room, where the servants rushed to bring them thick towels.

"Yes. Both partners usually keep this thread around their wrists until the next rain, and it is done."

"I was expecting something much bigger! Do you have any idea what hassle the wedding ceremonies are here? Let alone the ones in the Imperial Family!"

"The Rain Tribe isn't the... showy type. As long as the God of Water has been able to witness it, any kind of ceremony is holy and perfectly valid. We don't need grand ceremonies, decorations, or a lot of people. As long as both parties were sincere, we are now acknowledged as lifetime partners; this is all that matters."

"It was a beautiful ceremony, Cassandra," said Kareen, glaring at her daughter for her to shut up. "Your tribe has a beautiful tradition. I prefer it to the ones here. We are all about the grand celebrations and showing off, while this feels much more intimate and sincere. That prayer was beautiful."

Missandra was still weeping silently. Cassandra kept hugging her and caressing her hair until she calmed down. This may have been a bit too much for her. It brought back painful memories of a time where their friends and family were alive, and they were both living very differently. Missandra had lied, stolen, and hurt other people, and hearing the whole prayer again made her feel ashamed and disgusted in herself.

As the ceremony was over, Kareen ordered for them to move to another room to sit comfortably and rest for a bit while the servants brought large trays of food once again. It was something like brunch probably, as it wasn't really early enough or late

enough for a proper meal. To help everyone warm-up, some tea was brought and Missandra insisted on being the one to prepare it and serve it to everyone.

Cassandra sat on a couch with Kairen's arm around her shoulders as she snuggled under a large fur blanket. She hadn't really realized how cold she was until then. However, she also didn't want to change into normal clothes yet. She was happy to wear the traditional green of her tribe, even if all of the fake Borean ink had already been washed away by the rain. If it had been real, it would have lasted several hours at least, but it couldn't be helped. Cassandra kept caressing the little silver thread around her wrist, feeling a bit numb with happiness.

Meanwhile, Shareen was gazing at Missandra, frowning a bit. The young girl's tears had dried, but her eyes were still red and she would sniffle from time to time.

"What were you crying for? Marrying your sister away?" she asked.

Missandra answered with a glare, though she quickly stopped to go back to preparing the tea. Kareen slapped her daughter's thigh, frowning.

"You insensitive Daughter! When did I raise you to be so heartless?"

"Do I have to answer that?"

Shareen got another slap and shut up after that, only making annoyed faces and sulking on the side.

Aside from Shareen, most people in the room actually understood the real reasons behind Missandra's tears, though they wouldn't have been so blunt about it. The prayer they had recited taught about love and being true and selfless. Missandra had lost all of that at a young age and grown into someone far from those ideals. For the first time in a while, she felt sullied by her past as a prostitute, and the thefts she had committed. That ceremony had been too much of a brutal reminder of that.

"Did your parents hold that ceremony too?" asked Lady Kareen, trying to pull the topic away from Missandra as she distributed the tea.

"No... Our father died when our mother was pregnant with Missandra," confessed Cassandra.

"May I ask how?"

“He was in an accident,” replied Missandra. “Our mother said he died when they were building houses. There was an accident and our father got badly injured.”

“One of the houses they were building became unstable because of a storm. Our father wanted to go and help secure his friend’s house, but it collapsed on them,” said Cassandra. “Our Uncle was there too, and he saw three men die with him. The house collapsed in the river and just... washed them all away. Our mother got the news once it was all over. Only our uncle returned, but he was severely injured. He passed a few hours later.”

“By the Great Dragon,” whispered Kareen. “I can’t imagine how sad your mother must have been.”

Cassandra was about to say something, but a loud growl interrupted her. They all heard Krai land loudly next door, and a few seconds later, Roun too. Its growl was higher-pitched than the Black Dragon’s. Then, little Srai showed up in the room, as the only one small enough to sneak in, and went to curl up at Kareen’s feet, its eyes watching the wall behind where they could hear its siblings bickering again.

“I don’t remember him,” said Cassandra. “Our mother told us about him many times, though. He was one of our tribe’s best architects and he had built our house too.”

“I wish I could see our house again.”

“Maybe you could go there again?” asked Shareen.

Cassandra shook her head.

“It would be very dangerous. The swamps we lived in are now under the Eastern Republic’s territory. I don’t even think there’s anything left of it, they probably destroyed it.”

Missandra nodded sadly. Even Lady Kareen didn’t dare to ask about their old tribe again. She was aware that, despite the fact that their rival had taken over the former tribe’s parcel, it was the war between the Dragon Empire and the Eastern Republic that had destroyed these girls’ homeland.

Somehow, it was only luck that the Dragon Empire hadn’t been the one to destroy the Rain Tribe. If they had, it would have made this conversation even more awkward, and added another gap between Kairen and Cassandra.

This conversation had gone a bit sour after such an intense ceremony. Somehow, the Rain Ceremony had been so solemn, it had brought some deep-buried memories to the surface. The nostalgic feeling that hovered over Cassandra's heart made her feel a bit bittersweet. For a while, everyone focused on eating, and an awkward silence filled the room until Shareen spoke.

"So... After that ceremony, what is changing, exactly? You mentioned something about giving up your mind, body, and all. Is it for real? That sounded a lot like you two were going to commit suicide."

Cassandra chuckled.

"No, not at all. It had a deeper meaning than that. The Water God teaches us to not hold on to material things, not even our body."

"But your mind?"

"It means we have to elevate ourselves from earthly things. We only see through the eyes of those we love. It means we must care about others before ourselves."

"Well, I like to care about myself more," said Shareen. "Others can come after. Your people had a very selfless way, but I still think this is a bit odd."

"I agree," replied Cassandra with a chuckle. "Since I grew up in the Dragon Empire after that, I do see our differences, but I've also grown to love both. I like the dedication of the Rain Tribe to others, but I also like how living in the Dragon Empire is teaching us to care about ourselves. It's a very different environment, after all."

Cassandra had already thought about this before. Somehow, she felt that having met Kairen had allowed her to grow as a person. She wasn't afraid of her own shadow anymore, but she cherished her own life more. She was miles away from the slave girl who had lost all her will to live in that arena. She had grown a lot more in those few months, more than in the previous few years.

After her words, Missandra and Shareen started an argument about the different ways of life between the Dragon Empire's people and the Rain Tribe, but Cassandra was too tired to take part. Somehow, all this rain had made her a bit sleepy, and she just enjoyed this long brunch, her head on Kairen's shoulder. She kept snacking on those cheese cubes and green grapes, but also some slices of dried and smoked meat, which Missandra quickly took notice of.

"Hinue, you're eating meat again?" she said with a frown.

“Sorry, it’s...the baby.”

Cassandra couldn’t see it, but Kairen glared at Missandra, warning her. The War God put a hand around his concubine’s belly. Kareen, too, clicked her tongue.

“Let her eat. Your sister is pregnant. She can eat and drink whatever she wants as long as she stays healthy!”

“Is that why you sent that bottle of wine to our room, Mother?” growled Kairen, annoyed.

It wasn’t that often that the Third Prince would get mad at his own mother. All the servants in the room froze on the spot, their eyes going to the Imperial Concubine with a bit of worry. He wouldn’t do something to his own mother, would he? However, Kareen was not impressed at all. The War God was her own son, after all. His obsidian eyes had no effect on her.

“Why can’t I? I know Cassandra is reasonable. You would drink most of it by yourself anyway!”

She wasn’t wrong, but Kairen still glared at his mother, a bit annoyed. Cassandra chuckled. Truth was, she really didn’t mind that little taste of mulled wine before sleeping. It may have helped her sleep better, even. However, she wouldn’t dare to say that in front of the War God.

Moreover, she had noticed, throughout the lunch, Kairen didn’t take his hand off of her belly. Even while he was eating, the War God would only use his right hand. It wasn’t that surprising that he would easily hold her and cuddle, but Cassandra was starting to wonder if there hadn’t been a bit of change since the previous night. Maybe it was only her imagination, but they had slept in a spooning position, and that time, he also had his hand covering her little baby bump. Was it because he had felt the baby kicking? Cassandra silently hoped that the father of her unborn child would slowly grow more attached to this child. Until then, Kairen had shown more care for her than usual since the beginning of the pregnancy, but not much care about the baby at all. Maybe he hadn’t realized much before? She was the one carrying their son, so maybe, to Kairen, she still came before a baby that had yet to come to this world.

She secretly wished this large hand spread in a protective way around her tummy was a good sign for their future as a family.

As they finished their lunch, the rain kept falling continuously. It probably wouldn’t stop for a while, either. Cassandra secretly hoped all this rain and the storm would

slow the Imperial Army as much as possible before they arrived there. Shareen, however, was sulking.

“As soon as that damn rain stops, Anour, we’re leaving,” she announced.

“Already?” asked the teenage boy, sulking a bit.

“We are not going on a holiday, remember? I want to hurry and go to the camp to whip those damn idiots’ asses.”

“Aren’t you just going there to play?” said Anour.

Kareen chuckled, but Shareen didn’t answer that. Of course, the War God’s Army was probably doing just fine without her or even their Commander-in-Chief. The real threat would be the East, and Cassandra was in no hurry to have Kairen go there.

Once their lunch was finished, Kairen and his sister had to talk over military matters, so Cassandra went back first to finally change into warmer clothes. She carefully hung her green ceremony clothes where she could see them, as if that would make the dream last a bit longer. She took a bath to clean and warm herself up first, and put on a new pink dress, with a light fur cloak, as the rain was keeping the temperature low. Between the hot and dry weather of the Capital, the humidity of the Diamond Palace, and the cold of the Onyx Castle, Cassandra felt like she could get sick very easily. Hence, she made sure to cover herself, and drank some more warm tea.

She had another intention while going back to her room, and that was writing her letters. She asked for some ink and parchment. She wrote a long letter to Evin first, wondering if the Imperial servant would be happy to hear any news from her. He was the most serious man she had ever met, but she kind of liked him. He had been of great help back when she lived at the camp with Kairen. She was hoping to get some news from the Red Room as well, see if her medical teaching had done some good there. What she had heard from the Emperor in the Capital wasn’t enough. Cassandra was hoping to hear more from Evin directly. She also added some more recommendations, about some herbs she remembered seeing there but hadn’t taught them to use yet. She ended her letter wishing him well.

After that, her next letters were for Orwen, the blacksmith apprentice, and the servants of the Onyx Castle. She was curious to know how they were all doing. She missed Nebora most, as her first friend there. They had a rocky start, but she truly appreciated her honest nature. Cassandra took her time to let her friend know most of what had happened for her and realized that, once it was put on the paper, it was indeed quite a

lot. Finally, Cassandra wrote some shorter letters to the younger servants, and Patrina, the Head Maid there.

“You look busy...”

She smiled, feeling two sturdy arms around her waist as she was writing the last couple of sentences. Kairen put his face into her neck, letting her finish. Once she was done, Cassandra put her letters to the side for the servants to collect and turned to him.

“What about you, my Prince? Did you finish discussing war with your sister?”

Kairen suddenly put on a grumpy front, surprising her a little.

“Don’t you have something else to call me now?”

“You mean, Almien?” said Cassandra with a chuckle.

Kairen nodded, and leaned in to kiss her, satisfied.

“That’s right, your man.”

Kairen’s kiss was gentle, slow, and sweet. Cassandra couldn’t help but smile against his lips. Now that she was done with her letters, she wrapped her arms around his neck and let him pull her close, standing up and guiding her to their bed. Kairen’s hands on her skin were warm, so warm that her skin would get little goosebumps from that delicious warm sensation. She loved the familiar smell of the War God. Her heart sank when Cassandra realized that, in a few days, she would have to say goodbye and wouldn’t be able to enjoy this for a few weeks.

Hence, she was even thirstier for his kisses than usual, caressing his neck and brushing his hair. She suddenly stopped, though, looking at it.

“What is it?”

“Would you let me cut your hair?” she asked in a soft voice.

“My hair?”

“Yes...Do you mind?”

Kairen shook his head, and kissed her forehead. Of course, he didn’t care at all. The War God never really bothered about his hair. The lustrous black hair was usually pushed back on his shoulders, he never really cared to cut it. His mother would do it

for him from time to time, but there was really no particular attachment from him. He didn't care what Cassandra would do with it. Taking off the green cloth from his shoulders, Cassandra hung it next to hers, but as she did, Kairen frowned.

"Wait...I forgot about this," he said.

He stood and walked to one of the bags they had taken back from the Palace, searching for something, and eventually pulled out a little dagger from it, handing it to her. The blade was wrapped in a thick leather cloth, but Cassandra took it out carefully.

"I've seen it before," said Cassandra, observing the weapon with a frown.

"It was Phetra's. I modified it to make it a better weapon, and lighter too. Keep it with you."

Cassandra was surprised to receive the weapon of her enemy. Indeed, the dagger had changed a bit since Phetra had tried to harm her with it. She vaguely remembered Kairen working on it while she was making the decoction for Missandra's injuries, but she hadn't really paid much attention back then, and somehow forgot about it. Now, she could observe it a bit more carefully. The War God had removed all the unnecessary decorations, gems and gold for which neither of them cared, and sharpened it. Cassandra couldn't yield one of Kairen's swords, as they were way too heavy for her thin build, but this little dagger was indeed just the right weight in her hand. She could move it easily, though she hadn't much knowledge about how to use a dagger. She slid her finger on the blade, but avoided the edge. It was obvious this had been sharpened with precision, and she didn't want to cut herself.

"Can I cut your hair with this?"

"You can tame it this way."

Cassandra chuckled. She actually liked the symbolism behind keeping this weapon. The young concubine insisted on washing his hair first. Then, Kairen sat on the floor next to her, as even on a stool he would have been too tall for her. Cassandra was a bit excited to cut her Prince's hair, but she had to think about what she wanted to do first. Kairen's hair had grown long, it fell below his shoulders. She knew that length wasn't comfortable for him to fight with. She combed his hair with her fingers first, pushing it back, and trimmed the ends a bit. Then, she decided to shave the sides. She had seen some men with this haircut at the camp. She proceeded carefully. Indeed, the blade was very sharp... Cassandra had to proceed slowly, as she was agonizing over the idea of cutting him. It took longer than she had thought because of that, but once she was

done, the shaved sides pleased her a lot. She carefully kept his freshly cut hair, too, putting it in a little napkin on the side. Then, she put the dagger down on its leather wrapping, and braided the hair left on top of his head, which was still plenty and long enough to fall between his shoulder blades. Then, she decided to tie it with some little gold rings she had in her chest, that she would probably never use. Once she was done, she stepped back a little and looked at the result, satisfied.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“Do my beard, too.”

Cassandra laughed. His heavy beard indeed felt a bit too much now that his sides were shaven. She grabbed the dagger again, observing it to think about what she should do.

“I need to think about it...”

“Just shave it.”

“I like your beard though.”

“Then just shave what you don’t like. It’s too long.”

Cassandra chuckled.

“Aren’t you a fussy customer, Prince Kairen?”

“I’ll pay you, then.”

“How much would you pay me?” asked Cassandra, as she started trimming his beard.

“A gold bar.”

She laughed.

“I would be the most overpaid barber in the Empire!”

“It’s fine.”

Cassandra shook her head, and focused on the trimming. It was his gold anyway. She knew very well he didn’t care much about it. The Imperial Family was way too rich to really care. She focused on his beard, cutting it but leaving some, as she loved the spiky feeling of it. Once she was done, she had cut about two-thirds of it, but still leaving about half an inch for herself to play with.

“Alright, we are done,” she said with a satisfied smile.

Kairen nodded, checking his newly trimmed beard with his fingers. Cassandra knew he was satisfied as he didn’t ask her to cut more. She put her dagger down, and went to gather the hair she had collected in a napkin. Then, she very carefully started wetting it in the little basin and braided it. Kairen frowned a bit, wondering what she was doing now. She even got up several times to look through her little chest full of jewelry she seldom used. Once she was done, Cassandra proudly showed it to him. She had made a bracelet of his cut hair, adding some of her little gold rings to it. Kairen was surprised. She finished knotting the silky black hair around her wrist, around the thread from their ceremony, and it was clear it wouldn’t come off unless cut.

“Did you intend to make this from the start?” he asked, stroking the little bracelet.

“Yes... Your hair is very long, and I like it. It will be my memento for when you’re gone.”

He nodded, a bit curious. Then, his eyes went to her hair, frowning.

“Do you want one from me too?” asked Cassandra, reading his mind easily.

“I don’t want you to cut your hair.”

She chuckled and grabbed the dagger again. Kairen was frowning, but Cassandra knew very well he loved her long hair, and had no intention to cut it short either. Instead, she grabbed a strand around her nape, where it wouldn’t be seen. She cut a good portion of it. Her hair was long enough, and that bunch alone would suffice.

“Will a bracelet fit you?” she asked, a bit unsure.

“Can you braid it into my hair?”

Cassandra immediately loved the idea. She checked the braids she had done in Kairen’s hair, and worked around it. The final result was actually surprisingly beautiful. From what she had done before, the black braids on his head were fading into her dark-brown strands, and falling a bit lower down his back. It looked like his hair was naturally fading into hers, and the now rather long braids down his back were quite beautiful and unique. She had a wide smile observing the result. The War God, too, grabbed the braids to look at it, stroking the dark brown strands with his fingers.

“Are you happy with it, dear customer?” Cassandra asked.

“Very,” he replied with a nod.

He pulled her in for a kiss, now that they were done with the hair-styling fun. Cassandra was so happy, she wished those few days of peace together could last forever. She felt safe wherever the Prince was, even more so when they were staying at the Diamond Palace. This Rain Ceremony had been a dream come true, so simple yet so beautiful. She didn’t know if Kairen grasped the full extent of this vow, how much it meant for her, but she was satisfied enough to have been bonded with him in the ways of her people. She didn’t want to take this silk thread or her newly made hair bracelet off, ever. Even if they had to part soon, she knew she’d cherish it and comfort herself with it.

She was just so eager to enjoy all of him while she still could. She kissed him back, so eager and demanding. She would never get tired of this man. Especially since she really liked that new hairdo. Kairen looked even manlier, if possible. He truly looked like a God of War, like this. He wasn’t a particularly handsome man, but Cassandra had grown to love his strong jaw, his obsidian eyes, and his features. His muscles, too. She was never into burly men, but Kairen’s powerful arms just ignited all of her desire so easily, with those large hands. She would blush every time he caressed her, her body so conditioned to his touch after all of those hours of love making.

There was something about knowing those were their last days together for a while. Somehow, she didn’t want to let go of him, not yet. Her whole world had been spinning around this man for several months now. The weeks without him had been hard. Now, how long would she have to wait until the next time they could be together again?

Hence, for once Cassandra wasn’t too shy about taking the lead. She pushed him gently on the bed, and of course, her Prince wouldn’t reject her. Kairen actually liked to see her act a little bit bolder, to let her take the lead in bed. They had made love so many times, their bodies didn’t hold many secrets from each other.

Cassandra sat across his hips, while Kairen pulled them both into the middle of the bed. She felt a bit guilty about having sex after they both just changed, but it was a bit too late to reconsider. Their passionate kissing wasn’t giving much room for her to think, and her skin was burning up already. She undid the laces of her dress, and helped her Prince take off his pants. Within a few minutes, they had their skins against each other, and no piece of clothing left. Cassandra kept caressing the long, freshly cut braid on Kairen’s back. She really liked his new hairdo, and her fingertips would caress his head, feel the bare parts behind his ears, caress it down to his nape, then find the braid, trace it back to the top, and redo that gesture, over and over again.

“Stop that.”

Cassandra frowned, a bit surprised. She tilted her head, but when she tried to pass her fingers behind his ears again, Kairen avoided it. She chuckled.

“Don’t tell me...it tickles?”

“Just stop.”

Cassandra laughed. Who could have known the War God was ticklish behind his ears!