

Chapter 8

A few weeks later, Kairen still hadn't returned.

Cassandra was growing lonely, sitting by herself in the Imperial Concubine's garden. No matter how many times she had been told not to worry, she couldn't help but stare at the horizon, beyond the City's high walls.

She had changed over the past few weeks. Under her new guardian's insistence, she had started taking better care of herself. She was now used to wearing the beautiful red gowns and jewelry. Every morning, servants would help her dress, put a bit of pink balm on her lips, and brush her hair, suggesting a few hair pins or bracelets, until Cassandra couldn't take it anymore and ushered them out to finish her preparations alone. She had finally put on a few pounds too. How could she not have? Kareen made sure she ate plenty at each meal and brought her snacks at all times of day. Cassandra had only recently found a way to stop her overbearing actions by faking some nausea.

Truthfully though, she really was nauseous at times, especially in the morning. Her tummy had developed a little bump as proof of her pregnancy, making this child feel a bit more real each day.

Cassandra was caressing her belly, lost in her thoughts when Kareen walked in.

"Concubine Mother."

"Good Morning. What are you doing out so early without a shawl?"

Though she was asking Cassandra, her glare found a servant, who immediately ran inside to get one. But the young concubine shook her head.

"I am fine, really. It's much warmer here than it was at the Onyx Castle."

Cassandra missed it. She wondered everyday about Nebora and the others, and the Military Camp. How did they function without the Prince there? Perhaps he had visited during these weeks and didn't stop by the Diamond Palace?

"So stubborn," sighed the Concubine Mother.

She was about to add something else, but at that same moment, Srai jumped from over the balcony. The Purple Dragon struggled for a few seconds to come in, balancing strangely on the ledge. With his torn wing and uneven weight, the dragon never seemed particularly agile. It eventually managed to get on its feet, and walked to sit by Kareen's side.

Cassandra felt uneasy anytime she watched that dragon. It didn't like her and, up until now, had only interacted with her through warning growls and defiant glares. Even as the Imperial Concubine caressed it, it seemed restless.

"Good boy," said Kareen.

"The dragon...Srai cannot fly, can it?" asked Cassandra.

She had doubts as she certainly had never seen it actually use its wings and Srai never hunted either, only wandered around the Palace letting servants feed him huge portions of meat.

"That is correct. He lost the ability, his wings are too damaged now to support his weight. The child cannot hunt."

"Concubine Mother, is he..."

"He was my first born, Suiren's, dragon. He died at six years old."

Cassandra was struck by those revelations. Six years old? So young! How could a Prince die at such a young age? Kareen, as if she had guessed her silent question, sighed.

"He was killed! Someone threw my child from a balcony like this one."

Cassandra looked at the balcony Kareen was gesturing to. It wasn't something a child could climb over by himself! How could someone be so cruel as to murder a child so brutally?

"My second one... She was a girl. She was killed two days after she was born. Someone got into my room and suffocated her with a pillow."

A pillow? Cassandra felt nauseous. Who would...? To a newborn! She felt sick just thinking about it.

“After Shareen, I was pregnant with another son. I was beyond paranoid about protecting my children, but it wasn’t enough. He was poisoned at two years old. His dragon died instantly with him.”

How horrible! Cassandra wondered what Kairen’s childhood could have been like in such dangerous conditions.

Strangely, however, Kareen didn’t seem affected while revealing all of this. Instead, pure anger was painted across her face. Cassandra glanced at the small dragon sitting by her feet. Krai’s older sibling was so small compared to him.

“Who dares to...”

Both women glared at the incoming shadow in the sky. Cassandra instantly knew it wasn’t Krai, as its tail shape was different. When he got closer, she realized it was a Green Dragon, one that she had seen in the Arena.

“Anour?” wondered a voice behind them.

Shareen had just come out, squinting at the incoming Dragon. It landed outside of the Palace, but neither woman went to him. Instead, Kareen went to wait in a large room by the entrance. Settling into a large wooden chair, Kareen ordered Cassandra to sit next to her while Shareen stood to the side.

“Concubine Mother! Sister Shareen!”

Prince Anour was the youngest of the Imperial Princes and barely resembled Kairen. He had a nice smile and a thin build like his Green Dragon, which looked more like a lizard.

“Anour! What about your manners?”

“Don’t be mean, Concubine Mother. I came to give you news about my brother.”

“Is he alright?” Cassandra immediately asked, visibly worried.

Anour, surprised that she dared to address him, gave her a glance of disgust.

“Who is that?”

“Have you gone blind brother, or is it that little boys can’t see red?” said Shareen.

“Oh, is this brother’s concubine? I didn’t recognize her! So she is the pregnant one?”

“Anour, enough. Where is my son, you impertinent child?”

“Father got angry with him. He sentenced him to be hung in the dungeons for fifty days, with Imperial Servants whipping him ten times every hour.”

“HOW DARE HE!?” roared Kareen.

Meanwhile, Cassandra was on the verge of tears. Whipped? Her Prince had been detained and whipped relentlessly since then? Only Shareen didn’t seem affected, stifling her laughter in the corner.

“Looks like Father is really desperate for your attention, Mother.”

“He shall see! That old fool will pay for touching my son!”

Her anger echoed within the walls, and she stood up to her full height causing Anour to shrink a little.

“Concubine Mother, this is a bit...”

“Silence! Don’t you dare say a word to defend him! Roun!”

To Cassandra’s surprise, a wall of green scales appeared on the other side of the door, the Imperial Concubine rushing to it.

“She can command any of the dragons?” Cassandra asked Shareen.

“Of course not. Only those she raised listen to her. Anour’s mother was murdered when he was an infant. Our mother took care of him and Roun in her stead, as she and his mother were close.”

Cassandra realized Anour’s mother had probably been killed in the race to the throne as well.

Kareen was determined as she stood before the large Green Dragon. Cassandra hesitated a bit before eventually following, seeing that Shareen was also accompanying her mother.

It was smaller than Krai, probably because it was younger, but still quite sizable, with a leaner face, and its wings and tail had a different shape. The little dragon turned its head to Kareen, intrigued, swishing its tail left and right.

“Concubine Mother!” called Anour.

“Let’s go. We shall see if that damn Emperor dares to injure my precious son again!”

She was obviously dead set on flying to the Imperial Palace. Before the young Prince could even protest, she had taken her place on the dragon’s back, and Shareen was helping Cassandra on too.

He sighed, and climbed up. Four people was still nothing for the dragon, who took off right away, visibly excited. Cassandra couldn’t help but feel nauseous as it was her first flight in a while and on a different beast, too. Moreover, she was concerned about Kairen. It wasn’t until Shareen stroked her back that she was pulled from her thoughts.

“Are you okay? You’re paler than usual.”

“I’m just...worried about him.”

“What are you worried for? Our father is just using him to get Mother’s attention, but he won’t go overboard. My brother is absolutely fine.”

But Cassandra couldn’t be comforted, even as they landed at the Imperial Palace. She hadn’t been back there in a while and didn’t hold many good memories about it. She followed the Imperial Concubine and her children who hurried inside.

A few Imperial Servants tried to stop Kareen.

“Imperial Concubine, you can’t walk in unannounced like this. The Imperial Emperor is busy...”

“He is busy? If he is so busy he should have let my son be! How dare he abuse my child!”

Her yelling had every Imperial Servant running away in fear. Kareen stormed through the Palace with no one daring to stop her. Cassandra even witnessed several concubines turning around with terrified expressions as soon as they saw her.

Shortly, they arrived at the Grand Hall’s main gates. Cassandra’s heart beat louder, filled with worry.

“You old Dragon!” roared Kareen while throwing the gates wide open.

It was quite a unique sight to behold.

The Emperor, sitting on his golden throne, spat out his wine upon hearing her. It was the first time Cassandra was able to really take a good look at him. Previously, she had to keep her eyes down because of her slave status, but now that she was wearing a red dress and accompanied by Imperial Concubine Kareen, she wasn't as afraid to look.

She was surprised. She had expected a much older man, maybe around sixty or seventy, especially since he already had so many children. However, the man didn't look a day over fifty! She was speechless. How could that be? He had children older than Kairen!

“K...K...Kareen?”

Seeing him stuttering like that, he looked like a teenager caught doing something wrong. At his feet, a handful of young women, who were holding plates of fruits or instruments, went completely white at the sight of the Imperial Concubine. They all stood up and retreated, as if some dangerous beast had come into the room. Cassandra, however, had her eyes set behind them. Krai!

The Black Dragon had already turned to her, growling and struggling to come closer. Despite the attempts, Krai was unable to budge, a much larger beast actually trapping it on the ground - the Imperial Golden Dragon, Glahad.

Cassandra was shocked! Krai was big, very big, but Glahad was massive. The golden dragon was the size of a large building and covered in gold scales. Its ruby eyes were the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and also the most terrifying. She was used to Krai, and had learned not to fear the Black Dragon, but Glahad was another level of scary. It was a mythical creature, a God who could decide between life and death in a single bite. When it turned its head towards them, she couldn't help but stumble a few steps back.

“Kareen! You...you're back, my dearest!” exclaimed the Emperor, visibly overjoyed.

He didn't even seem to see his Concubine's angry face as he stood up, smiling wide from ear to ear.

“You should have told me. I would have gathered a few presents, or ordered a celebration...”

“A celebration? A celebration for what?! How you're abusing my dearest son? Hmm? You cold hearted, selfish old man!”

As she kept yelling, Glahad, from his perch upon Krai, abruptly spotted her. The dragon's eyes immediately changed, opening wide while staring. Shareen grabbed Cassandra's arm and had her step even further back, her eyes fixed on her father's Dragon.

The next second, Glahad jumped, almost running to Kareen with a long growl. Though it was scary to see a Dragon of this size run at them, Cassandra immediately recognized the behavior. It was the same impulsive affection Krai often displayed towards her. The Golden Dragon ran until Kareen suddenly turned her head towards it, glaring fiercely.

“Don't you dare, you rascal!”

Instantly, Glahad dug its paws and claws into the perfect wooden floors, grinding to a halt a few meters away from Kareen. The dragon was frozen in an awkward pose, with its body turned towards her, but its collar and head turned away, like a guilty dog. It kept trying to sneak glances at her, but had to turn its red gaze away every time, as the Concubine was glaring. Behind Glahad, Krai furtively took this opportunity to throttle towards Cassandra, wrapping its body around the Concubine as she scratched and caressed its head, happy to reunite with her Prince's Dragon. Meanwhile, Glahad softly growled, jealous, but Kareen had already turned back to the Emperor.

“Where is my son?!”

The Emperor looked baffled, surprised even. He clearly wasn't expecting his Concubine's anger and stared at her with a confused expression.

“Kareen, dearest, I...”

“Answer me!”

Cassandra couldn't help but think about how exceptionally bold Kareen was. Was she some Hell Goddess reincarnated? To be talking to the Emperor like this, you needed to have a few extra lives!

The man sighed.

“Kareen, don't be like this. You know I don't want to be mean, hmm? But how else could I get your attention? And see! Even mad, you're so pretty!”

“Oh, you want to see me mad? Come closer and I’ll yank your hair out! Now, give me my son back, you deceitful snake!”

“I get it, dearest, but please stop screaming, you’ll hurt your pretty little voice. If we want to be able to have a nice chat later, we should...”

“A nice chat? You force me to come all the way here to retrieve my son and you expect me to sit down and idly chat with you? How dare you!”

“Oh, come now, I’ll have your favorite garden prepared. How about that? With your favorite tea, too! Do you want a massage? I have a young lady who can do wonders...”

“Ha! Now you want to brag about your new concubines to me? That’s just a bit too much! You think I’ll die of jealousy? Huh?”

Meanwhile to the side, Krai was happily growling and rubbing against Cassandra’s hands, and sending glances towards Kareen too, gently pushing her with its snout. Glahad, however, was still sitting a few steps away from the Imperial Concubine Mother and was glaring at it with jealousy. The Imperial Golden Dragon growled several times, but Krai ignored it, too absorbed by Cassandra.

When Glahad had finally had enough, it reached out a paw, aiming its claws at Krai’s rear, but the Black Dragon growled back. The two started bickering, making an awful lot of noise in the room and no matter how angry Kareen and the Emperor were, two adults yelling couldn’t possibly be heard over the ruckus.

That’s when the Emperor, suddenly taking on a very annoyed expression, turned to them.

“Enough!”

Both dragons froze, but Krai was still childishly growling, curling its body around Kareen and Cassandra with a defiant look. Glahad walked back behind the throne with a sullen expression, but stayed silent. The Emperor sighed, turning to Shareen.

“My daughter, go get your brother before your mother really gets angry at me.”

One could have argued the Imperial Concubine was already angry enough, but Shareen simply left the room, Cassandra following closely behind her. The Princess seemed to know exactly where to go, heading down several staircases and crossing corridors in record time.

They arrived at the dungeons a short while later. It was cold and sinister down there. Shareen gave some orders to the Imperial Servants and they guided her to a large cell.

“My Lord!” yelled Cassandra.

As soon as the door was opened, she ran inside. Kairen was there, hanging by his wrists from the ceiling. He seemed unconscious, but Cassandra was more worried about the number of dark scale lines on his skin. How many times had he been whipped?

She started crying while Shareen looked on, dumbfounded.

“What is wrong with you? Stop crying, he’s fine!”

Fine? How was he fine? But Shareen rolled her eyes and walked over, taking her own whip out. Before Cassandra could react, Shareen violently slashed her brother’s arm. A few seconds later, the red mark was already covered in black scales.

“What are you doing?! He’s already unconscious from...”

“What? Unconscious?” retorted Shareen, satirically. “The idiot is asleep!”

Asleep...? Cassandra stepped closer to Kairen. His eyes were closed, he was breathing slowly and almost...snoring. Snoring! How could he be sleeping in these conditions? His sister rolled her eyes again and slapped his biceps a few times.

“Kairen, you idiot! Wake up, your precious woman is here crying because of you!”

It took a few seconds, but the Prince finally opened his eyes to Cassandra’s relief. He frowned, surprised to see her there.

“Cassandra...?”

“My Lord! My Lord, are you alright? Does it hurt?”

“Stop with the pity party, you two, it’s annoying,” said Shareen. “And you, Brother, what were you thinking? Why would you let yourself be whipped?”

Kairen was focused on Cassandra, ignoring his sister. Seeing her tears flowing, he became angry and confused.

“Cassandra, why are you crying? Who did this to you?”

He struggled a bit with the shackles holding him and then all of a sudden, they snapped with a loud metallic crack, shocking her. Freed, the Prince landed on his feet in front of her, immediately brushing his hands on her cheeks.

“You...you could free yourself?” asked Cassandra in surprise.

“Of course. You think those shackles could restrain a Dragon Master?” sighed Shareen. “So silly. Anyway, I’ll be on my way now.”

His sister left the cell and headed back into the Imperial Palace, but neither of them paid her any attention. Cassandra was still speechless, looking at him confused, while Kairen caressed her cheeks, trying to understand the cause of her tears.

“Are you injured? Who made you cry?” he kept asking unrelentingly.

All of a sudden, Cassandra pushed his hands away, angry.

“I was worried about you! I thought you were actually hurt! And...and I was waiting and worried! How could you stay here when you could have just freed yourself?”

All she could think about was how the Imperial Family was too much. Who lets themselves be whipped and trapped without complaint? And not even try to get free for weeks! How could Kairen be so heartless and not even think of her feelings? Cassandra turned her back to him, both angry and embarrassed. His Highness had gone too far!

“Cassandra...”

Seeing her enraged was a first for Kairen. He was now feeling a bit guilty and had no idea how to make up for it. He put his arms around her, resting his hands on her little baby bump.

“Sorry... Father really wanted to see Mother...”

Cassandra turned around, scowling.

“Don’t tell me... All of this was only to have the Concubine Mother come here?”

Kairen nodded.

“It was the only way my father could think of to compel her to come.”

“Why did you agree to it?”

“Because he said if I helped him, he would agree to my demands. Come.”

Worried about her staying too long in the cold dungeons, Kairen gently ushered Cassandra out and guided her back into the Castle. They walked for a few minutes, until they reached what looked like a little reading nook or tea salon, with two women in red dresses inside.

“Get out,” growled Kairen.

They left in a hurry, keeping their eyes on the floor. The Prince then gently guided Cassandra to sit in the middle of a little pile of brightly colored cushions. Taking to his knees in front of her, he grabbed her hands and started tenderly kissing them. Frowning a bit, Cassandra pushed him away.

“I’m still upset, My Lord. How could you have agreed to that? I was worried for weeks!”

But Kairen only smirked, caressing her hair.

“Did you miss me?”

“It’s not funny!” Cassandra pouted, throwing one of the little cushions at him. “I was really worried...”

“I get it...I’m sorry. I apologize.”

Cassandra looked away from him, her cheeks flushed from a mix of anger and attempts to repress her tears of relief. She didn’t want to forgive him so soon for abandoning her for weeks. Weeks! He had simply stayed here without warning her, and not thinking about her feelings at all!

“Cassandra... I’m sorry...”

Kairen softly kissed her skin, leaving a trail of kisses from her wrist, up her arm, and finally landing on her shoulder. Cassandra shivered. A wave of warmth overcame her, along with her Prince’s familiar smell.

“My Lord...”

“Kairen,” he corrected.

She shook her head, biting her lip and trying to breathe. His hand was slowly caressing her leg, pushing the fabric of her red dress higher above her knee. Cassandra

was blushing as she thought about the last time they'd had this kind of contact, how it had been far too long. Kairen's lips were now on her chest, on that little spot of skin her dress wasn't covering. She grabbed his shoulder, feeling the sensation of his hot skin under her fingers. The black scales that tracked over his body were rougher, but she liked their unusual texture.

Kairen shifted her back, having her lay in the middle of the cushions. He reached for her hairpins, taking each of them out and freeing her long curls. He brushed his fingers through, caressing each strand, before firmly grabbing a handful of her luscious locks.

Meanwhile, his other hand was sliding down along her waist to her thigh, playing with the inner layers of her dress. Cassandra was already too flustered to breathe steadily. The blood under her skin was sizzling, flushing it to an excited pink. She grabbed his face in her hands, and pulled him up for a long, deep kiss. Finally allowed to kiss her, Kairen didn't wait to respond fiercely, crashing his tongue and lips against hers, brushing her skin and hair with his fingers.

He finally reached the last layers of her clothes, grabbing her underwear to pull down her legs. Cassandra felt it, and her senses went into overdrive, feeling them slide down until they were gone. His fingers were caressing her, heating things up

between her legs, rubbing her thighs, and at her entrance. The slow motions were torture... a very sweet and exciting torture, causing a rush of adrenaline. She was moaning under the movements of his hands, unable to free her lips from his passionate kiss. Kairen wouldn't let go of her, pressing his body against hers, he was ruthless with his mouth and his hands all over her.

Cassandra could barely catch her breath between his lips, while his fingers ventured further, grinding against her insides and making her legs tremble. She wanted to cry out, beg for mercy, but he was barely letting her make any sound, nothing but erratic moans.

How could this be appropriate? They were inside the Imperial Palace, anyone could barge in!

But, of course, he didn't care. Kairen kept going, too engrossed in their sexual arousal and savoring the wetness on his fingers. They hadn't been together in so long... His desire was growing exponentially, as he quickly undid his belt. Cassandra was finally able to breathe when his lips plunged to her breasts, undoing the top of her dress to caress and tease them. She gasped, feeling him pressing between her legs.

“My Lord.”

He sucked on her skin, leaving red marks above her breasts and all over her white skin. Cassandra’s body overflowed with sensation, holding on to his shoulders, to the soft cushions around her.. She continued trembling in pleasure, but she was wet and getting impatient. Her fidgety hands reached for his member, caressing it. Kairen growled a bit, surprised. He let her do so though, and went back to her lips, deeply kissing her again. He wanted this woman so much... How could he have kept them apart for weeks?

With a swift shift of his hips, the War God slowly penetrated her, causing his Concubine to cry out in pleasure. Feeling him fill her to the brim was the hottest sensation she ever had. Cassandra took deep breaths as they slowly started moving their hips together, but Kairen wasn’t that patient. He accelerated, thrusting long and fast inside her, driving her crazy with his perfectly timed momentum. He kept going, in and out, breathing loudly. Cassandra felt her lower body burning, her legs and hips a slave to his wild movements. It was so good... so, so good. And they hadn’t done it in so long. She just didn’t want this to stop.

Obliging her need, Kairen kept going, only slowing down to change positions a couple of times. Cassandra found she was starting to really like those colored cushions... She was on her flank, his arms around her, going voraciously at it from behind. Kairen kissed her shoulder, caressed her breasts, and rubbed her little button between her legs, making her go insane. His double rubbing on her most intimate parts were bringing her to the verge of explosion, but she was trying hard to hold it back. She didn’t want to cum first again.

Cassandra tried breathing deep and hard, but her Prince was relentless, not giving her a moment’s respite. Suddenly, she heard him groan as he accelerated further, and she couldn’t take it anymore. In a long cry of absolute bliss, she spasmed around him, unleashing. Kairen joined her at the same time, in a long release.

He sighed against her skin.

“It was high time you came...”

As they were putting their clothes back on, Kairen couldn’t help but thoroughly behold his Concubine. Why did she seem prettier than he remembered? His mother’s influence could be seen on her. Cassandra had always been naturally graceful and gentle-mannered, but now, she was moving with the attitude of a Queen. Or maybe it was just the jewelry enhancing her natural beauty.

“How is our son?” asked Kairen, caressing her tummy.

“He’s fine. I can feel him a little now. And the egg has grown bigger, too.”

Kairen nodded in approval and took her hand, pulling her out of the room. Cassandra was completely lost in the maze of the Palace, but the Prince guided her confidently. In a few minutes, they were back in the Main Room where the Emperor’s golden throne was. Shareen was still there, her arms crossed.

“Kairen!” Kareen sighed out in relief.

“See, he’s fine, dar...”

“Fine? Then what are those?!”

The Imperial Concubine was inspecting the scaled scars on her son, looking furious.

“Who dared to injure my son? I want their heads!”

“Fine, yes, whatever you want. Would you move back to the Palace now, please?” asked the Emperor, visibly annoyed.

“Move back to this nest of snakes? Among all those two-faced whores? The little sluts that skulk around here?”

“You...you’re being a bit too much, darling.”

“Over my dead body!” yelled Kareen. “And know that if anything happens to my children or grandchildren, this will be the last time you’ll see me!”

And with that, she turned on her heels and left the room, not hiding her anger.

“Kareen! Ka... Oh, that woman!” sighed the Emperor.

He sat back on his throne looking sullen. Behind him, Glahad looked a bit disappointed too, laying down with a long face. Kairen walked up the first few stairs towards the throne.

“Father, my request.”

“Your request? What request? Your mother didn’t even listen!”

“You only asked that she would come here,” growled Kairen.

“Come and listen to me! All she did was yell at me! Did I deserve that? I feel so pathetic! She won’t even look at me anymore! What good is it being the Emperor if you can’t even control your own women?!”

“Father!”

“Ah, enough! I’ve had enough yelling for one day! We’ll talk about it later. Just go to your rooms, and... Won’t you and your concubine please attend the New Year Celebrations?”

Kairen’s fists tightened. This stubborn father of his was really getting on his last nerve, but before he could add anything, Cassandra grabbed his hand gently.

“Let’s go,” she whispered to him.

He didn’t say anything further, listening to her instead and stepping down, before leaving the room altogether. All that time, Cassandra hadn’t glanced at the Emperor once. For some reason, she felt very awkward just being in the same room as him...

They kept walking in silence through the corridors, passing by several rooms.

“My Lord, what did you ask of your father? In exchange for all this...”

“To be taken out...”

“Taken out?”

“Of his possible successors.”

“What?”

Cassandra stopped, speechless. He had asked for what? As she had stopped walking, Kairen had no choice but to stop and turn back to her.

“You asked for what?”

“For my father not to consider me as one of his successors. To be taken out of the running for future Emperor.”

“W...why would you do that?” Cassandra asked, still in shock.

“To protect you,” Kairen shrugged.

“That is not a valid reason!”

He didn’t even respond to that. Cassandra couldn’t understand what was going on. Was it because of what she had said? How scared she was for their child’s safety? Did he think everything would be solved if he was ruled out as a potential successor?

Cassandra’s mind was working at full speed. This was too much, even if it was for her sake!

“My Prince, you can’t...”

“Later.”

Kairen started walking again, and Cassandra followed, realizing that they were headed outside of the Imperial Palace. As it was much warmer there, a bit too hot for her. Cassandra tried to stay in his shadow to shield herself from the sun.

As soon as they reached the outer gardens, a bunch of young women suddenly approached them. They all had green dresses on and harbored fake smiles.

“Your Highness! Are you going outside? Do you need help?”

“We can accompany you, if you’d like!”

Cassandra was outraged by the women’s smutty intentions. What was this? Didn’t they usually fear the War God? And they were all blatantly ignoring her in their efforts to seduce him! Had they no shame at all? However, Kairen resolutely ignored them. Maybe for the first time though, Cassandra felt utterly annoyed. Had they become servants of the Imperial Palace just to try and seduce one of the Princes? Didn’t they fear for their lives?

“Your Highness! Wouldn’t you like another woman to warm your bed?”

Suddenly, Kairen stopped and turned to the young woman who had spoken. She was pretty with shiny hair and big lustful eyes, but Kairen’s eyes reflected back nothing but annoyance.

She didn’t realize this and assumed a seductive posture, showing off her curves. Cassandra looked elsewhere as she couldn’t bear to watch this kind of scheming.

“...Out of our way.”

“Eh?”

“I said, get out of our way.”

The woman looked a bit shocked, but kept insisting, trying to use her physical charms.

“B...but don’t you think I’m pretty? And I’m very experienced, too...”

Before she could add anything else, Kairen shoved her to the side with enough force to send her tumbling to the floor, falling flat on her ass. None of the other women moved to help her, they were all petrified by the Prince’s deathly glare.

Kairen resumed walking, not even bothering to look at them any longer. Cassandra followed in his steps silently. The servants didn’t dare to add a word either, especially after a dark shadow suddenly flew over them. Krai landed behind Cassandra, toddling to her until its head could be by the Concubine’s side. The dragon’s arrival had scared away all the nearby servants, but it made Cassandra smile. Krai softly growled while waddling by her side, following them outside the Imperial Palace’s domain.

The Palace itself was so vast that it took quite a while to leave it. Once they walked past the large walls though, the City sprawled out in front of them.

Cassandra took a deep breath. It had been so long since she had been in the City! Not much had changed over the last few months, of course, as she recognized most of the streets and shops. What was different was the way people looked at her though. This was the first time she could walk with her head held high. Before, she would get looks of disgust, people chasing her away like vermin. Now, the women were covetous of her, while the men lusted over her. All of them were careful to look down if the Prince or his Dragon came near though and Krai growled often, warning people not to come too close, forcing a clear path to open up in front of them, obviously disliking crowds. Now, those people were the ones averting their eyes and being careful. It was a vastly different experience.

“Where are we going, My Lord?”

“To the Slave Market.”

Cassandra was speechless. Really? Now? But indeed, after a few more steps, she started to recognize the direction they were headed. Was he really going to take care of her slave status, now?

“How do you know where it is, My Lord?”

“I used to run away from the Palace and come to the City.”

“Really?”

Was he a mischievous child growing up? Cassandra couldn't keep herself from smiling, imagining a young Kairen playfully running through the streets.

“C...Cassie?”

Cassandra turned around. Hidden in the crowd, a pair of young slaves were looking at her with shocked eyes. She recognized them instantly.

“Ethen? Mira?” she called out to them.

They nodded, and the people around the slaves stepped back. The two were younger than Cassandra. Ethen was fourteen years old, and Mira was just eleven. After a brief hesitation, they walked up to her and Cassandra hugged them as soon as they were within reach.

“Ethen, your...hand...”

She looked at the bandage on his wrist, where his hand used to be. He still had it when she had left their master's house.

“Ah... It's okay, Cassie, I'm fine. The... Master was very angry at that time, so he...”

“Cassie, I thought you were dead!” Mira interrupted, tears in her eyes. “The Master said that you were given as an offering to the...the...”

She didn't finish her sentence, but her eyes were clearly on Krai, afraid. The dragon was looking at her with curiosity though.

“Cassandra. Who are they?” asked Kairen.

“We...worked for the same Master.”

“The Old Master is dead, Cassie. Now his son is our Master.”

Cassandra felt like screaming. She remembered him. He was about her age, but the Old Minister's son was a horrible, spoiled child. He had laid his hands on the young female slaves several times and was even worse to the men. Ethen's hand was only a glimpse of his cruelty.

She shook her head. She couldn't possibly let them go back. Cassandra turned her head to Kairen, hesitating for a moment. Could she ask for a favor like this? Maybe just this once? Feeling her hesitation, her Prince turned to her.

"Say it."

"I... Can they come with us? Please..."

She didn't even have to ask a second time. Kairen nodded, and resumed walking. The two young slaves were confused, but Cassandra took their hands.

"Come with me."

"B... But...The Master..."

"Don't worry about him."

Still fearing the huge dragon, they started walking next to her, chatting about what had happened since the Arena. Cassandra detailed her story and then asked them the same. The two young slaves didn't have any good news. The Old Minister was a cruel man, but his son managed to be even worse. He had taken some of his father's remaining concubines as his own, and chased away or killed the rest.

"What a pig..." said Cassandra.

"Cassie... We'll really be punished if we don't go back..." cried Mira.

"No, no, don't worry."

The more she thought about it, the more Cassandra didn't want to let them go back, or let anyone go back there. She abruptly stopped, and thought about it for a few seconds, before turning to Kairen.

"Let's go there."

He didn't say anything, but she took a deep breath to explain herself.

"I can't...I can't leave them. All the slaves there were like me, they were all my friends. Some are even younger than Mira. I... His son only inherited his father's wealth and properties, but he doesn't have a title. I can...I can do this, right?"

Kairen smirked. Of course she could. When would she stop doubting herself so much? Cassandra only seemed to realize her own strength and status when she needed it to help others...

“Where is it?” he asked.

Cassandra led the way. It was an odd feeling going back to her Old Master’s house. She probably would have been terrified if she hadn’t been accompanied by a Dragon and its master. One was a killing machine, and the other could eat several grown men in one bite. And both were smitten with her.

They arrived a few minutes later. Cassandra took a few seconds at the entrance to calm herself. As she stood there, all of the memories resurfaced, as clear as if it were only yesterday. The yelling, the slaps, and the bite of the whip. All that suffering that had marked her skin forever. She could never get rid of the scars, physical or emotional. The worst thing about it was the hunger though. Most people thought the physical punishments were more painful, but only someone who had lived through it knew that there was nothing worse than hunger; it drove you crazy.

She took a deep breath. She wasn’t hungry, cold, or scared anymore. Those scars were now just reminders of injuries that had been healed.

“Who dares to...!” the man yelled, furious.

Cassandra had just walked into the room, wearing her red dress, staring at him with disgust. The young man was barely older than her, by a couple of years. He was half-naked in his bedroom, wearing just a bathrobe, and two young women by his side. Cassandra talked to them first.

“Leave us, please.”

Her calm and composed tone contrasted strangely with the group of slaves behind her. After some hesitation, the women were about to leave, but their Master suddenly grabbed them by the hair, making them both cry out in pain.

“Where do you think you’re going?! You wenches! Who is your Master?!”

“Let them go!”

“Why?” he asked. “Why should I obey you, slave? Huh? Where did you steal that dress! You little slut, do you think I don’t recognize you? You were one of my father’s slaves! I’ll whip you a hundred times for running away!”

“I said, let them go!”

Right after she yelled, a large growl was heard from above. Except for Cassandra, everyone in the room was suddenly terrified, looking up at the roof.

“W...w...what was that?”

Too surprised, the young Master had let go of one of the women, who ran out of the room screeching. His grip was still tight on the other woman’s hair, though, and the woman was quietly weeping, obviously scared.

Since it seemed quiet upstairs for a moment, the man, trying to appear more confident, stood up to face Cassandra with a disgusted look painted on his face.

“How dare you walk in here and give me orders, you damn slut! You think you can tell me what to do? How about this?!”

Before Cassandra could do anything, he threw the woman on the floor. He brutally kicked her in the stomach several times. Her screams and the violence of the scene made everyone take a step back; everyone except Cassandra. Despite her own disgust at the man, she suddenly grabbed her shoe and threw it at him.

She wasn’t aiming to hurt him, but to divert him so he would stop. Her shoe violently hit his temple making him stumble back away from his victim. The woman was crying loudly, holding her waist in pain. Cassandra walked up to her, checking on her, genuinely worried. She didn’t recognize this young woman, but she was also a slave.

“Are you okay?”

“The...the Master...” cried the girl, but her words didn’t make any sense.

“How dare you injure your Master! I’ll have you whipped, burned, and killed!”

Cassandra had enough. Ignoring him, she helped the girl get up.

“Where do you think you’re...!”

Just when the man was about to hit them both, Cassandra took one of her hairpins out, and held it like a weapon, aimed right at him. She didn’t attack, but with her stance and the speed of his hand, the man impaled himself right on it.

Shocked, he saw blood dripping, the needle in the middle of his hand, and took a few seconds to understand what had just happened. Cassandra let go of the hairpin, as he started screaming in pain.

“It huuuuuuurts! It huuuuuuurts!” he kept screeching.

Cassandra felt no sympathy for him. After what he had done to so many slaves, for all those years, she didn’t have it in her heart to give him any pity. He certainly didn’t deserve any.

She was about to escort the woman outside, when another loud growl was heard. Understanding it came from above them, half of the slaves present ran out. Cassandra sighed, taking cover on the side. A few seconds later, the room’s roof was completely torn away. With its gigantic claws fighting to get rid of the wood, Krai kept eyeing her from the hole just created, impatient.

“Krai, stop it! I said to wait!” She sighed

Whether it didn’t want to listen or didn’t understand, the dragon kept digging, making a big mess of what had just been a room seconds before. Cassandra had to sidestep to avoid the falling debris. A few feet away from her, the man had completely forgotten about his pain, staring at the huge black Dragon, in utter shock.

“Th... The... Thir... Third Pr... Prince’s...”

“His name is Krai,” said Cassandra. “And if you move or scream again, you will be his lunch.”

With that threat, she finally left the room, unharmed, helping the terrorized slave who was clinging to her, mumbling.

“The ma... Master will kill me... He’ll whip me...”

“Don’t worry, he won’t do anything to you.”

Cassandra walked her to the inner court, where the other slaves ran to take care of the young woman, giving her some clothes and checking her injury. Behind Cassandra, Krai noticed she was out, and stepped down to follow her, completely forgetting all about the building it had just destroyed. The slaves were still frightened by the dragon, but watching it happily growl at Cassandra and rub its snout against her arm, was definitely a unique sight.

“How many slaves are there?”

“About sixty,” said Ethen. “And about as many servants.”

Cassandra sighed a bit. She had hoped it'd be less. She was about to turn to walk out and ask for Kairen's permission, when she stopped. She remembered his words, right before she walked in here. She should do this on her own this time. No more asking for permission. Taking a deep breath, she turned again, facing the crowd in the outer garden.

“I'm on my way to the Slave Market, to get this thing off my neck. I...I am an Imperial Concubine, now. If you want to follow me, I can do the same for you.”

“Where will we go next?” asked one of the middle-aged women.

“I can offer you jobs...but not to everyone. Some will have to find work on their own. I only need about twenty people to accompany me back to the Onyx Castle.”

A lot of people were hesitating. It was disheartening to Cassandra, but she easily understood them. Most of these people had spent their whole lives working in this place. In the outside world, they had no idea of what they'd become. Even if it was a different person holding it, they would always fear the whip of another Master.

Suddenly, someone banged on the door behind her.

“You wench! You shall die by the-!”

chomp

Cassandra turned to look at what the odd sound was. Behind her, Krai froze like a dog caught doing something wrong. The dragon turned its red eyes to the side, obviously to avoid hers. The inert leg hanging out from its maw was a dead give-away, though.

“Krai...”

The Black Dragon turned its head away, pretending not to hear. Behind her, all the slaves were silently horrified. Did that dragon just...? Someone in the group loudly threw up, while Krai was trying to chew slowly, as if Cassandra couldn't see it. There was only one shoe left on the ground.

She sighed. She didn't think the dragon would really eat him...

“Did your dragon eat the Master?” Innocently asked Mira.

“We’re all dead,” whispered one of the men. “They won’t forgive this... The family... They will kill her and kill us for this...”

Cassandra turned to him, annoyed.

“This is an Imperial Dragon! No one will do anything to you anymore, I promise!”

“You’ll just sell us to the next Master! What do you care, now that you’re one of them?”

“Cassie won’t do that!” yelled Mira, running to her side. “She is our friend!”

Most of the young people nodded in agreement. To them, Cassandra had been like an older sister, silent and helpful most of the time. Even if she had been gone for months, they remembered her gentleness that no one else had shown them after she had left. Ethen, along with a few young slaves, confidently walked over to her side as well.

“Nowhere can be worse than here anyway,” growled the woman from before, joining them.

After that woman spoke, a few others came along. Cassandra knew most of them, but they had barely interacted before. That woman was known as Yasora, one of the slaves that worked in the kitchens. The ones staying behind were all staring at her with defiant looks, either doubtful or scared of the Dragon.

Cassandra sighed.

“Fine. We can...”

“Cassandra.”

She turned around. Kairen, impatiently, had arrived inside. As he came to her side, a few people stepped away, too afraid of an Imperial Family member. Though he didn’t wear any purple clothing, they could tell who he was just by the scales left on his skin, his armor, and his behavior.

He wrapped his arm around her waist, glancing at the people present.

“Are you done yet?” he asked in a cold voice.

“Yes but...some cannot leave.”

Kairen stayed silent for a while. His eyes were looking over at the residence, its buildings and all. He stopped where Krai had made a mess, glaring at his Dragon, but the black beast once again looked away.

“Just keep it,” he eventually said.

“Keep it? You mean this place?”

Kairen nodded.

“You hate the Imperial Palace anyway.”

Is that what he meant for her to keep...this whole residence? Indeed, its last owner had died, but...this was way too big for her to keep! She hesitated, looking at the slaves and servants who had all gathered.

One of the old maids stepped forward, bowing lowly.

“We will take care of it for you, Lady Cassandra. If...if you can do as promised, we will happily work for you. This residence will welcome you anytime.”

It was an odd feeling, having her former colleagues be at her service now. Cassandra sighed. She wasn't really happy with this situation, but indeed, it would be much better for them this way. With an Imperial Family member's protection, they didn't risk anything. No one would dare to raise questions about the place's ownership either, the Black Dragon that had wrecked some of it would be enough of an explanation.

“Are we done now?” asked Kairen, visibly bored.

Cassandra nodded, feeling a bit better. She wanted to hurry to the Slave Market. A lot of people were coming with them too. Though it was probably the place she hated the most, it was also where she could hope to find a clue about what had happened to her younger sister.

“You... You....Your Highness!”

The man couldn't believe his own eyes. A member of the Imperial Family, in the Slave Market? What had gotten into him! He glanced at the concubine next to him, and the obvious collar on her neck. What was that? He probably wanted his new toy's collar off, but... What was the deal with the dozens of slaves behind him?!

“Take that damn thing off.”

Kairen's angry voice had everyone sweating in fear. One of the older men took a step forward, looking at Cassandra's slavery collar with a suspicious look.

"It's not that simple, Your Highness. Every slave has a binding contract and a debt to pay in order to buy their freedom back."

"A debt?" repeated Cassandra, shocked. "Are you implying I owe you money?"

Kairen raised an eyebrow, not because of the slave trader, but in surprise at her sudden stance. It wasn't often that he saw her really angry at someone.

Cassandra was shocked and furious. She stepped forward, glaring at the man like she never had before.

"You stole me like some merchandise from my tribe when I was a child! You ransacked every house, killed every man you couldn't sell. You locked women and girls in cages, like we were animals! If any money has to be taken into account, you owe me more than a hundred whole lives could repay, for everything you've done! You owe me everything you took from me, my family, my life, my people!"

The man was shocked that the young Concubine had dared to yell at him. He glanced at the Prince, but seeing that he wasn't taking part in the conversation, he crossed his arms and made an offended look.

"Young Lady, how is it my fault if your tribe, or whatever, fell because of some war or bandits? It's not like people run here for slavery contracts! That's how the business is. We get the slaves and find them places to work. You should consider yourself lucky. You were provided a roof and food after what happened to your people!"

"Lucky?" repeated Cassandra in astonishment. "You think slaves...are lucky?"

Some of the people following them started yelling at the slave trader, making him step back. The crowd behind him wasn't too happy, either. In the Slave Market, which was basically a huge tent for buyers and sellers to meet and trade the slaves, there were about thirty to fifty slaves per trader. While their wrists, ankles, and neck were all bound by chains, they were free to glare and yell. Seeing the situation wasn't good, some buyers promptly left. No one wanted to get caught between a slave-trader and an Imperial Concubine wearing a slavery collar...especially when she is backed-up by her Prince and his Dragon.

Krai was standing outside of the tent, growling regularly. Plus, with its size, no one could ignore the little mountain of black scales that stood visible behind all of the crowd.

“I’ve spent almost half my life as a slave, and I should be grateful for it?” said Cassandra, outraged. “I should be grateful for all the times I’ve been whipped, beaten, and starved? For eating scraps and drinking dirty water? For risking my life every day? Thank you for the scars and nightmares?”

The slave trader rolled his eyes, obviously annoyed at her.

“What are you complaining about, huh? You got yourself an Imperial Prince, didn’t you? You, of all people, should be damn grateful you weren’t killed!”

For the first time in her life, Cassandra felt utter hatred for someone. She took the little dagger at her hip, and without warning, slashed the man’s arm. Not too deep, just enough for blood to appear, making him yell in pain.

“You...you swine!”

“What? Aren’t you grateful? Isn’t this nothing?!” Cassandra yelled back angrily, with tears in her eyes. “Slaves get injuries like this every day! The only person I’m grateful to is My Lord, for not killing the abused goods that I am! For taking a liking to me, despite all the scars I carry!”

“Cassandra, enough,” said Kairen, taking the dagger from her shaking hand.

Gently, he put his hand around her, comforting her and kissing her wet cheek. Cassandra had never been so angry before. She couldn’t even express it correctly.

“It’s...Those men are...”

“Calm down,” he whispered.

He didn’t mind her getting mad at someone. He wouldn’t have blinked if she killed him, but he didn’t want to see her too worked up, not when she was pregnant. She was crying in anger and shaking. He turned to the man, glaring at him with a deadly look in his black eyes.

“The collar. Now.”

The man hesitated. Even if this Concubine was upset or whatever, the Prince was a member of the Imperial Family, someone with money to no end. Maybe he could get some more before freeing that slave for him.

“I can do it, but the binding contract, and the fee...”

This time, Kairen had enough. Without warning, Kairen grabbed the man by his collar and pulled him back to the entrance. The man screamed like a pig, terrified. He didn’t expect the Prince would get mad over a slave, or even a Concubine. Kairen’s apparent calm and composure had misled him to think Cassandra was the only one who was angry.

“Let me go! I’ll free her! I’ll free her right away! We have a key! A key that works for...”

Before he could end his sentence, Kairen threw him like a sack toward Krai. The Dragon, like a dog catching a ball, crunched him half-way. It didn’t even chew, just gulped the man down, ending his life in seconds. After that, it burped loudly, to everyone’s disgust. When Kairen walked back to his Concubine, Cassandra was frowning.

“Can Dragons get sick?” she asked.

“What would he get sick with?”

“Rotten meat,” she said with disgust. “It’s the second one today.”

Kairen smirked.

“His stomach can handle fire.”

He then turned to the other slave traders present, all of their faces had gone completely white with fear. Before any of them wondered how many humans a dragon could eat in a day, they all ran to Cassandra, each bringing some very odd key. Kairen kicked one that had come too close, warning the others not to overstep that range.

He grabbed one of the keys and gently turned Cassandra around. Her head was spinning a bit. Really, now? Was it...really happening? She noticed her own breathing was getting louder, her heartbeat ringing in her ears.

With a loud clicking, the two half-rings of metal fell at her feet. Cassandra looked down at the rings for a few seconds, stunned. It was more than just those pieces of metal, it was her neck, and the sensation of lightness, that struck her.

There would be no more constant heaviness around her neck, no more pain. She slowly brought her fingers up, touching her skin. It was gone, really gone. It wasn't just the collar that was removed; it was like a hundred pounds of sorrow, fear, and pain had been lifted off her shoulders.

Cassandra silently started crying, hiding her face in Kairen's shoulder. Her Prince held her close, caressing her back and neck, waiting for her to calm down.

With her cheeks still wet, she suddenly grabbed his face and kissed him without warning. The War God wasn't expecting this. Never before had Cassandra been so passionate, demanding, and commanding. Yet, it felt so incredibly good. He answered her kiss, completely forgetting the world around them. It was like another woman had taken over her body, claiming him, hungry and restless. She caressed his cheek, his nape, keeping him to herself. Kairen was pleasantly surprised, his arms around her waist, hugging her until they parted, both of them out of breath.

For a while, they stayed silent, their faces close to each other, in a slight daze.

"Thank you," whispered Cassandra.

Kairen didn't answer, only wiping her tears and kissing her gently again, while Cassandra stood against his chest, her eyes closed. She was still trembling a bit, but he continued to hold her and turned to the slave traders.

"The others. Now."

The slave traders looked at the large group, a bit hesitant, but all of them had seen or heard the sound of a man being eaten alive by a Dragon. No one wanted to be

the main dish. They rushed toward the other slaves, each carrying one of the keys, and the collars fell one by one. People started crying, screaming, and laughing in joy. Some even hugged their siblings or friends, overwhelmed with relief. Cassandra only listened. She still had her eyes closed, leaning on Kairen's chest; her Prince's hands holding her tightly.

When they were done with the group, the slave traders returned, visibly pissed by what had just happened. Freeing fifty or so slaves in a day wasn't a part of their plans

at all. Kairen's deadly glare on them wasn't stopping, making them feel as if something was wrong.

"S...Sir, we are done..."

"I said, free the others."

For a few seconds, they didn't understand. They had obviously freed all of the group, so why... Then, their faces turned white, one by one. He couldn't possibly mean all of the slaves? Yet, the Imperial Prince's glare was obvious. The men stepped back.

"Your Highness, this... this is our trading business. This is how we...we make our living."

"If we free all our merchandise, we..."

Kairen's unwavering expression was extremely scary and disturbing. Three of the slave traders turned back and ran to free their slaves, with shaking hands. The men left were hesitant. He couldn't be... serious, could he?

All of a sudden, a loud growl was heard. Krai began to bite and tear the tent away. Even though the tent was dozens of meters long and wide, the dragon pulled it like a child would have played with a handkerchief.

Kairen stayed silent again, but Cassandra stepped closer, talking to the closest trader.

"The man who sold me, sold my younger sister too. His name was Nubar."

"Nu...Nubar died years ago, Madam."

"How can I find my sister?" she insisted, still visibly upset.

The man hesitated, but someone from behind him spoke first.

"How...how old was she, Madam?"

"She was seven."

"Then...she was probably sold to a brothel."

Cassandra felt her heart sink.

"To a brothel? I just said she was seven years old!"

“They take the young girls when they are very young, so they can train them and ensure their virginity. If they are very pretty, they can be sold at very high prices to wealthy nobles, but most of them are kept as prostitutes.”

Cassandra almost fainted. A brothel... Her sister had really been taken to some brothel? She felt like crying again, and throwing up. Those people were less than human. She turned to Kairen, shaking her head, feeling sick.

“I want to leave,” she cried. “I want to leave this place. I never want to step foot here, ever again.”

Kairen slowly nodded, and carried her outside, Cassandra’s arms around his neck. When he reached Krai, the dragon was growling in the direction of the slave traders, its eyes darkening.

“Stuff yourself,” the War God whispered.

Cassandra didn’t hear the carnage behind them, and she didn’t want to. She cried silently against Kairen’s neck. She couldn’t endure any more emotions for the day. She was angry, sad, and exhausted. Her Prince carried her without a word, back to the Palace. No one dared to bother them. She didn’t look up again until they reached the gates.

Kairen brought her to his apartment and gently placed her on the bed. She wasn’t crying anymore, but her eyes were red. He hated seeing her like this.

“I’ll send people to look for your sister.”

Cassandra sighed.

“Back then, when I had just been sold to my first Master...I looked for her every chance I had. I asked so many people... I was caught and punished several times for venturing outside when I wasn’t allowed to. I just wanted to find her so badly. She always looked so much like me, I knew someone would recognize her right away if they saw me.”

“What’s her name?”

“Missandra.”

Kairen nodded, and rubbed her back.

“We’ll find her.”

“She may not be in the Capital anymore, it’s been so long,” cried Cassandra.

Before she could add anything else, Kairen gently kissed her, and pulled her into the middle of the bed. He kept kissing her, until she finally began to slowly respond to his kiss.

Her sister had been lost for almost ten years. Even if the news that she may have been sold to a brothel was hard, Cassandra still had hope. If she was alive, with the Prince’s help, they would find her.

Right now, there was something important to celebrate. Kairen was going down to her jawline, onto her neck, down to her collarbone. Her skin was now all his to touch, caress, and kiss, as much as he wanted. Even on Cassandra’s pale skin, one could see the thin tan line from her slavery days. Eight years... For eight years her neck and shoulders had carried the weight of that heavy, rusted metal.

“I want to bathe,” she suddenly said.

“Now?”

Cassandra nodded, and Kairen quickly kissed her before leaving the bed, allowing her to sit up. He had gone to give orders to the servants in waiting. After a few minutes, they had her bath ready, lukewarm water with flowers and oils, right in the middle of the room. They dismissed the servants that were waiting with towels in order to be alone.

Cassandra undressed, revealing the little belly under her dress. Her breasts, too, had gotten a bit fuller and more firm during those last weeks. Kairen helped her step inside the bathtub, sitting behind her as she liked.

She could finally relax a bit inside the water, with the Prince’s warm torso against her back. Kairen brushed her hair back, kissing her neck and shoulder.

“We should celebrate,” he whispered.

“That I’m no longer a slave?”

“That and... this,” he said, caressing her tummy.

Cassandra nodded, smiling a bit for the first time in a while. She put her hand over his, feeling a lot better just from his touch.

“How do you celebrate?” she asked.

“Probably a feast... Gifts... I want to get you something.”

She chuckled. She would never have guessed the War God was into gifts. So far, all he had given her was gold bars! He was so rich he didn't need to buy anything for himself, as was all of the Imperial Family.

“More dresses?” She asked.

“No...a necklace.”

Cassandra was a bit surprised. A necklace? What kind of necklace was he thinking about?

“I understand my brothers better now.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, a bit confused.

“You'll see tonight.”

He was probably talking about the Feast. Since they were in the Imperial Palace, they would probably have to attend. Last time, Cassandra had been there as a slave. Now she was a free woman. That feeling was still too new to her. Despite the weight being taken off her neck, she had yet to get used to not being a slave anymore. Her status had risen considerably in just a few seconds. She was a low-rank Concubine, now, which meant she had gone from the lowest status in this country to one of the highest.

“Why did you ask your father to... take you out of the running as his heir?” she asked, suddenly remembering that issue.

Kairen glanced at her pregnant belly, his dark eyes bearing a solemn expression.

“To protect you...and our son. As long as I can inherit the throne, you'll both be in danger. Constantly.”

“But...it's such an important matter.”

He sighed, and pulled her closer, pouring water on her back, washing her gently.

“I don't care about being an Emperor. I don't want you to be scared or unhappy.”

Cassandra shook her head. “You can't make this kind of decision like that. No wonder the Emperor was so unhappy about it.”

Wasn't he the most favored of the six sons? The Emperor may act childish when his favorite Concubine was around, but Cassandra knew how smart he really was.

He wouldn't act that way towards Kairen if he wasn't a good Heir. Moreover, he was the best Dragon-tamer, that fact alone spoke volumes about him too.

Kairen frowned, confused by her reaction. "You don't like that?"

"It's not just about me. There are so many more people than just me in this country. What if whoever becomes the Emperor is bad or an incompetent person? Hundreds, or even thousands, of people could die."

She gently brushed his hair, looking at him. He was such a powerful and respected man, yet all he could see was her? Cassandra leaned closer to kiss him, enjoying this sweet taste between them. At first, she was so scared of him, but now...now he was her refuge, the one person she wanted to be with, unconditionally.

They kept kissing and caressing each other for a long time in the bath. Kairen had a new and embarrassing game; leaving a trail of hickeys from her neck to her breasts. When she noticed them in the mirror, Cassandra sighed. "I didn't think you would enjoy my collar being gone to this extent."

The Prince smirked behind her, putting his pants back on before calling the servants back. A dozen of them ran in to help them prepare for the banquet. Kairen only had his scaled braces on and stayed shirtless, as he chased and scared anyone who tried to get close to him.

Hence, the servants focused on Cassandra, helping her get ready from head to toe. With her collar gone, it was a whole new attitude they had toward her. They were extremely careful with each movement. They kept bowing and avoiding eye contact until Cassandra begged them to stop.

"It's alright, you'll hurt your back or neck if you keep bowing like that."

They seemed surprised by her attitude. It was probably very different from the usual Concubines. It took a while before they stopped bowing continuously. Yet, they still tried not to look at her directly.

"If the Imperial Concubine has a preference..."

They kept showing her dozens of necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and rings, confusing her. Everything was shining with gold and gems, in all the colors she could think of.

How come they had so much jewelry available for her? She had some that she had bought while at the Onyx and Diamond Palaces, but not here!

“The Emperor has insisted, Your Highness. the Third Prince’s Imperial Concubine shall be entitled to own anything she likes.”

Cassandra was speechless. Now, even the Emperor was treating her like a Princess! Had The Concubine Mother played a part in this? Kairen didn’t seem surprised one bit. He stood up, glancing at the jewelry.

“Father is probably trying to calm Mother through you. And he’s happy about the baby, too.”

Kairen picked a thin gold one, with emeralds, diamonds, and handed it to her. Cassandra chuckled, putting it on with the help of two maiden servants. They helped her put on the rest of the matching jewelry, which included earrings, hairpins, and an ankle bracelet. After picking a very light, off-shoulder dress that had thin layers and a long skirt, the servants put Cassandra’s hair up beautifully. Once she was ready, Kairen took her out of the room.

It would be her first time attending the Imperial Banquet as an official Concubine, as well as meeting the Imperial Siblings and their Concubines. Of course, she was nervous. Half of those people were wishing for her and her baby’s death.

As she followed Kairen, Cassandra had a hard time calming down. Everything would be so different from the first time she had walked into the large hall of the Imperial Palace. Most importantly, she could hold her head high, and walk beside the Prince, instead of behind him. The War God had his arm around her waist as they entered, in a clearly protective stance.

“His Highness, Kairen the Third Prince, God of War of the Dragon Empire, and his Concubine,” someone announced loudly.

This was very ceremonial; all eyes were clearly on them as they walked in. This time, Cassandra could see all of their faces. First, she realized that the Imperial Concubine Mother wasn’t there. Had the Emperor failed to convince her to attend? Shareen, however, was sitting in her golden chair next to her brother’s.

Just like Cassandra remembered, each Imperial sibling had their own golden chair. The brothers’ were a bit bigger than their sisters. All of the Concubines, in red and pink dresses, were sitting down below them on the stairs in front of their respective

Prince. She could guess all the servants were hidden in the shadows behind the golden chairs, but they were completely still and silent.

This time, there were no performers; perhaps they had come too early. In any case, Kairen took her to his golden chair. She sat right in-between his legs, where she could rest her arms and head on his knee. He immediately started stroking her back. She wasn't the only woman touching her Prince, another Concubine had her back resting on the Fifth Prince's leg, acting flirtatiously with him.

The Emperor wasn't there yet, so Cassandra spent time observing the other Imperial Brothers. She had never noticed how similar yet different they all were. All of them had tanned skin and jet-black hair. The First Prince was the only one with long hair and a very quiet attitude. He wore a large purple tunic and only had two Concubines. The Second Prince had his hair very short. He wore a mean expression with his thin features, and he had a total of six Concubines, with half of them wearing red dresses. The fourth seat was empty, but in front of the fifth, there was a crowd. How many Concubines did the Fifth Prince have? She counted at least twenty in front of the young man, but the women kept chatting and moving, so she lost count. Finally, the brother she knew, Prince Anour greeted her with a little nod when their eyes met, and Cassandra did the same in return.

"So, this is your new woman, Brother."

Cassandra recognized that woman. Princess Phetra, who was glaring at her. Didn't she recognize her, though? It didn't seem like she realized Cassandra was the slave she had already insulted a while ago.

All of the ten Princesses present were eyeing her, but Princess Phetra was the only one to speak. Cassandra turned her head to her, staring. She wasn't afraid to look her in the eye anymore. Princess Phetra wasn't the prettiest, but she had a very sexy body and a lot of jewelry to show.

She seemed to wait for an answer, but Kairen didn't give a damn. He kept gently caressing Cassandra's back with his fingers, looking elsewhere with a bored expression.

"Such bad taste..." she said, clicking her tongue.

"Do you have advice to give, Sister?" asked the First Prince.

"Well, one with more curves, to begin with. Aren't you supposed to try and have Heirs? How can you do that with such a scrawny woman?"

“That’s rich, coming from a childless slut,” said Shareen, with a smirk.

“How dare you!” roared Phetra, turning red.

As usual, Shareen wasn’t afraid to bicker with her sibling and turned to her with an obvious satisfied expression.

“What? Aren’t you the childless one giving advice to a pregnant woman? Oh, Phetra, really, why weren’t you born mute? You’re good with your tongue unless it’s for talking.”

For a second, Cassandra wondered if both women were going to have a catfight. To her surprise, the Second Prince glared at Princess Phetra, making her turn red and look down. Did she fear her own brother more than she feared Kairen?

“The Imperial Dragon Emperor has arrived!” suddenly someone announced.

All bowed to the Emperor’s arrival, though it was quick. He walked to his throne, obviously a bit grumpy, and looked around to see who was there.

“Where’s this Fourth Son of mine?” he suddenly asked, staring at the empty chair.

“Brother Opheus is sick, Father,” said the Eldest Brother.

“Oh, he’s always sick of something. Anyway! I’m happy to see you all… all of you who came here. Shareen, daughter, come here to entertain your father. Bring in the performers!”

Immediately, a group of dancers appeared at the center of the hall, dancing together to a speedy rhythm. Cassandra didn’t feel like watching. She felt like a mouse in a nest of resting snakes. The Princes were talking to their Concubines, and the Princesses between themselves, but you can easily see that none of the siblings really got along.

The Second Prince was whispering to his sister, looking angry. Another sister had also taken part in the conversation. She seemed a bit older than them.

Cassandra realized. Anour was still a teenager, but the oldest Princess looked to be in her forties. How old was the Emperor, then? She whispered her question to Kairen.

“He is sixty-two this year.”

Sixty-two years old? The Emperor barely looked forty! How could one look so young at that age, when so many of his children were there! Cassandra was confused. Did

that mean the Dragon Blood made them age slower? She had heard some of the previous Emperors had died after a hundred years, but... She thought it was all just legends...

“What about you? And your brothers?” she asked Kairen, now too curious.

She had always assumed he was no older than thirty, but...if the Emperor looked like that at over sixty, her Prince could even be forty year old!

“Sephir is thirty-five, Vrehan is thirty-two, Opheus is twenty-four or twenty-three, Lephys is twenty-one and Anour is fifteen. And I’m twenty-eight.”

Cassandra blushed uncontrollably. So, they had about a ten-year age difference. She had never thought about it. It wasn’t uncommon to see an age gap between men and their Concubines in this Empire, so she wasn’t too surprised. The concubine she used to serve was twenty years younger than her Master.

“What are you thinking?” he whispered.

Cassandra just shook her head and rested it on his knee. She was actually feeling quite safe, sitting so close to him. Kairen’s hand on her skin chased all of her worries away, even with all the glares she was getting.

The glares were not only from the Second Prince, but from some of the Concubines as well. Were those women jealous? It was an odd feeling, but Cassandra pretended not to see them or care. In the main area, Shareen was laughing with the Emperor, entertaining her father while chatting with him. It was obvious they had a real bond, even without Kareen in the picture.

“Cassandra.”

Kairen caught her attention as a servant was presenting them with a gold tray of food. Cassandra took a bite carefully, but all the food here was tested for poison. She could remember back when she was supposed to be the one to test it.

Suddenly, from across the room, a ruckus was heard. One of the Fifth Prince’s Concubines, while shifting her position, had mistakenly spilled some of her wine on one of the young Imperial Princess’ purple dresses. The Princess screeched like she was burnt to the third degree.

“You idiot! How dare you stain my dress!”

“I...I am so sorry...” stuttered the Concubine, sounding terrified.

“Sorry? You’re sorry? Look at what you’ve done, you idiot!” The Princess kept yelling furiously.

The Fifth Prince Lephys glanced over briefly, frowning.

“It’s fine, Kiuna. It is just a wine stain. She’ll wash it later.”

“It’s not fine! I don’t want your stupid Concubine to stain my dress! Whip her! She should be punished!”

Everyone had gone silent, conflicted about the situation. It was just a stain... albeit a large one. However, who could say no to an Imperial Princess? The other Concubines were looking down or elsewhere, obviously scared to get involved.

Meanwhile, the young Princess kept screaming, her tantrum growing louder and louder until it caught the Emperor’s attention, who simply frowned.

“Kiuna, enough,” said her brother, visibly starting to get annoyed.

“I want that idiot Concubine whipped! She’ll get whipped a hundred times! No, a thousand times!”

“It is not the same.”

Cassandra’s calm voice from across the room took everyone by surprise. As they looked at her, the War God’s Concubine was strangely calm and unafraid to answer back. The Princess glared at her.

“What did you say?”

“If you whip someone ten times, the skin will be red and sting. If you whip her a hundred times, you’ll cut into the flesh, and she will bleed. But if you whip her a thousand times, you’ll open the wounds to the bone. There will be no more skin, only exposed, cut flesh, and lots of blood. No one survives after being whipped about five or six hundred times.”

Her sudden reality check had everyone silent for a few seconds. Cassandra’s cold but serious voice was very different from that of Princess Kiuna’s tantrum. She

had no idea how to react. With Cassandra’s words, it was clear Kiuna had been speaking mindlessly, saying numbers out of anger. The crude depiction of the wound

took her back to reality where she was merely toying with someone's life over a wine stain.

It was even more striking that Cassandra knew what she was talking about. She was staring right at Princess Kiuna, unafraid and cold as ice.

"You... You..." said the Princess, out of words.

But who would dare to respond to a woman who was in the War God's shadow? Kiuna was unsure, and all around her, the room's atmosphere had changed. She looked stupid and childish.

"Enough, enough. Sit back, child, and shut up," said the Emperor, frowning. "Aren't you too old to act like this in front of your siblings? Huh? Don't ruin our dinner."

Princess Kiuna sat, looking down, visibly angry and upset. She didn't dare to glare at Cassandra anymore. Kairen hadn't said a word, but the murderous look in his eyes was enough of a warning.

"You. Child. Come here," suddenly said the Emperor.

Cassandra was surprised. Was he calling for her? To come to him, now? But he had barely looked at her before. She hesitated, but Kairen gently helped her up. The young Concubine took a deep breath, and walked to the Golden Throne, hesitant. Behind him, she could clearly see the two ruby eyes, looking at her in the sea of gold scales.

Cassandra barely dared to look at the Emperor as she approached. To her, he was a much scarier being than the humongous golden Dragon behind him. Yet, the old man gently held his hand out until the Concubine placed her hand in his, with a light smile. She could tell there wasn't any animosity in his dark eyes.

"There she is," he said softly. "Aren't you as white as a water lily?"

"So disgusting," whispered someone from behind her, but the Emperor didn't seem to hear it.

"What is your name?"

"Cassandra, Your Majesty."

"And where are you from, child?"

"The Southern Rain Tribe, Your Highness."

“I see. That explains a lot then.”

Explains a lot? Cassandra was a bit confused. Next to the Emperor, a servant stepped forward, showing them some letters. What is that? The Emperor didn't look at it, and turned to Cassandra instead.

“I received some very interesting letters earlier today, children. From General Horogan from the East Army.”

Wasn't that one of Kairen's Generals? Cassandra had never greeted him in person, but she could remember the imposing man wearing armor with a beard. He had spoken with her Prince several times. Did he complain to the Emperor about a woman being at the camp? Or was there some issue due to the Prince's absence?

“I was curious to hear about how my Son's been doing as Commander-in-Chief,” said the Emperor. “Yet all I read were praises for the young woman he had brought with him. According to two of my most trusted Generals, along with seven of their Commanders, this Empire owes the lives of no less than two hundred of its soldiers to a young slave woman.”

Cassandra was speechless. The Generals had written to the Emperor about her? She hadn't possibly seen that many men in the Red Room, back at the Camp! Maybe two hundred, but six hundred lives! Did they exaggerate on purpose? Or had something happened while she was gone? The Emperor went on.

“According to them, the Lady of the Mountain has been more efficient in healing and teaching her knowledge to their men than any of the useless, stubborn, and whiny military doctors that had been appointed. The injuries and disease reports have been reduced by nearly half. This is due to the men now being able to take care of themselves. Apparently, they insist on...thoroughly washing their hands, several times a day.”

She couldn't help but blush and look down after hearing this. She hadn't been to the Camp in weeks! How could she have known her little stay had allowed so many things to happen back there.

The Emperor smirked.

“It goes on for several pages, with some military matters that would bore most people. The Generals are sending their thanks to my Third Son, for his exceptionally wise taste in women.”

He nodded in Kairen's direction, but everyone knew who was really receiving the praise here. Cassandra was in an inner turmoil. She hadn't expected to be singled out by the Emperor in front of the Imperial Family! When the old man turned to her again, she was still too shaken to react.

"After reading so much, this old Emperor couldn't sit still! Who knew so much knowledge could hide in such a young woman? You make this old man very happy, child."

Cassandra had no idea how she was expected to answer, or if she was supposed to answer at all. She wished Kairen was by her side, but the Prince was sitting still in his golden chair, a few steps away. She was standing by herself in front of the Empire's most powerful man.

"As an Emperor, I have to be grateful to the ones who make this Empire prosperous, and its people safe. Your knowledge has been helpful to our valued soldiers. I do hope you will lend us more of it from now on. I had thought of a way to thank you, but it seems my son took a step ahead with your...situation."

Cassandra frowned a bit. He meant her status as a slave, staring at the place where her collar stood just hours prior. The Emperor nodded, looking satisfied.

"Fine, fine. I can just go with my own idea, then. From today on, Cassandra, you will be a Noble Lady and an Imperial Physician."

"Father!" yelled Princess Phetra, her tone sounding more than furious. "You can't give a noble title to a damn slave!"

"Take a good look, Sister, this woman is no longer a slave. Sit and shut up," said an older Princess.

"Still! They can't rise from rags to rubies in a day! She's a slave and a Southerner! What do we look like if just anyone can achieve that!"

"Not anyone, Phetra," said the First Prince. "Lady Cassandra is a skilled doctor, our father's most trusted General attested to that. Can you claim to have any skills as admirable as one that can save lives?"

With her older brother's glare, Princess Phetra was defeated. One could tell her anger hadn't subsided one bit. She sat back loudly, glaring Cassandra's way, clenching her fists. The young Concubine was too shocked herself to react.

A Noble Lady? Imperial Physician? It was all too much for her! Just like Princess Phetra said, it was unbelievable. All of this was happening to her in just one day! Yet, the Emperor was nodding, satisfied.

“It is good, very good. I’m counting on you to meet with my own Imperial Physicians later. You are welcome to study from our Imperial Library, and I bet those old doctors have a few things to learn from you as well!”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Th... Thank you,” mumbled Cassandra.

“Good, good! And take good care of yourself, too! I want to see this precious Grandson of mine as soon as possible! Now you can go and enjoy the feast, young Lady.”

Understanding this meant their conversation was over, Cassandra hurried back to Kairen’s side. As they reunited, her Prince didn’t say a thing, he only invited her to gently sit on his knee. Cassandra, feeling a bit embarrassed, refused him, and took back her place in-between his legs. No woman was allowed on any of the Prince’s seats. She had already drawn too much attention to herself tonight.

Most of the Imperial Family had their eyes on her for the rest of the evening, including some murderous glares. Cassandra didn’t feel as scared as she could have, though. Kairen’s warm hand was on her at all times, caressing her arm, shoulder, back, or neck. He was making her confident with his presence right behind her. It was easier to ignore them if she wasn’t scared.

As the couple silently ate, watching the performers, Cassandra realized she would now be wearing a pink dress as a high-ranking Concubine. The Emperor’s words had made it clear her status had changed again. Did this mean she would be safer or in more trouble? It was hard to predict. As soon as they could, Kairen and Cassandra went back to their room, leaving the Imperial Feast without looking back. Even after returning to the Prince’s apartments, Cassandra didn’t feel calm or safe at all. She slowly took off her jewelry, frowning a bit.

“Did you ask your father for all this? Or your men?” she asked Kairen, who was waiting for her on the bed.

“No.”

So the General really had sent this letter on his own accord. Cassandra couldn’t help but wonder if anything had happened back at the Military Camp. It was all going too fast for her.

She sighed a bit, taking off the last piece of her jewelry, and walked to her Prince, who put his arms around her. His fingers gently caressed her skin, making sure to undo her dress in the process.

“Are you tired?” he whispered.

“Just a bit. I didn’t expect His Majesty to...”

Cassandra interrupted her sentence, frowning. She was staring down, behind Kairen’s back. Something was moving under the bedsheets.

“Cassandra?”

“Don’t move.”

She slowly took the sword at his side, taking it out in silence. The Prince frowned and was about to turn around when Cassandra screamed.

“Kairen, no!”

Just as he moved, Cassandra aimed the blade down, piercing the mattress. A stain of red appeared on the sheets, a few inches away from his hand. She pulled the sheets back, revealing the snake, pinned down by the blade. The Prince took the sword from her hands, glaring furiously at the snake. Cassandra was about to grab the snake, but he got to it first.

“It’s not a venomous one,” she sighed in relief. “I couldn’t tell under the sheet.”

To her surprise, Kairen suddenly pulled her in for a kiss. She blushed, pushing him away.

“It is not the time to...!”

“You called me by my name.”

Cassandra blushed even more. Yes, she did, without thinking. In the panic of the moment, she had called his name, the one she had in her mind for days.

“We... Someone put a snake in our bed, and...”

“Cassandra.”

She turned to him, unable to look him in the eyes. Kairen was smiling, one of his signature minimalistic smiles. He kissed her again, but Cassandra took the dead reptile from his hand and eluded him, too embarrassed to focus.

“It’s a Crecca snake...” she whispered. “They are not venomous, but the bite can be painful...and...”

“And what?” asked Kairen.

“It can be dangerous for children or pregnant women.”

The War God’s eyes darkened as he glanced at the dead snake. This thing... Cassandra didn’t seem worried, now that it was dead in her hand.

“These types of snakes do not live in this area. It must have cost a fortune to bring it here. I don’t think the person who did this knows anything about snakes. You can find lethal ones or less dangerous ones in the Capital. They are cheaper, too.”

“They wanted to hurt you,” growled Kairen.

“I think they meant to scare me. Not a lot of people knew about my pregnancy until tonight. Those who did couldn’t have bought the snake so fast. Maybe they already had the snake, but it’s a peculiar species, so...”

“It doesn’t matter. They’ll pay.”

To his surprise, Cassandra nodded and turned to him.

“If we find out who did this... Can we do something about it? Even if it’s one of your siblings?”

“You think I’d let it go?”

“If it’s the Imperial Family?”

Kairen shook his head and grabbed her hand.

“Cassandra.”

She stared into his black eyes for a while, and after a few seconds, she understood. She came first. Their unborn child came first. Whoever did this... He wouldn’t let it go. He was the War God, after all. Not someone who’d stay still after such a vicious threat.

Cassandra nodded.

“I can find out who did this.”

She turned around, and carefully put the dead snake into a basket. She washed her hands thoroughly in the little basin. Behind her, Kairen pulled the dirty bedsheets away and laid his fur cloak on the mattress. They didn’t need a blanket to sleep anyway, the Capital’s humid air was hot enough. Cassandra walked back to him, putting her arms around his neck. Kairen held her close, pulling them both on the bed.

“Are you not afraid?” he asked in a whisper.

“I’m scared for our baby. I just hope he can be born safely. So many people hate me, but here, it’s a matter of life and death every single time.”

She sighed silently, and before she could add anything else or worry more, Kairen pulled her in for a kiss. Their lips intertwined, and their tongues touched, looking for each other’s warmth. Cassandra felt her heartbeat fasten, and climbed on his lap, closer. She was now the one pulling him with her hands, caressing his shoulders and naked torso. Her warmth was rising slowly.

The Prince pulled her dress down to her hips, exposing her bare chest. He began caressing her with his large hands. Yet, a strange desire was rising in Cassandra. Hesitantly, she pushed him down. Kairen didn’t resist at all. Instead, he laid beneath her, letting her ride him with a faint smile. For once, Cassandra was being willful and bold, and he didn’t hate it at all.

She was breathing harder and louder, undulating her hips, a pearl of sweat running down her body. Cassandra’s every breath was so enticing, and those which turned into moans were even worse. The War God couldn’t take his eyes off his concubine. With her on top of him, riding him, he wouldn’t miss a second of this delightful scene. She was the one guiding him, imposing her rhythm, and it was good, so good, for both of them.

Laying down under her, holding her hips. Kairen was mesmerized by the balancing movement of her hair, the sparkles in her emerald eyes, and her skin, shyly going from white to an adorably excited pink. He could spend hours like this. Unfortunately, his concubine couldn’t. Cassandra kept moaning louder, feeling him between her legs and the pleasure that was rising inside like a raging fire.

“My…Lord, I…”

“My name, Cassandra. Call my name.”

“Kairen...Kairen...”

She kept repeating it, like a spell. Her eyes closed, she was biting her lips and focusing on their connected bodies. Kairen caressed her little breasts, the pink extremities, making her shiver. She liked it. Cassandra would close her eyes when she couldn't face his dark eyes anymore, and her cheeks were redder than ever. She was close to the edge.

The Prince finally started acting up, moving his hips under her, little assaults that took her by surprise, as Cassandra had to hold on to his shoulders. He wouldn't give her any rest, though. He kept swinging, making her cry in pleasure above him, only slowing down when she truly begged him to, until both of them were tired, pleased, and relieved.

The concubine slowly fell to his side, exhausted. She was still sweating a bit from all that exercise and trying to catch her breath.

Kairen was satisfied too. A warm feeling in his chest, he turned to her, making sure she was okay. He caressed her arm and back gently until Cassandra fell asleep, won over by the exhaustion. Then, he sat up and used the towels in the room to wipe her up a little, and covered her with a thin silk sheet. Only then did he come back to lay next to her, putting an arm around his concubine.

They had come a long way from the time he first met her. His Concubine hadn't revealed any of her secrets back then, her knowledge in medicine, or her admirable willpower. She was just a common woman, among many others, and she had never tried to step above the others or put herself first. She remained pure throughout, the exact same girl that had stood at his feet. Kairen glanced at the basket, where the dead snake was. He wouldn't forgive whoever it was. Not when they had tried to harm her... and their baby. His eyes glanced over her little tummy. How much longer? As long as they are both safe. He'd rather take Cassandra out of this wretched place, but for now, he didn't have much choice. Too many things were happening at once, and with all of his family gathered... Events could unfold drastically at any time now. He hated the idea, though. Their allies within the walls were very few. He didn't trust any of them fully, except maybe his mother.

The next morning, they both got ready in silence. Someone had already delivered a new set of magnificent pink dresses for Cassandra. She picked a pale pink one that complimented her complexion perfectly. Her Prince was also very satisfied while helping her get dressed up. He caressed her hair and the fine gauze of her dress'

layers. She could tell he really liked it on her and picked a matching set of pink diamond jewelry. Their time together didn't last long, though. Kairen was soon called to the Emperor's early military council, while Cassandra was invited to Imperial Concubine Kareen's quarters for breakfast. They parted early, but he made sure Cassandra wouldn't be alone. Hence, the young concubine walked through the gardens, along with a very voluntary Krai, the huge dragon happily toddling right next to her.

It was still early in the morning and the temperature was right to Cassandra's taste, along with a little breeze. She took her time, knowing the Imperial Concubine hadn't set an exact time. Cassandra had never really taken time to visit the Imperial Gardens by herself, but despite their beauty, they weren't as wild and free as the ones in the Diamond Palace. She definitely couldn't come to like this Imperial Palace. Something about it always felt wrong to her. Too big, too wide, too luxurious, and...too dangerous.

"Don't make yourself too comfortable."

Behind a pillar, followed by half a dozen servants, Princess Phetra was there, along with her younger half-sibling, Princess Kiuna. Both had very different stances. While Phetra was standing tall and crossing her arms in a proud stance, Kiuna, on the contrary, was looking down and fidgeting with her hands as if she

was embarrassed and didn't want to be there, avoiding Cassandra's eyes and her sister's.

The young Concubine took a deep breath and bowed slightly to them. Phetra had been infuriated by her new status and it was still obvious in the way she glared at Cassandra's brand new pale pink dress.

"Good morning, Your Highnesses."

"Where are you off to?" asked the Princess in that imperial tone of hers.

"I was invited to have breakfast with Imperial Concubine Kareen."

"Of course... "

Phetra's words had some deep meaning, but Cassandra couldn't grasp it all. She just knew she didn't want to stay near that woman. Though they obviously didn't like her, the other Princesses didn't look at her in such a murderous, hateful way. Cassandra

had felt it early on. Just like the Second Prince hated Kairen to the core, she could tell Phetra was just as dangerous.

Phetra stared at her for a while, from head to toe, with disgust.

“I miss the time when slaves couldn’t even step inside the Palace...near us.”

Cassandra felt anger rise in her heart. Slaves could only enter the Palace to be massacred in their slaughter games...or if someone from the Imperial Family took them in, just like Kairen had done for her. The young concubine wasn’t upset because Phetra was disgusted by her presence, but because of the Princess’ obvious revulsion for slaves.

But Cassandra couldn’t say anything. Krai was slowly growling behind her, but the dragon probably wouldn’t injure a member of the Imperial Family, unless they really tried to harm Cassandra in some way.

“If you’ll excuse me, Your Highnesses, I need to get going.”

Without waiting for their permission, Cassandra turned her heels and started walking away, trying to repress all of her feelings against that woman. Krai was following from up close, but the dragon’s red eyes never left the princesses.

“You were right, you know.”

Cassandra stopped, turning to her. What did she possibly mean by that? What was she right about? As she was trying to find the answer, Phetra’s icy smirk chilled her to the bone. The Princess was obviously enjoying this, and maybe for the first time in a long while, Cassandra felt truly scared.

“Five hundred and six.”

Cassandra was lost. What was she... But after a few seconds, the young concubine understood and all the blood left her face. Princess Kiuna was looking down, with something like shame painted all over her face. But Phetra was thrilled.

“She died after the five hundred and sixth.”

Cassandra felt so sick and disgusted, she thought she was going to collapse. That woman was so... wretched! She had...really...

“You know, it was almost exciting. Waiting to see when she would finally die. I took a normal whip, of course, and counted. Each. One. My. Self.”

She had said those last words so slowly like she was savoring them. For Cassandra, it was too much. She stepped back, turned, and walked away as fast as she could.

Phetra was evil. Pure evil. How...how could one be so inhumane as to... do that to another human being? And enjoy it? And take the time to count... She almost ran to the Imperial Concubine's quarters, much to Krai's concern. The Dragon was staring at her, curious about her behavior, trying to get her attention with soft growls, but the young concubine wouldn't stop. She kept going, trembling, trying to get there faster. No, the truth was, what she truly wanted was to get away from Phetra.

When she arrived there, trembling and almost out of breath, the Imperial Concubine got up, frowning.

"You little... Why are you running? What is it, child? What would cause you to put my grandchild's safety in danger like this?"

Cassandra tried to catch her breath, shaking her head. She walked up to her, almost falling on her knees at the Imperial Concubine's side. Kareen frowned and caressed her hair, unhappy.

"Tell me, Cassandra."

They were not bonded by blood, but at that very moment, and for the following hour, Kareen acted like a mother to Cassandra. As the young concubine was silently weeping, she caressed her hair gently, waiting for her to calm down.

She couldn't speak for a long while. Her throat felt hoarse. Cassandra had heard too much in those few sentences. Phetra had cruelly reminded her how terrible it could be. That woman had a similar status to hers, that of a concubine, yet Phetra had gotten rid of her so easily. This was the power of an Imperial Princess.

"How did you do it?" she whispered. "How did you survive among them?"

"You mean among those privileged brats and hungry bitches? A lot of willpower and trusting no one but my own blood. Remember my words, Cassandra. No one gets to such a position with clean hands. Even myself."

"I...I know but..."

"Cassandra, look at me. Now."

Her order was clear. The young concubine had no choice but to look up, with tears in her eyes. Kareen's stare was fiercer than ever. She took Cassandra's face between her long fingers.

"Listen to this old woman, pretty flower. I grew up among merchants. Before I was ten, I knew how to lie, bargain, and steal. How to exploit the weak and be on the stronger end of the deal. My mentor took me inside this place when I was twelve. Not because he wanted to teach me, but because he was a snake, a snake who wanted to take advantage of a child that was smarter than he was. I was even smarter than he thought and made sure the Emperor knew, too. I did not expect that stubborn old man would take a liking to me, but I knew how wretched all of his women were."

"I would have been terrified...if he had other women than me. Even just one."

Cassandra shivered. In a way, she had been lucky to be picked by Kairen. When she was still a slave, she had seen how such jealousy could tear families apart, burn houses, and leave women homeless in the streets, even with their children.

The minister she had served had kicked away two of his women to please the newer one, and Cassandra remembered all of the children Kareen had lost.

"Imagine walking in a room full of hungry tigers," whispered Kareen. "Only one master is holding all of their leashes, so you can't help but get a few scratches getting to him."

"You lost children," said Cassandra. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost this baby."

At that moment, the Imperial Concubine's smile got even scarier than Phetra's earlier.

"When that happens, you become something much more dangerous than those tigers, Cassandra. Trust me. You become a two-headed monster that won't ever return to its original self again. I don't forget and I don't forgive. All his women know that. It's exactly why they all fear me more."

"I don't want to become like you."

The woman chuckled, caressing her cheek.

"I know, pretty flower, and I won't let you. I promise. You have this old woman and her son to look after you. I want to see this child's birth, Cassandra. If I have one thing to do before I leave this world, it is to see the face of my grandchildren."

Cassandra slowly nodded.

She had stayed with Kareen only for a few weeks, but she admired that woman greatly, and trusted her. Like Kairen had said, she was probably their greatest and strongest ally in this Palace. Cassandra felt lucky she had come here with them. Despite Phetra's threats or all the jealous concubines, she knew there was at least someone willing to protect her.

Cassandra was not a fighter. She was among those women who had been born with a frail body, but had grown very wise.

"Wipe your tears, Cassandra. Don't show them your weakness, ever. If they think you're weak, they'll enjoy your suffering twice as much. Don't give them that."

"Princess Phetra is..."

"An obnoxious little swine. Just like her brother. They hate me and my children to the core."

"W...why?"

"Their mother made the mistake of trying to defy me. She shouldn't have."

Cassandra frowned. So this was all about some...revenge? Was that Phetra's case as well? What had happened to their mother? Despite her curiosity, Cassandra knew Kareen enough by now to know that she wouldn't say anything else.

"Well, let's have breakfast now, shall we? I won't let my grandson starve, and his mother is still too thin. Servants!"

Immediately, a horde of Imperial Servants hurried in, bringing endless gold trays of food. It was time for her to dry her tears indeed. The two women ate silently, but Cassandra knew things wouldn't settle like this. She told Kareen about the snake after they finished their meal, but to her surprise, the Imperial Concubine didn't seem worried or surprised in the slightest. She elegantly wiped her lips, nodding as if she had already known about it.

"It wasn't a poisonous one?"

"No, I am sure. Unless they knew I was pregnant and had prepared ahead, but..."

"They're just playing around then."

“Playing?” repeated Cassandra, shocked.

Kareen stood up, walking further inside her apartments to get changed. Cassandra had seen her shamelessly change her clothes in open spaces in the Diamond Palace before, it was nothing surprising. As she had learned over time, the Imperial Family members shared loose morals, especially over nudity. Moreover, only women were allowed in here. Three servants helped her change into a dark pink dress, with purple and golden embroidery in it. Cassandra wondered if this was a gift from the Emperor.

“If they wanted to kill you, they wouldn’t have sent such a petty threat. Not into the War God’s room. My son won’t die of something so insignificant. His Dragon blood wouldn’t even have felt the difference. That thing was directed at you, most likely.”

“Me? Why would someone want to scare me?”

“You’re the new one and the only concubine of the Third Prince. All the concubines around here like to play like children. They fool around like this all the time, testing each other, seeing who’s the stronger woman. But you’re not a child anymore. You’re a mother.”

Kareen turned to her, crossing her arms, while the servants were struggling to do her hair.

“It’s time you show those women you are not to be toyed around with. Not because you’re protected by Kairen, but on your own.”

Cassandra shook her head.

“I doubt I’m strong enough to scare them.”

“You don’t have to be strong, you have to be smart. And we both know how smart you really are, Cassandra. A woman with your past and knowledge is the one they should be most scared of.”

She didn’t even have anything to reply to that. She took one step back, shaking her head. How? How could she prove to these women they shouldn’t mess with her? Her whole life, Cassandra had struggled to stay out of sight, unnoticed, but things were different now. She had no more room to hide and all eyes were on her.

Cassandra knew Kareen had simply voiced the truth, but it terrified her. Not all of those women were like Phetra, but some still were.

Later that same day, Cassandra left Kareen's apartments, holding a basket in her hands. She knew where to go, but she only lacked a bit of courage. It was still early, and she only crossed a few servants on her way out. She was relieved not to meet anyone from the Imperial Family.

She walked all the way to the outer gardens. It was the same place that she had seen her former and last owner face a brutal death: the Gardens. The Concubines' favorite resting place. It was rumored to be the most beautiful place in the Palace, but Cassandra couldn't care for it.

Most of the Concubines were gathered there for their breakfast; those who weren't accompanying their masters, anyway. They giggled and exchanged sweets

and pleasantries, seemingly getting along with each other. Cassandra didn't believe any of those interactions were real.

As soon as she entered the Gardens, all the women stopped talking, their eyes on her. Some were showing curiosity, others were defiant or hateful. Cassandra did her best not to betray her emotions and walk to the middle of the place with her basket.

"Did you get lost?" asked one of the concubines with a naughty tone.

"Shall we bow to her?"

"I'd rather drown in the lake than ever bow to a slave!"

Cassandra took a deep breath and put the basket down. Some of the concubines who had remained silent, frowned. What was she planning?

"You... Why are your hands this color?"

One of the young concubines was pointing at Cassandra's blue fingertips and nails. Turning to the young woman, she showed it better, raising her hands to show them.

"This? I got a little infection. A wild snake ventured into my room last night."

Most concubines knew this snake was probably not simply wandering on its own in her bedroom, but of course, they all remained silent. They either thought she was too stupid to realize, or too smart to say it out loud.

"Luckily, His Highness caught it," said Cassandra. "But...this type of snake's skin can be extremely dangerous when it's an impregnated female. The scales contain

some of its venom, only in smaller portions. Just touching it can provoke someone's death within a few days."

One of the concubines giggled.

"Are you going to die? With those blue fingers?"

"This? Oh, no. Luckily, since we caught the snake, I managed to make an antidote in time. It made my fingertips blue from crushing the scales to make a broth with some medical herbs. I was lucky, though. While it will kill instantly with a bite, if you touch its skin, most victims would die in their sleep within a few days. The poison spreads slowly through the finger's crevasses, making them more and more tired until they won't wake up."

"This is ridiculous! I've never heard of such a way of dying!" said one of the other women.

"I'm not surprised, this is a rare snake," said Cassandra. "Back where I come from, we call it the sleep thief. Because the victim will feel more and more sleepy until they can't stop sleeping and slowly die in their sleep."

The women started gossiping between themselves, wondering if it was true. Cassandra took the basket back and slowly walked over to one side, washing away her hands in the little river that crossed the garden. She did her best to ignore all the eyes on her. It was a bet, but she knew she could find the culprit this way if everything went according to her plan. She wasn't proud of it, but she knew she had to be a bit like Kareen. Unforgiving.