

The War God's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 51

The Ivy Garden

Cassandra walked a few more steps, wondering where to go. She was angry and had no other way to protest than to leave the Imperial Banquet, which upset her. For once, Cassandra felt she was truly too powerless, unable to stop Phetra or oppose the Imperial Princess. This place was really too harsh.

“Imperial Concubine?”

She turned around, realizing someone had followed her. It only took her a couple of seconds to remember that young woman. Weeks and weeks ago, she was the young servant that had given her first red dress.

“You’re... Dahlia, right?”

The young woman smiled.

“I’m glad you remember me, your Highness.”

“Please don’t... Just call me Cassandra, please.”

Dahlia chuckled. She hadn’t changed much since Cassandra had seen her. She was still wearing a long green dress, with her dark hair in a braided bun. Bowing slightly, she walked up a bit closer to her.

“Are you okay?”

“I... I needed some fresh air,” said Cassandra.

It was partially the truth. She felt stuffed, confined in this room with so many people. Only because her prince was there could she bear it. Dahlia seemed to understand and nodded slightly.

“Do you want to rest in the Ivy Garden?”

“The Ivy Garden?”

“It’s a smaller one, not many people use it,” explained Dahlia with a smile, but it’s really pretty at night.”

Cassandra nodded and followed her. Dahlia seemed to know her way around the Palace perfectly, even if the sun was slowly setting outside, putting them in the dark before long. After a few minutes, they finally arrived.

As she had said, it was a much smaller one than the fancy garden the concubines usually went in, but Cassandra instantly loved it. It only had one bench and a little pond with white fishes. The walls around it were covered in ivy and little white flowers she had never seen before. The place seemed incredibly pure and pretty.

While Cassandra walked around, Dahlia lit up a few lanterns, bringing some more light in this space.

The concubine was still observing the place when a long growl was heard. Krai's head popped from behind one of the walls, his big red eyes finding her immediately.

"Come," called Cassandra.

He only needed one word. Stepping over the wall, Krai hurried to her side, circling her with his body, his head resting next to her. Of course, it was his perfect position for being scratched, and he growled until Cassandra sat and started taking care of him.

Dahlia's mouth was open in awe and she didn't dare to step closer. The concubine was sitting right next to the Dragon, totally fine, and scratching him as if he was some one-ton dog! Though she was a brave girl, and the Dragon seemed harmless this way, Dahlia sat a few meters away, close to the pond, fascinated by the scene.

"Thank you for bringing me here," said Cassandra after a few minutes. "I needed to relax a bit."

"It's my pleasure, Lady Cassandra. Is it really fine not telling anyone where you are, though? I thought you would have a few servants with you..."

Cassandra shook her head.

"It's fine."

As long as Krai was with her, his master would know and be at ease. That was all Cassandra needed. Kairen had let her leave, but he probably had to stay behind to discuss official matters with his father. As inexperienced as she was in politics, she understood that much. Moreover, she appreciated spending time alone with another woman her age. She

missed Nebora a bit, and maybe because of their similar black hair, Dahlia reminded Cassandra of her friend somehow.

“How long have you been working here?” Asked Cassandra.

“My whole life or so, I think... One of the Palace’s cooks found me on his doorstep and adopted me when I was just a baby. So, I became a servant as soon as I was old enough to be.”

Cassandra nodded. Dahlia was among the lucky ones. Most orphans were captured and made slaves... No wonder she knew the palace so well, despite its size.

“Lady Cassandra, did you go to the Onyx Castle?” Suddenly asked Dahlia, blushing slightly, but curious.

Cassandra smiled, and just like that, both women started talking. On one side, Dahlia was loving stories from outside the Palace, while on the contrary, Cassandra was avid to know any detail of this place Dahlia could tell her.

Having grown there, Dahlia had seen many, many concubines. That’s why she had felt Cassandra was different from the start. She didn’t have that mighty attitude of a noble’s daughter, or felt entitled in any way; she even spoke to her like an equal.

“Do you want to explore the world, Dahlia?”

The young woman seemed to hesitate for a while, blushing slightly.

“Yes, but... there is also someone I want to stay close to, here. So... as long as that person is here, I don’t think I’ll be able to leave.”

“...A lover?” Asked Cassandra, judging from her reaction.

Dahlia sighed.

“I wish, but... I doubt they even know I exist, so...”

Cassandra felt a bit sorry for Dahlia. She seemed like such a gentle woman, but to fall in love in the Palace was... a sad twist of fate. With so many pretty concubines everywhere, it was probably hard to be noticed by anyone around here.

Cassandra knew how lucky she was that Kairen didn’t actually care about such things. If it wasn’t for Krai, she would have been nothing but dust

by now... Thinking about this, she kept caressing the sleek scales for a while, chatting with Dahlia, actually feeling calmer than she had been in a while.

Much later in the night, the young woman was called back to work, and Cassandra was left alone in the garden. She didn't feel like going back, unsure the banquet would be over by then, and decided to stay a bit longer.

The quiet garden was actually nice. At night, the temperature was much better for Cassandra to endure, with a fresh wind and the warm dragon scales on her back. She rested, watching the stars, until she heard someone step closer.

The Prince slowly walked to her side, putting one knee down.

"So that's where you were..."

Cassandra smiled.

"His Highness, your Father, didn't..."

"He was unhappy you left."

The Concubine felt a bit happy about that. It meant he approved of her action, in a way. If he had been against her leaving, she couldn't even have taken one step out of the Banquet Hall. If the Emperor was unhappy, it probably wasn't directed at her, but at the one who had caused her to leave.

Cassandra felt a weight lifted off her shoulder. She wasn't used to being so bold, and every action made her insecure. She could still be killed at any moment, even if she was now wearing a pink dress... Kairen's presence helped her forget about her worries too.

"I like this garden," she said softly

"You want to stay here?"

Since Cassandra hesitated for a while, he decided to sit next to her, letting her lay on his chest. Surrounded by the Black Dragon, they knew no one would dare to bother them. Resting her head on his shoulder, Cassandra kept staring at the stars, feeling his warm hand caressing her.

“My mom used to tell me about the stars every night. She’d teach me how to read them, their names and their past...”

“Their past?”

Cassandra slightly nodded.

“In the tribe I grew up in, we did not believe in Dragons and demi-Gods, but in the sacred nature... I was taught every life is sacred and equally precious. Plants, animals, humans, all equal and living together, each one with a purpose. And the elders said the stars are little reminders of each life that came and went. My mother said the brighter they were, the purest and shortest a life was.”

The Prince frowned a bit. It was so rare for her to talk about her life before meeting him... No wonder she wasn’t really afraid of Krai, and couldn’t stand another’s suffering.

“...Did they teach you about medicine?”

“Yes... My grandfather was the village chief and a good doctor. He knew every plant, every flower, every herb’s name, and their properties. He taught me everything. After that, I kept trying to learn what I could when I could access my master’s libraries or listen to the apothecary shop owners.”

Still, it was impressive. She was captured when she was very young, but had still managed to learn so much in such a short time and kept nurturing her talent by herself... Kairen felt like his woman was more precious than any treasure one could gather in this Palace. He caressed her hair, kissing her fingers gently.

“Your mother...” whispered Cassandra.

“What about her?”

“...Can you tell me what she did to the Second Prince’s mother?”

She heard him sigh.

“Their mother tried to poison me when I was young. She hated my mother and didn’t want her son to have another rival born from her... But my mother found out and tricked her into drinking it herself. She had a slow and painful death.”

Cassandra felt disgusted. How could one do such a thing to an infant...

Since Imperial Children were so resistant; drinking a poison meant for Kairen must have brought that Concubine to a terrible agony. No matter what,

Cassandra couldn't help but think it was a tragic death, even if she had brought it upon herself. Kareen wasn't cruel by nature, but she certainly had to stand up to protect her children.

In the same situation, Cassandra wondered if she would have had the guts to do the same thing and cause someone else's death... She put a hand on her tummy. Yes, maybe. Probably. She already loved her unborn child so much, she couldn't bear the thought of losing him. If she had gone through what Kareen went through, losing several children, she might have gone crazy with despair. She shivered and hugged Kairen closer, in need of his warmth.

"Are you cold?"

"Just hug me, please..."

He gently obeyed, surrounding her with his sturdy arms and hot skin. Behind them, Krai softly growled, curling up a bit more around them. They stayed like this a long while until Cassandra fell asleep, and the Prince decided it was getting a bit too cold for his expecting concubine to stay out.

He gently carried her back to their bedroom, only noticing she was awake when landing her on the bed.

No words were exchanged between them for a while. He helped her get rid of her jewelry and dress and laid next to her. Cassandra's emerald eyes were shining with the candlelight between them, as she kept staring at the War God, half-asleep.

"My Prince..." she whispered.

Her voice was so soft, he thought he had misheard it.

"My name," he said, getting closer to her, one arm around her.

"Kairen... I love you."

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The Proposal

The War God stayed stunned for a while, unable to say a word.

Cassandra chuckled, observing his baffled expression for the first time.

Did he really... not know? She got a bit closer and put a quick peck on his lips, despite her shyness. Her heart was filled with something warm and sweet, and that secure feeling whenever that man was close.

Kairen didn't stay frozen for long, though. The Prince's eyes got down to her lips and he threw her in for a much more intense, deep kiss.

Cassandra helplessly blushed, feeling his lips and tongue claiming her so fiercely. His caresses on her skin were still gentle, though. It had a slightly different taste to it...

When they separated, Cassandra couldn't help but smile, a bit out of breath.

"Aren't you going to answer me?" She whispered gently.

Kairen stayed silent for a while, scrutinizing her very seriously. After a while, he took a deep breath, looking stern.

"Marry me, Cassandra."

The young concubine was so taken by surprise and expecting anything but those words, it took her a few seconds to understand what he had just said. To marry him? Her? She was just... and already... Her thoughts got lost in a storm. After a few seconds, she laughed nervously.

"Did you just..."

The War God's expression was still as serious. Cassandra tried to sit up, but he held her wrist and kept her lying down.

"You don't want to?" He asked.

The young concubine sighed.

"...If you marry me, you won't be able to change your mind."

"I know."

"Even if you meet someone much prettier and younger later," she added.

"I know."

What was he thinking?

Cassandra wished she was inside his head right now, to understand how

the War God functioned. Certainly not like most men.

Becoming a high-ranked concubine after she had spent eight or nine years as a slave was already something, but becoming someone's wife? No normal man would have thought of such a thing. There was a huge gap between the concubines and the official wife. A gap so important, most of the concubines in this palace would have killed to hear that sentence. A man's official wife had an unshakable position. The Dragon Empire didn't recognize divorces, and even if one of the partners died, the other would never be able to replace him or her. While concubines could be abandoned or dismissed, an official wife had no worry about that. Hence, most men of power made sure to marry a woman from a strong background, with good looks and brains. Cassandra felt like she probably didn't check at least two of those boxes...

"Cassandra," he softly called her, taking her out of her thinking.

"You won't be able to take another concubine," she said. "I won't allow it."

That was one of the powers of the official wife. No more concubine could be brought by the husband without her consent. Hence, most men would rather not pick a wife, and have plenty of concubines instead, or made sure their spouse closed their eyes on their new women.

Cassandra already knew she wouldn't be able to do that. She was already too attached to him, emotionally and physically. She would rather die than share him with another woman.

woman.

"It's fine," replied the Prince,

"It's not fine... I won't be able to do much to help you. I'm not as smart as your mother, or as powerful as your sister..."

Cassandra was worried. If something happened, between him and his brothers, she would be powerless. She had no backing, nothing to help him. His brothers' wives probably had a lot of money, influence and scholars behind them. A merchant or a minister's daughter would have been a hundred times better than her to be his wife...

However, no matter how much thought she gave it, Cassandra knew that man too well. He wouldn't change his mind, not for a while. He was odd, and stubborn about what he wanted or not. Luckily for her, she was among the things he liked most...

She smiled, and leaned in closer to him, stealing another kiss. He never refused her kisses, and it wouldn't be the case for this one either. Gently brushing his fingers through her hair, he tasted her sweetness, rolling with her on the bed. His young concubine was obviously too tired tonight, as her eyes kept closing and her breathing slowed.

The War God was fine with that, she definitely deserved some rest, but... "You didn't answer me," he remarked as Cassandra was half-asleep on his torso.

She smiled.

"You do that often."

He frowned, wondering what she was talking about, but, before he could figure it out, she had fallen asleep for good. He sighed, pulling her hand to his lips to kiss her pale skin, and wrapped her in his embrace, closing his eyes too.

The next morning, Cassandra woke up to a horrid feeling. Something was smelling terribly bad. She struggled to sit up. It was so early, it was dawn outside and her Prince was still soundly sleeping next to her.

Yet, she couldn't stay in bed. She stood up, glancing at the tray of food someone had brought in during their sleep and stumbled to the washbasin. She was feeling goosebumps and kept gagging above the basin, her head spinning.

"Cassandra?"

Kairen had woken up the second she moved, but now that she really seemed unwell, he rushed to her side, worried. He had no idea what was going on until Cassandra loudly threw up.

"Cassandra, you're sick? Is it poison?"

"The... food..." She managed to stutter, pointing at the tray.

The Prince frowned, before understanding that her sickness was due to

her pregnancy, not some poisoning. He grabbed the tray and threw it outside the closest opening, the window, before running back to her. 6
“What do you need?” He asked while caressing her hair.

But Cassandra shook her head. She was just trying to breathe a bit better, but she felt too embarrassed to talk after vomiting. She had random morning nausea, but this was the first in his presence and the most embarrassing one. While Kareen knew about the unpleasant consequences of pregnancy, her son was clueless.

Since his concubine couldn't formulate any request, Kairen called for servants to walk in. Dahlia and another

young woman rushed in to help Cassandra,

“Lady Cassandra, would you like some water?” Whispered Dahlia.

“P...Please.”

Unhappy, Kairen stood to the side with his arms closed, watching the two servants help his concubine. He hated being unable to help, but this was a woman's matter. If Cassandra was uncomfortable with his help, he'd rather do nothing and let those servants help her.

After a few minutes, Cassandra was able to sit down and talk. The Prince by her side, rubbing her back, she listed out to Dahlia the ingredients and smell that usually triggered her nausea, or made it worse. The young servant nodded all along.

“I will make sure the kitchen knows, Lady Cassandra.”

As Dahlia stood up to leave, Kairen watched her and turned to Cassandra.

“You can make her your private servant,” he suggested.

To his surprise, Cassandra's eyes widened in surprise.

“Really?”

He had thought she would straight out refuse the idea, but on the contrary, she seemed to love it. He nodded.

“Are you better now?”

“Yes... I would even feel a bit hungry, to be honest. This baby is really moody...”

Kairen nodded and put a hand on the little bump. His son. That child

better be good to his mother once he'd be born...

After a while, Dahlia reappeared with a different tray, and some specific food Cassandra had requested. The only thing they could find was a variety of nuts that grew further south, which made the Prince frown. Cassandra, however, was satisfied with what Dahlia had gathered in such a short time. She cleaned herself up a bit, got changed and decided to eat in the closest open space, as she didn't want to stay in the room where she had just puked minutes ago.

The Prince followed her closely, to everyone's surprise. Imperial servants couldn't help but stare at the War God, who was accompanying his concubine like she was some precious treasure to be watched closely. As soon as they sat in the garden, Krai appeared over their heads and even bickered with his master to sit the closest possible to the Concubine. Watching this scene, with Cassandra chuckling between them, Dahlia couldn't help but feel like she was probably the luckiest Concubine around...

"Can we go search around the brothels today?" Suddenly asked Cassandra, turning to the Prince.

Kairen frowned.

"You're sick."

"I'm not sick, I'm pregnant... I will be fine. Dahlia can take care of my needs."

The young servant avidly nodded. Kairen glared at her, immediately having her look down in fear.

"No. I won't be able to accompany you."

He probably had more to do with the Emperor and his military advisors today again, but Cassandra was tired of doing nothing but get lost and sip tea with his mother. She took a deep breath, and insisted a bit longer.

"Please... I'll probably be safer there than here."

That part was right. With her pink dress and an Imperial servant following her, no one would dare to lift a finger at her. In the Palace, however, she could be attacked at any time. The Prince kept frowning,

though. He didn't like having her in a different place. It was fine when she was with his mother in the Diamond Palace, but...

"...Go with Shareen," he finally said.

Cassandra smiled wide, unable to hide her satisfaction. She could finally start looking seriously for her younger sister! Moreover, she would definitely be safe with an Imperial Princess. She kissed his scratchy cheek swiftly.

"Thank you," she whispered.

This simple kiss stopped him from frowning. He sighed, defeated, and kissed her back, meaning it was time for Dahlia to leave discreetly.

A couple of hours later, Dahlia was surprised to see the young concubine again, still accompanied by the Dragon. She had heard from other servants about how the beast was so attached to her, but seeing it like this was different.

Any move Cassandra made, Krai was watching, like a curious dog following his master. He struggled to follow her with his huge body, sometimes crawling over the buildings and growling at the servants that appeared out of nowhere. When Shareen arrived, though, he didn't dare say a thing at her.

"The red district? Really?" Asked the Princess.

"I am looking for my younger sister," explained Cassandra. "My best chance to find her is there..."

"I see. How well, that might be one fun outing," said Shareen. "And it gives me an excuse to avoid mother's nagging at my lifestyle..."

Shareen's way to have fun wasn't to her mother's taste. Hence, Kareen usually resorted to a silent protest by visiting her from dawn until dusk, unless the Princess was busy elsewhere. To Cassandra's surprise, Shareen was the most involved Princess' in the Empire's politics. She attended most of the meetings along with her brothers and didn't lose to any man in the room. She was well respected in most circles for being a smart and strong woman, who didn't need a man to back her up, not even her own father.

Like the other members of her family, she had a short temper, however.

Bringing her sword to meetings wasn't just for decorative purposes. As the women left the Palace, Cassandra felt like a big weight taken off her shoulders. She really couldn't relax in this place without the Prince around...

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The Red District

Though she had never been there personally, Cassandra had lived long enough in the Capital to know where the Red District was. She naturally headed there, with Shareen and Dahlia, and the black-scaled Dragon right behind. It was a truly strange procession the bystanders witnessed that day. A concubine in a pink Imperial Princess, only one servant with them and... an Imperial Dragon that struggled to fit inside the streets. Many displays fell victim to his wing or tail in his wake, despite the merchants' desperate attempts to push it out of the way. No one wanted to hinder their path, and the trio progressed easily among the streets.

The reputation of the Imperial Family preceded them. Any glance, gesture or sound could trigger a brutal and violent death, and no one wanted to leave any chance for that to happen. Shareen's purple outfit was like a ghost making everyone run away. Though she found it sad, Cassandra understood the people's fears and didn't comment on that. There were too many wilful princesses back at the Palace, she had witnessed it herself. People were bound to fear them.

As they progressed in the streets, Cassandra surprised to realize Shareen knew the way perfectly.

"Have you been to the Red District before, your Highness?"

"I already told you to just call me Shareen, didn't I? You're my brother's woman, you need to grow a backbone... And yes, I often go there."

Cassandra didn't mind her rude way of speaking. After living a bit with Shareen at her mother's palace, she had grown used to it. Shareen was extremely blunt and literally had no filter on any subject or to anyone,

except maybe for her mother.

“Really?” Said Cassandra. “I mean... I didn’t think members of the Imperial family would... venture in such a place...”

“Oh, some do. I like to go, for shopping.”

“For...”

Cassandra understood her sentence and desperately blushed. A question popped in her head, but she chased it away, as she could never gather the courage to ask. After all, she had witnessed herself how playful Shareen was...

Behind them, Dahlia was walking silently, glancing at the two women. Though she had volunteered to accompany Cassandra, she was about as shy as the concubine about going there. She silently kept glancing at the Imperial Princess, intimidated, but she also watched out for the Dragon following them. Like common people, Dahlia was naturally scared of it, and if she hadn’t seen it being so peaceful to Cassandra before, she probably would have been terrified about coming along...

“So, where do you want to start?” Asked the Princess as they reached the said District.

During the day, that area was relatively calm. Most people here worked at night, so the brothels were barely just opening their doors to let the caretakers, servants, and slaves do their chores. Cassandra glanced left and right, but she had no real clue.

“I guess we’ll just have to ask around...”

“Right. We better do it now before they start screaming and running away seeing your pet...”

“Oh.”

Cassandra had almost forgotten about the Dragon. Indeed, it would be a bit inconvenient to walk him around. She smiled and walked up to him, immediately getting all of its attention. Krai had been following, curious to where they were going, so when the young concubine turned to him, he barely contained his excitement, crushing two stalls with his tail.

Cassandra put her hands on its snout, scratching him.

“Can you wait for us here? Krai?”

She was never sure how much he'd understand of her words, but since the Mountain episode, she knew about how to make him lay down and wait. She kept patting his snout with both hands until he laid his whole body down, closing his eyes, ready for a little nap.

“Good boy,” she said with a smile. “Don't eat people!”

Whether he had understood that last part or not, Krai slightly opened his red eyes, watching her walk away with the two other women.

Dahlia was in shock. The young Concubine had the blood of a Goddess, to order around a Dragon like that and have him obey like he was her pet! The Dragon's owner didn't even need to be around! She had previously thought the Dragon was indulging her because the Prince was always around, but she had it all wrong! Now, by her will, the most dangerous beast on this Empire was taking a nice little nap in the middle of the street!

“Let's start with this one...” Said Shareen, heading to the closest building. “You know what to ask?”

Cassandra nodded, stepping ahead.

Needless to say, anyone who opened their door was completely struck by the sight of the two women. When wearing the Imperial Purple, the other a high-ranked concubine! A couple of them even wondered internally if this wasn't some sort of scam since the strange duo was only accompanied by one servant...

“I'm looking for my younger sister,” Cassandra repeated for the eighth time that day. “She should be sixteen years old now, she was captured nine years ago. She probably resembles me...”

Back when they were children, Missandra and Cassandra indeed looked a lot alike. They had the same brown hair, the same thin nose, and even the exact same emerald eyes. Even if her sister had matured, Cassandra hoped that their whiter skin would help people identify her.

“Sorry, your Highness,” said the woman. “I don't remember anyone that could match your description. You might want to ask next door, though, they usually purchase the girls when they're young, they're known for their training.”

Cassandra thanked her, but she was starting to feel a bit depressed. Someone should have been able to remember Missandra. Even if many girls came in and out of those establishments, not many should have been from a different origin. Compared to the goldish or brown tanned skins around, Missandra should have stood out.

“So boring...” said Shareen. “We can’t even see their girls at that hour.”

“We didn’t come here for shopping, remember?”

“Speak for yourself...”

“Do you buy your servants here? Instead of the usual market?” Asked Cassandra.

She had noticed how Shareen liked to be surrounded by beautiful things, and beautiful people. Most of her servants were gorgeous women and handsome young men. She didn’t seem to care much for their personalities though...

Once again, Cassandra repeated the same words to the old woman who directed the next Brothel. However, this one had an odd expression the whole time.

“Oh, that’s why you seemed familiar, my Lady! You’re Mie’s older sister? You look just like her!”

“Mie?”

“Yes, yes, Mie! How could I forget her? That child was a little spitfire! Always running around, yelling and stealing food, a little demon that one!”

Shareen sent a glance at Cassandra, doubtful.

“You sure that sounds like your sis?”

“She was always more energetic than me...” Whispered Cassandra before turning to the woman. “Is she here? Can I see her?”

“Oh, no, no, your Highness, she left years ago. We sold her to another brothel, one of our top ones couldn’t stand her... I think she went to... yes, yes, let me check my notebook, it should be written down somewhere...”

The old lady disappeared for a while, leaving those two. Cassandra’s heart was thumping loudly in her chest. Could this really be Missandra?

Did she finally find a lead, after all these years ?

She returned, giving them an address, another brothel a few streets away. As soon as they got there, though, Cassandra's heart broke. The place was closed.

"Crap... Do you think they will open soon ? Maybe we can just wait a bit ?" She sighed.

Next to her, Shareen rolled her eyes and took out her sword.

"Seriously, act like your rank, pretty face. You're an Imperial Concubine. You don't fucking wait!"

With those last words, Shareen brutally destroyed the entrance door, sending the panels of wood flying away. She had really gone full strength on those, making it even larger than it was supposed to be... Cassandra felt sorry for whoever would have to pay for the damages but still followed her inside.

A man came running, and while he was obviously about to yell, his mouth closed as soon as he spotted the two women, forming an odd grin.

"You... Your Highnesses, can this humble man ask what... what has caused your anger ?" He asked awkwardly, glancing at the large opening.

"You," said Shareen, visibly out of patience, pointing her sword at the man's chin. "Tell us if you bought a girl that looked like this concubine, years ago. She went by the name Mie."

The man only took a quick glance at Cassandra, very eager to answer.

"Y... yes, your Highness! I remember her, but she isn't here! We... We sold that girl three months later, we couldn't keep her! She had bit the customers and hit the owner..."

"Really ?" Said Shareen, turning to Cassandra with an amazing look.

"Damn, Cassie, it sounds like your sis took all the fiery side and didn't leave you any, did she ?"

"Where did she go next ?" Asked Cassandra, ignoring her.

"I... I think the Master sold her to another brothel, a few streets down... But I know that place ended up selling her too, five weeks later, the same thing happened."

Cassandra sighed. Missandra really didn't make things easy for them... Though she was a bit happy that her younger sister had resisted her fate, she hoped she hadn't run in more trouble by doing so.

For the next hour, the same schema repeated over and over again. Every time they asked a new brothel, it appeared Missandra had only stayed a few weeks to a few months, injured a customer or worker, and got sold again. Even Shareen was impressed. (2)

"I hope she didn't get too badly treated and punished for all of these..." said Cassandra as they were on their way to the next brothel.

"Oh, she probably was," replied the Princess. "However, the brothel owners are careful not to scar or permanently injure their merchandise. She probably got cold showers, or was starved, things like that. I'm starting to get very curious, though, she must be a real beauty if people kept buying her despite her reputation..."

Cassandra had the same feeling. Every brothel that Missandra had been to, no matter how short, clearly remembered her as soon as they saw Cassandra. How much more until they actually find her? As they were about to enter another one, next to her Shareen brutally stopped her eyes elsewhere.

"Shareen?"

"Wait, it's..."

The Imperial Princess was staring in another direction, towards two women who were chatting. Cassandra didn't know either of them, but one of them was obviously a prostitute, judging by her clothes, while the other was obviously much younger, fourteen or fifteen years old. The most intriguing thing was the green dress the second one was wearing... To her surprise, Shareen suddenly rushed to those women who hadn't seen her coming, grabbing the young girl's wrist. She screamed in surprise. When Cassandra arrived at the scene, the prostitute woman had fled the scene, but the girl caught by Shareen looked terrified. The Princess looked like a feline who had just caught her prey.

"I wonder what you're doing here, Valeria..."

Cassandra wondered if she was an Imperial servant for Shareen, but it didn't seem to be it. The girl was shivering from head to toe, holding on to a little packet in her hand. She was avoiding Shareen's eyes, completely terrified.

"Who is this...?" Asked Cassandra, lost.

"This? This is one of my younger siblings, Valeria, fifteenth Imperial Princess... Care to explain what the hell you're doing in this place, in this outfit, little sister?"

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The Unlucky Sisters

Like a rabbit caught in a trap, the young Valeria didn't dare to move a muscle. It was the first time Cassandra witnessed a member of the Imperial family being so scared. Was it because of Shareen? She couldn't be one of Kareen's children, so who was her concubine mother...? A girl her age and her rank definitely had nothing to do there, especially alone and in a servant's outfit. It looked like she had sneaked out of the Palace.

"Valeria, talk," insisted Shareen.

However, the young woman stayed completely mute and petrified by fear. Annoyed, Shareen ripped the little bottle off her hands and threw it at Cassandra.

"Aren't you good with plants and potions? What is that?"

The girl was on the verge of tears.

"Let me go..." She begged, trying to pull away from Shareen's tight grip. Cassandra reluctantly opened the bottle. She didn't like doing this, but if Shareen was asking... A little sniff made her frown, and feel so nauseous she almost dropped it. Dahlia immediately took it from her. Just like Cassandra, she sniffed it, and then, applied a bit on her pinky to get a little taste.

"Dahlia! What if it's poisoned," said Cassandra, worried.

“It is fine, my Lady. I have been trained for poisons. Moreover, this is no such thing. I can taste green orchid, pudding grass, nutmeg, sea squill, twin-leaved gamophila...”

The more she said, the paler Cassandra became, understanding what the content was. Shareen noticed.

“Cassandra, what is that?”

The young concubine exchanged a look with the servant, who nodded, confirming her thoughts.

“It’s an abortifacient. A potion to... induce a miscarriage.”

Instinctively, Cassandra put a hand on her belly and lost all compassion for the young Princess, who was clearly terrified. Her dark eyes went from Cassandra’s tummy to Shareen, growing wider and wider.

“No, no, no! Sister Shareen, I swear this wasn’t meant for the Concubine! I swear! I would never dare to...”

“To try to harm my brother’s offspring? Is that it, Valeria?” Said Shareen with a menacing tone, raising her wrist higher.

The young girl cried in pain, as Shareen was taller than her and hanging her by her wrist on purpose. The difference in strength showed by the calm with which she was almost hanging her younger sister by her wrist without showing any effort.

“Spill it, Valeria. Who is that meant for, you little swine?”

The young princess obviously couldn’t bring herself to say it. Her expression was tortured between pain and frustration, but Shareen was not going to let go until she heard what she wanted.

“I swear... I swear it wasn’t for her,” she cried repeatedly.

“For who, then? Talk, we don’t have all day!”

“Shareen,” whispered Cassandra, feeling a bit uncomfortable with the situation. “Maybe we should...”

“No, she will say it now. Even if she doesn’t know who it was destined to, she has to know who asked her for it. Dressing up as a servant, leaving without an escort and trying to evade me, too. You know how short my patience

is, Valeria, and I don't think Father would mind much if I lost my temper with you..."

The threat was ice cold, even Cassandra felt a chill. Was Valeria the daughter of a lower Concubine of the Emperor? She probably didn't have any of the brothers' backing, from Shareen's words...

However, she was only fifteen and defenseless like this. Cassandra sighed. She truly believed this potion wasn't made for her. Valeria looked like she would have been much more terrified if Shareen had seen through her right away.

"Is it for one of the concubines?" Asked Cassandra. "One of the Princes' ? One of your Father his Highness' women?"

Valeria turned her eyes to her, looking a bit surprised by the sudden questioning, but seeing her lack of response, Cassandra was sure neither of those was right. Then...

"Is it for one of the Princesses?"

This time, Valeria went from red to white in a matter of seconds. Shareen saw it, too, and smirked.

"So that's what it was... One of our dearest sisters ordered you for this. Now I wonder which one of those bitches was dumb enough to get pregnant."

To Cassandra's surprise, she let go of Valeria right after those words. The young Princess didn't wait and ran away in a hurry. Cassandra turned to Shareen, confused.

"Is that it? Aren't you going to ask her which one?"

"There are only a few who could get that child so scared. If it was any daughter of a low-rank concubine, Valeria would have spilled the beans right when I caught her. She is an only child and her mother is of no importance now. Whichever Princess ordered her to get this potion is at least as scary as I am, and there aren't many that can be said of."

Cassandra finally understood.

Though they were all seemingly sisters, not all Princesses had the same statuses or power. Shareen, for example, was backed up by a favored

mother and a brother. Phetra, too, had a rather comfortable position thanks to her Imperial brother Vrehan. However, not all Princesses had the same luck. Unless they had a brother or a mother favored by the Emperor, they were probably just pawns for the others... Valeria was probably among the unlucky ones, fighting for her own survival just like many.

Who could be pulling her strings, then? Cassandra had an idea, but she wasn't sure.

"Which Princess would want an abortion potion?" She wondered out loud.

"Don't know. But we are not supposed to engage in sexual relations until our father marries us off..."

Cassandra turned to Shareen, surprised. She knew it was a rather common rule for daughters in the Dragon Empire, but somehow, this brought out a completely different side of Shareen she had never thought about.

"Does that mean you are...?"

"Married? Me?" Asked Shareen with a snarl. "Hell no."

"But..."

Cassandra still vividly remembered some scenes the Princess was involved in that she would rather forget. She even blushed just thinking about it. Shareen smirked.

"Oh, Cassandra, I may be a virgin but it doesn't mean I can't play, can I?"

This sentence would stay a long time in the young Concubine's mind before she could actually realize what it meant, and rearrange her whole way of seeing Shareen.

She shook her head, trying to forget about it, and turned to Dahlia, pointing the little potion still in the servant's hands.

"Do you think she came here just for this?"

"Probably so... No Princess would want to be seen here buying an abortion potion, Father would be furious..."

Cassandra nodded, taking the potion. She silently thought she should

hold on to this until they found the culprit. Maybe she could even find a clue...

“All right,” said Shareen. “I’ve had enough, let’s go grab your feisty sister before I really lose patience.”

The three women agreed to go check the next Brother, but once again, Cassandra’s heart faced another deception. Missandra had come and left this place too. This time, however, things appeared to be different, as the young cunuch explained. (3)

“Mie tricked some local thugs into losing a lot of money, and they didn’t appreciate. They came often to harass this brothel, so the owner decided to kick her out. She only realized a while later that Mie had actually stolen her money too... I have no idea where she is now, though, this is all from about... eight or nine months ago? She could be anywhere now, but I would bet she didn’t stay in the Red District. Too many people were unhappy with her, and this group of thugs is still actively looking for her. To be honest with you, I wouldn’t even be surprised if she left the Capital, your Highness.”

Cassandra had to repress the urge to cry. How could her younger sister get in so much trouble? She should be barely sixteen by now! Did Missandra grow to be such a mischievous girl from her upbringing in the Red District? The worst for Cassandra was to think that, all this time, the two women had been in the same City. Though the Capital was extremely vast, they could have crossed paths, if only Cassandra had ventured closer to this area, or Missandra had been near one of her old master’s properties...

“Well,” said Shareen, “I guess this is it for today. At least we know this troublemaker sister of yours was still alive and well a few months ago. She could be literally anywhere now, though...”

“I can still ask around... There are a few places Missandra could have tried to go to...”

Cassandra was already thinking about where to search for her next. After everything she had found out that day, she couldn’t give up. She felt closer to Missandra than she had been in years.

“Tomorrow, pretty face,” said the Princess with a frown. “Sun’s about to set, and my brother will make a fuss if I don’t bring you back before night falls. Especially considering where we spend our day.”

Cassandra blushed. Indeed, a lot more establishments were open now, as the Brothels and their tenants were preparing to work. More customers were filling the streets too, though they kept a careful distance with the three women. They probably wondered what this odd trio was doing there.

“Come on, let’s go.”

As they started walking back, Cassandra couldn’t help but glance sideways, just in case she could spot Missandra. It was a bit desperate, but she just couldn’t stop. Even Shareen, who noticed, didn’t bother to say anything about it, resolutely walking her back to the entrance.

“You!”

An angry voice came from behind them, but for the first few seconds, neither Shareen or Cassandra realized it was aimed at them. Hence, they turned back only when they realized people around were eyeing them. Charging their way was a large man, with a shaved head and too many tattoos to see his face’s actual traits. He was quite horrendous to look at, but Cassandra had a good idea who that man was anyway. In the Capital, criminals were marked like so, their wrongdoings tattooed in visible places for others to see. While most people wanted to avoid those as to not to be cast away by the society, local thugs like this man arboored them proudly, as if it was a proof of strength. And that one had a lot. (1

“You little bitch! Do you think you can hide from us? And use this kind of disguise, too? You’ll see!”

Shareen and Cassandra exchanged looks, completely unsure about what was going on. It was Dahlia who understood first and stepped to stand between that man and the young concubine.

“I think you are mistaken, sir! My Lady is not the one you seek!”

“Are you kidding me? This bitch is the one I’ve been looking for! You’d better give me my money back and you’ll take a good one for stealing

from me, you bitch!”

Cassandra was speechless. Was that man mistaking her for her sister? Were they really so alike that someone would actually confuse them? A group of men was gathering behind him, with only a few fewer tattoos but quite the same horrible faces.

Shareen sighed, swinging her swords, a bit hesitant.

“Cassie, do you mind if I play a bit? I need to exercise, and I have some frustration to vent...

While Cassandra had a generous soul, she really didn't care much for criminals. That man's bad deeds were tattooed on his face and she was well aware of this kind of people's horrible behaviors towards women like her. She nodded, crossing her arms.

“Alright gentlemen, let's play,” said Shareen, a bit too enthusiast.

Cassandra turned around. They were only a few steps away from the entrance.

While the Princess happily parred with the men present, she couldn't handle them all, especially since they were trying to corner the trio. Dahlia had taken a little dagger, but it wouldn't do much against the sabers the criminals had.

The young concubine took two fingers to her mouth and whistled. After a few seconds, a large shadow came over them, and all the thugs' faces turned sheet white.

“Cassandra! Why are you spoiling my fun!”

“I am tired, and this is not a playground. I want to go back, my Lord will look for me.”

Krai landed next to her, growling immediately like a big cat would purr. His paw was squishing a man on the ground with a gruesome sound and a long screech, but he didn't seem to hear it. Instead, he was more curious about the men running around him in utter fear, and gobbled one up, as if he was trying some new treat out of sheer curiosity. Meanwhile, Cassandra was climbing on its back, leaving Shareen to her game.

Another thug tried to throw his saber at Cassandra, but the Dragon sent it to fly away with a flap of a wing. Unfortunately for that man, that

weapon came back right at him, stabbing a painful spot.

“Fine, you party-wrecker, just go!” Yelled Shareen. “But take that damn lizard with you before he eats them all!”

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The Present

Krai probably could easily sense where his master was because he flew right back to the Palace without Cassandra saying a thing. She was still a bit afraid of flying, but she was also seeing how nice it was. One thing she'd never get tired of, the view of the Capital from above... She still hoped they'd go back to the North soon, though. She missed the quiet Onyx Castle, her friends, and the Capital was too hot and humid.

The Dragon landed with a loud growl on one of the big courts of the Palace, some square-shaped area made of stone only. Kairen was waiting there, his eyes set on the young concubine as they arrived. He held out his arms, and Cassandra slid easily on the Dragon's scales until he grabbed her. She smiled and kissed him softly.

Kairen took a step back, still carrying her, to have her off his Dragon. He seemed a bit concerned.

“Did you find anything?” He asked.

“A bit, yes, but we still haven't found her,” Cassandra sighed.

“...You look tired.”

She chuckled, putting her arms around his neck.

“My Lord, you keep saying that those days.”

“You really look tired.”

“Fine... I'm hungry, actually. We didn't even eat.”

Kairen stayed quiet for a little while, and his eyes on her had Cassandra a bit confused. What was her prince thinking about now? After a while, he seemed to decide on something and nodded.

“I have something for you. A present.”

“A present?” She repeated, surprised.

Kairen had already given lots of dresses and jewelry... Well, more like

his father or mother had, but still. What else could she be needing, now? Something for their baby, perhaps? But Cassandra wasn't planning on raising the child here...

He turned around and carried her for a while through the Palace. Even if she had no idea where they were going, Cassandra was patient enough not to ask. She enjoyed the little ride, caressing her Prince's hairline and telling him about everything she and Shareen had learned. He didn't react or say much, even to the part where they had encountered his half-sister, but Cassandra didn't expect him to anyway.

After a bit more walking, he finally let her down in front of a large door she had never seen before, but by the looks of it, it was a brand new one. The redwood stood out in the stone walls, and there weren't many windows nearby. However, they definitely were near Kairen's apartments, making her think it was within his private area of the Palace. "This is yours, from now on," he said.

He was handing her a key, with a complex shape and a unique redwood handle. Cassandra took it with a shy smile, intrigued. She then turned to slowly open the door, her heart beating a bit faster.

She didn't expect what was behind and remained speechless on the doorstep.

Green, green everywhere. Green leaves, herbs, and plants everywhere her eye could go. Cassandra took a few steps in, unable to close her mouth. There were four long, long tables with hundreds of different herbs on it, in pots. Under her feet was grass, fresh grass, and several patches of herbs or flowers were growing here and there, in delimited areas. For a second, she had thought it was a greenhouse, but it didn't exactly have a roof. Instead, above her head was a large pergola, with ivy and other climbing or trailing plants covering most of the framework. The sun could still pass through, but the whole place was much fresher than what Cassandra usually experimented in the castle. The main reason was the little fountains and rivers artificially planted that ran from one side to another and refreshed the whole area. Actually, those fountains even had some flowers on them."

“Waterlilies...” she whispered with a smile.

“Do you like it?”

She turned to her prince, baffled.

“You’re giving me a garden?”

Kairen nodded.

“Since you don’t care for gold, dresses or jewelry.”

So, he had thought about something that would make her happy and gifted her a whole herbal garden instead? Cassandra was amazed. She had never thought Kairen would be able to put up such a thing and in such a short time! She was all teary just from thinking about it.

She turned around and walked back to him, throwing herself into his arms.

“I love it... I love you. Thank you!”

For the first time in a while, a slim smile appeared on Kairen’s lips, and he hugged her back, kissing her skin. Cassandra chuckled and found his lips to kiss him, a long, sweet and grateful kiss. He was relieved to see her happier, after her sour day and how she had been sick earlier...

Cassandra kept her lips going, enjoying the proximity between them, but Kairen pulled away with an annoyed groan.

“What is it?” She asked, a bit surprised.

He sighed.

“If we keep going, I’ll want to have sex with you. Here and now.”

Cassandra blushed to her ears, looking down. Oh, indeed, it was better if they stopped now. She might have been teasing him a bit too much without knowing... She laughed at the Prince’s sour expression and stepped back innocently, turning around to explore her new herbal garden. She truly loved this place. It was green and cold enough to have her forget the Palace’s climate she couldn’t get accustomed to. Moreover, everywhere she looked, she found new or familiar herbs, dozens of them. Almost every medicinal herb or plant known in this Empire was gathered for her to play with. She hadn’t noticed it right away, but at the very end of that garden was actually a wide desk with parchments about medicine,

ink and blank paper for her personal use. Whoever had prepared it had also put a lot of pots and a dozen of pitchers, mortars and pestles, scales and weights, jars and show globes. Cassandra could spend hours studying with everything here!

While she was still observing everything in awe, Kairen came from behind, gently hugging her with his hands on her tummy, and kissed her temple.

“So you like it,” he simply said.

“I love it, really. Were you trying to cheer me up?”

She hadn't been happy since they had gotten to the Palace, and they both knew about it. For the usually aloof man to actually go out of his way and prepare all this for her melted her heart.

Cassandra smiled and grabbed his face to kiss him a bit more passionately, making him groan.

“Cassandra, if you keep going...”

“How far are we from your bedroom?”

He simply snapped at her words.

Everything that happened next was way too fast for her to realize. She was brought back to his bedroom not even a minute later, laid on the bed and her dress lifted above her waist, making her breathe louder.

The Prince didn't lose any time. Cassandra cried out when he got in, biting her lips and shivering. A hot chill spread through her skin, as he starting moving, fast and hard. She didn't want to hold back and moaned just as loud as she needed, her heart thumping, holding on to him and letting him set the pace. Cassandra held on to his neck and closed her eyes, focusing on the sensations. His movements were so wild, he only focused on kissing her skin when it came close to his lips and kept moving, restlessly. The young concubine was running out of breath, and crying out louder, struggling to keep up with him.

Kairen didn't hold back long, however, his rut reaching its edge after a few more, and he released himself, panting. Cassandra curved her body, too, in a long sigh of pleasure.

The young concubine was exhausted after that very short but intense

session. She stayed her eyes closed a bit longer, as her breathing and heartbeat slowly calmed down. Kairen gently sprinkled light kisses all over her smooth skin, letting her time to recover. All the while, they were still hugging each other. Cassandra didn't want to let go of him, not yet.

"Rest here for a bit."

"I don't want to... It's still early," she protested.

"You're tired."

"I'm fine..."

He was about to say something, but all of a sudden, he froze. His reaction had Cassandra on the get-go, too. She sat up, now completely awake, looking for what had caught his attention. She heard it a few seconds later. Someone yells outside. 4

Kairen got on his feet and put his pants back on before leaving the room hurriedly. Cassandra followed right after him as soon as she could, worried.

To their surprise, at one end of the corridor, Shareen was dragging one of the men from earlier. While she looked fine, her clothes were sullied in a terrifying amount of blood, and the man she was dragging too.

"Ah, there you are!" She exclaimed. "Look, I kept one for you. Ask him."

Cassandra didn't approach from too close, as the smell would definitely make her sick, and stayed a couple of steps behind Kairen.

"Who is that?"

"One of the men who tried to attack us," said Shareen. "They mistook your woman for her sister. Apparently, she owes them money."

"You were attacked?" He growled, glaring at the man and taking out his sword.

His sister rolled her eyes.

"I said they tried, brother. Krai took her away and I played a bit. They weren't much fun. They are the ones who died a painful death, except for this one. I kept the chief alive for Cassie to interrogate him."

Saying she kept him alive was a bit too much, in Cassandra's eyes. It

would have been more credible if the man didn't have a scary trail of blood behind him, an eye missing and several of his fingers cut off. Even for Cassandra who was used to injuries, he was a horrible sight. She was a bit annoyed at Shareen and her "games"...

"What do you know about my younger sister, Mie?" She still asked.

"That bitch took my money! She... Gaaaah!"

Cassandra looked away a second too late. A couple of fingers flew off, and the man screamed in pain while Shareen clicked her tongue.

"What did I tell you? Watch your language, asshole. Next time I hear you use that word to designate any woman, I'm cutting off your eleventh finger, if you know what I mean." ?

It took a few seconds for the man to calm down, and Cassandra to compose herself. She knew Shareen was not patient or forgiving, but still. "My sister," she repeated.

"She... That wo...woman stole our money. We gambled and she cheated us! She took thousands from us! We tried to have her give it back, but... but she was gone from that place... We only heard from her being in the main street three months ago, but we can't find her... So... we were looking in the red district... in case she'd come back..."

Cassandra sighed. At least she knew Mie was still around, in the last three months... If she hadn't let before, she probably had found her way to stay without them finding her. How did she do it, though? The Capital was so wide, if she moved to another part of the City, it would have been hard for them to find her. Did she find a place with the money she had collected? If it was Cassandra, she would have hidden from those thugs by going to one of the upper areas, where the nobles and riches lived...

"What does she look like?" Asked Cassandra.

"That woman is... a lot like you... But she is... prettier. With more curves."

Cassandra couldn't help but roll her eyes. Those men's criteria were really...

"Did she have anything she mentioned? My sister?"

"I don't know! She... She was good with herbs, she always bought a lot.

She made potions for the who... the prostitutes. Her... Her husband sold a lot too.”

Cassandra froze, shocked.

“What? Her husband?”

“Yeah. She ... she got married last year. A rich merchant’s son. He’s dead, though.”

It didn’t make any sense. If Missandra was still working in the Red District then, how did she get married...? Cassandra was too confused.

“What was his name?”

“I don’t know! She said he died of sickness or whatever months ago!”

Cassandra sighed. She wouldn’t learn any more from this man, she even doubted half of what he said was true. She shook her head when Kairen sent her a questioning gaze, meaning she was done with him.

“Scram,” said Shareen.

“W... What?”

“I said scram before I put my sword up your butt! You’re lucky we have a pregnant woman here!”

The man spat blood in Cassandra’s way.

“Your wretched sister better pay me back my money, or I’ll find her and...”

His head rolled before he finished his sentence. Cassandra looked away, disgusted, and even Shareen sighed.

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The Culprit

Cassandra took deep breaths, closing her eyes and focusing on the soothing smell. Dahlia gently rubbed her back and helped her ventilate a bit.

“Does this make you feel better?” Asked Kairen, standing on the side. She nodded.

With Dahlia’s help, Cassandra had created a solution of lemon and verbena, and was now inhaling it from a little basin. The vapors were

helping her greatly for her nausea. She had puked again after the previous scene was too much for her eyes and stomach. A bunch of servants was cleaning the area, while Cassandra had been accompanied back to her herbal garden, where she could have some fresh air.

“Damn, I really don’t want to have kids,” sighed Shareen, who was also watching next to her brother. “Shall I call mother?”

“I am fine,” said Cassandra. “I already feel a lot better.”

She may have to produce more of that solution from now on. She didn’t think it would be so effective.

“I will go and buy more lemons later,” said Dahlia.

Cassandra nodded, grateful. She could always grow more verbena here, and even a lemon tree.

“Let’s skip the banquet,” said Kairen.

“Again? Brother, father will really throw a fuss. And it’s the last evening before the New Year Celebrations.”

“I don’t care.”

Shareen didn’t add anything as her brother already had his usual glare on. Cassandra also wished the Celebrations were already over, so they could finally leave the Palace. However, she still hadn’t forgotten the matter of the snake. She glanced at her fingers, which were mostly clear of any blue tint now.

“No, let’s go,” she said with a sigh. “I want to find out who was behind that snake.”

“You think you’ll know tonight already?” Asked Shareen, surprised.

Cassandra nodded and stood up, walking back to Kairen.

“Can we take a bath before that?”

Of course, he agreed, and Shareen decided she need one too, in her own apartments. Dahlia, who had naturally taken the lead of the servants preparing the bath, also made sure to include verbena and a bit of lemon into the scents of their bath, which helped Cassandra relax even better. For once, Kairen let her bathe alone, only staying by her side once he had dismissed everyone with an efficient glare.

“Those make you feel better?” He asked, looking at the plant of verbena Cassandra had brought from the garden inside their room.

She nodded.

“I’ve always liked this scent. They grew in the south too, but it was probably a different species. The ones I remember were blue and purple, not white like those... I think the smell was stronger, too.”

“We can get more if you need.”

Cassandra chuckled. She knew her Prince would rather all the verbena in the country just for her if she asked. It would be a bit too extreme, though. She shook her head, and got out of the bath with his help.

“No need,” she said while giving him a peck on the lips.

The demonstrations of affection between them were now so natural and regular, Cassandra barely blushed anymore. Kairen always watched her every move, his presence had become something she was used to and craving when he wasn’t close.

Once again, she repeated the usual picking of a new dress, some jewelry and even put some flowers in her hair, as she couldn’t stand the perfumes brought by the servants. She had never liked those strong, thick smells from the Empire’s beauty product to begin with, but with her pregnancy, her sense of smell was even more sensitive. It didn’t lessen her beauty at all, though. The white flowers she had picked from her garden suited her adorably, giving her an even purer appearance than usual.

Cassandra got a few whispers when she entered the Imperial hall, from giggling concubines who made fun of her hair decorations, whispering about how her prince must be unwilling to spoil her, but Cassandra really didn’t mind. She probably would stop hearing such things once the news about her herbal garden spread...

Kairen was glaring around, too, making sure any concubine or princess that met his glare shut up instantly. Compared to his gentle and innocent concubine, the War God was still as scary and impressive as ever for anyone else. They took their seats, once again, Cassandra on Kairen’s lap. No one seemed to dare react to that anymore, though some concubines were red with envy. Shareen sat next to them with a long sigh.

“So? How do you intend to find her?” She asked.

Cassandra smiled, taking a look around. After carefully observing the various concubines, she had one suspect.

“The woman in red, the second one at the second Prince’s feet.”

Shareen frowned for a while, trying to remember.

“That’s... Vrehan’s newest concubine. She’s a soldier’s daughter, I think.

I can’t remember her name... Why do you think it’s her? Are you sure?”

Cassandra slowly nodded, but remained silent because of the Emperor’s entrance. He took place on the golden throne, looking a bit unhappy.

Cassandra wondered if something had happened, but the Emperor simply sat and ordered for the usual festivities to begin shortly. Even she was a bit hungry, so Cassandra started eating along while watching the dancers’ performance. She wasn’t really looking at them, though. Truth was, she had her eyes on the young concubine. After a while, Shareen leaned closer to her.

“Cassie, spill it! How are you so sure?”

“Look at the dark circles under her eyes,” whispered Cassandra. “She hasn’t slept well or not at all. After hearing me, anyone who had been in contact with the snake would have been too worried to sleep.”

“Because they would believe you?” Asked Shareen doubtful.

“Even if they didn’t, all I needed was to plant a little seed of doubt. With my blue fingers, she probably couldn’t help but wonder endlessly if it was real or not. If she could die in her sleep. After that, it would be hard for her to sleep properly. Unable to rest properly, she would feel more and more tired, making her wonder even more if those were the symptoms...”

Shareen stayed speechless. Cassandra’s plan was to have the culprit tire herself out and show signs of fatigue? The Princess couldn’t help but frown.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit light?”

“Look at her hands,” whispered Cassandra.

Indeed, something looked wrong about the young concubine’s hands...

They couldn't possibly have turned blue, that was obviously something Cassandra had made up. No, actually, they looked red and dry.

"What did that little..."

"She washed them too much," explained Cassandra. "She saw my blue-tinted hands, and her natural reaction was probably to try and wash as much as she could, thinking it could make whatever she got on it away without the antidote."

Shareen was impressed. Just a few words from Cassandra had made such a mess in that woman's head. Not that their second brother's concubines were usually very smart at all, but still.

"You had predicted all that?"

"I didn't think she would ruin her skin on her hands, but I was hoping to see the lack of sleep after a couple of days..."

Nevertheless, it was impressive. Cassandra's days of treating patients and dealing with dumb and entitled concubines had left her with some unexpected skill...

Truth was, a big part of it was also due to this country's people's poor education, especially in anything related to medicine. Most concubines were chosen for their looks, but not very smart to begin with. A strong and educated woman like Kareen was a rarity inside the Palace.

Cassandra had hoped it would also be the case of the culprit, who had obviously sent her the snake without really thinking of its effect.

"One of Vrehan's concubines, of course..." whispered Shareen.

She was glaring in their second brother's way, but he didn't see it, absorbed in a heated discussion with his sister Phetra. Cassandra wondered if he was behind this... The feud between those siblings and Kairen wasn't to be taken lightly, not if she wanted to survive.

Her Prince, too, had his dark eyes sending murdering looks their way, while still holding on tightly to Cassandra.

"How are you going to deal with her now?" Asked Shareen with a smirk. Cassandra had no idea. She would have let her Prince deal with it, but if that woman was only a pawn, she didn't really deserve death...

"I heard sister Shareen had some interesting outing with brother Kairen's

concubine today,” suddenly said Phetra from across the Hall.

Immediately, everyone else stopped talking. That woman’s voice alone was enough to make Cassandra’s skin crawl. What was she up to now? She glanced in Shareen’s way, but the Princess had an interested smirk on, like a cat prepared to play with her prey.

“You should watch your concubine, older brother, she seems to carelessly wander outside the Palace...”

“What are you talking about, Princess Phetra?” Asked one of the concubines.

That woman was a poor actress. She had a smile on, and Cassandra could tell she was only too happy to play Phetra’s little game. Cassandra stayed expressionless, but Kairen’s fingers were restless in her back. Despite his solemn face, she could tell her prince was annoyed too.

“You are well informed, Princess Phetra,” replied Cassandra. “I wonder why my outings with Princess Shareen are of any importance to you?”

Phetra’s face turned sour. One could tell she didn’t expect Cassandra to reply back to her, and was pissed about it. Her expression was torn between anger and disgust.

“You’re right, it shouldn’t be too surprising to see you two hang around the whores’ houses...”

The insult was so clear, even the Emperor slammed his hand on his throne.

“Phetra! Watch your words, daughter, or you’ll anger me!”

“There is nothing upsetting about this, dear Father,” said Shareen. “After all, you knew that place long before we

did, Phetra, didn’t you? I bet it must remind you of your dear mother?”

Cassandra didn’t expect this. Their mother was a prostitute? Phetra turned green in anger, even standing up. Next to her, the second Prince Vrehan glared at her.

“Phetra, sit.”

“What is the meaning of this!” Said the Emperor, pissed. “If you have things to say, Phetra, say it now or shut up!”

“My apologies, Father. But I was upset because of Shareen’s misconduct today. Did you know she mistreated our younger sister?”

For a few seconds, the Emperor seemed confused.

“Your younger sister?” He repeated.

“Valeria, Father! She mistreated Valeria!”

Shareen laughed loudly, and even Cassandra felt their situation pitiful.

The Emperor had so many daughters, he couldn’t even grasp who Phetra was talking about right away, even after her name was given. He probably didn’t care much for the younger princesses.

“Oh, right, Valeria. What of her?”

Phetra was obviously annoyed that their father didn’t care much about the situation. She clicked her tongue and, to Cassandra’s surprise, Valeria emerged from the shadows behind her. The young princess was visibly very uneasy about being there, and on the verge of tears, but Phetra pushed her forward without a care.

“See! Shareen grabbed her arm so violently! Is it fine for her to abuse her younger sisters? Don’t you hate us fighting, father?”

Cassandra noticed the bandage on Valeria’s arm and sighed. Truly, this was too much of a show. She had been there, she knew that, despite Shareen’s tight firm on her arm, she certainly used such force that would require those bandages or even any medicine. Did Phetra had her put it on just for show? This was too much!

“Aren’t you going to say anything for her, Father?” Insisted Phetra.

“Well...” Sighed the Emperor.

“Are you done, Phetra?” Growled Shareen, annoyed. “That child isn’t even injured!”

“Look at this! Does she seem fine to you?”

Cassandra stood up unexpectedly, and all eyes went on her. She had enough of Phetra’s game, trying to make such a show and even use her younger sister for this.

“Take off her bandage, then.”

“...What?”

“Take off her bandage. I am the Imperial Physician, I will tell if she is injured or not.”

Phetra was about to protest, but a glare from the Emperor kept her from it. Cassandra was appointed Imperial Physician by the Emperor himself, she had every right to make use of that title. After a few seconds of hesitation, Phetra put on a smirk.

“I am sorry, she cannot. Another Imperial Doctor she saw said the bandages cannot be removed for two weeks, or she’ll have a scar.”

Cassandra sighed. This woman was so stubborn...

The War God’s Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 57

The Siblings’ protection

One could tell everyone in the Hall was waiting to see who would have the last word between the War God’s Favorite and an Imperial Princess. The tension was palpable, some of the women were excited to see how this would turn out. Princess Phetra had a triumphant smile on already. Cassandra, no matter how favored by the Prince or Emperor she was, couldn’t disobey her.

“...Is that so?”

Those three simple words from Cassandra took everyone by surprise. Her voice was too calm. While Phetra was still dumbfounded, the young Concubine got down from her Prince’s knee and walked down their way, seemingly unafraid. Everyone watched her cross the Hall without saying a word. Had that woman gone crazy?

However, Cassandra was walking very calmly and without an ounce of fear in her eyes. Maybe her baby was giving her some unexpected strength, but she couldn’t stand being afraid of those people anymore.

The fire of a Dragon was glowing in her eyes. (2

She arrived in front of Phetra and her younger sister Valeria and, while not giving one look at the first, seemingly bowed to the other. After a few seconds of that strange posture, she got back up, turning to Phetra.

The Princess didn't even bother to hide her annoyance.

"What are you doing! I forbid you from touching her!"

"I do not need to touch her," Cassandra retorted back. "This bandage doesn't even smell like medicine. It doesn't smell like anything."

A silence followed her words, and Phetra went paler and paler, as everyone present slowly understood.

Medicine in the Dragon Empire always smelled strong, and most of the time, horribly bad. It was usually made of some greasy and thick balms, that would smell even worse, had it been kept under bandages like the one on Valeria's arm. However, from what the young concubine had said, it was obvious. While faking Valeria's injury under such bandages, they hadn't even bothered to apply any kind of balm underneath, and anyone with a sniff. Even the second Prince's dragon behind them, that was usually so moody for nothing, was resting in his cage, unbothered. He certainly wouldn't have stayed put with the smell of the medicine so close.

vaste

Cassandra stared right into Phetra's dark eyes for a few seconds, not showing an ounce of fear, and turned back before her enemy could even reply.

"You... You...!"

But nothing came out of the Princess' lips, and Cassandra calmly walked back to her Prince. Kairen had a terrifying smirk on, much like Shareen's. As his concubine joined him and sat on his lap again, his eyes didn't leave Phetra one second.

Meanwhile, the Emperor slammed the golden throne again, and this time, his golden dragon behind him growled loudly, as if to show his master's anger.

"Phetra, what is this! Valeria, take off that bandage! Right now!"

The princess was completely white, so was her younger sister. Slowly, trembling hands took off the bandage, revealing a perfectly fine arm.

Kairen slowly kissed Cassandra's shoulder, proud of his young

concubine. His sister, too, was exulting.

“Look at this, father. My sisters work so hard at insulting and framing me, don’t they?”

“Father, I... I can explain... She... Valeria came to me crying! I only wanted to get justice for...”

Phetra kept trying to justify her lie, miserably. Cassandra frowned. That woman was really too disgusting. She was in such a hurry to throw her younger sister in the death pit when she was obviously the one behind all this... Even

worse, the second Prince completely ignored them, as if this whole situation wasn’t his concern. He wasn’t any better than Phetra. Cassandra exchanged a look with her Prince, but Kairen remained silent, continuously caressing her back and hair, his dark eyes still fixated on Phetra with a murderous glare.

“Silence!” Yelled the Emperor, doubled by his Dragon’s furious growl. “I shall not hear any more! Valeria, you’ll be punished by Shareen for framing her and lying, I don’t care what it is! And you, Phetra, I will personally deal with you later. Now you better sit and shut up until this banquet is over! I don’t want to see neither of you at the New Year’s celebrations, either!” ?

Despite everything said, Cassandra felt unsatisfied. Phetra was obviously devastated, but Cassandra found that punishment was way too light for her. Seeing her clenched fist, Shareen gestured for her to ignore it.

“She is our second brother’s favorite sister,” she whispered. “Father will never punish her too harshly, unless she really pushes it...”

Once again, the importance of the siblings’ bonds was showing. Even if he remained silent all along, Phetra’s status was protected by her closeness to her brother, the second Prince Vrehan. Cassandra felt it was too unfair for the poor Valeria.

“At least,” said Shareen, “now I will be able to interrogate that little swine...”

She had her feline eyes set on Valeria. Cassandra suddenly remembered

the issue of the abortion potion was left hanging, too. Was Phetra really behind this? And more importantly, who was pregnant...?

“Wouldn’t the Emperor know if one of them was pregnant?”

“The Princesses don’t have dragon children, only the Princes can transmit the Dragon’s blood to their children.”

“...Does the Emperor make it public if an egg appears?”

“Generally, no. First, Father doesn’t check the vault every day. Glahad usually watches it, and if a Dragon comes to battle him, we know something’s up. However, the dragons don’t always do.”

“Why?”

Shareen sneered.

“Shouldn’t you know best? Remember how the Dragons know their master’s feelings before they even realize them?”

Cassandra took a few minutes to think about that... If what Shareen said was right, then Dragons didn’t systematically claim their offsprings if they... want them. She looked around at all the Princes and concubines. Some of the princes probably didn’t care much once they had enough concubines and a few sons...

“Which ones of your brothers have children?” She whispered.

“Sephir, Vrehan and Lephys,” said Kairen.

“Sephir has one son and two daughters,” added Shareen. “Vrehan has two sons and six daughters, and Lephys... Lephys has four sons and eight or nine daughters. But three of his women are pregnant.”

Cassandra sighed. She had forgotten the fifth prince was notorious for his many, many concubines. Indeed, he was always surrounded by young and beautiful concubines to fool around with. If the rumor about him having over two hundred concubines was true, it was even surprising that he hadn’t fathered more children. Despite his many heirs, he didn’t seem to have much interest in the golden throne, though...

“What of the fourth and sixth prince?” Cassandra asked.

“Anour is too young, he only has one concubine for now. And Opheus... He has a dozen concubines, but none have given him a child yet. I don’t

think he's very interested, either. His mother is the one pressuring him." It seemed to be true. The fifth prince was happily chatting with one of his women, but the others looked bored and unwilling to be here. In comparison, Vrehan's women seemed desperate for their Prince's attention.

Cassandra felt grateful she wasn't like those women. Kairen only had eyes for her, and Krai had gone to retrieve its egg as soon as it appeared... She turned to her Prince, lovingly kissing him and, for once, surprising Kairen by doing so. Her boldness in front of so many people was unusual. Many eyes saw the scene, and some concubines were dying of jealousy. It was a bit too many glares. Kairen glared right back at them and, as if responding to his master, Krai suddenly appeared a few seconds later, flying from the open roof with a warning growl. The Dragon was at least as persuasive as his master, and soon no one dared to look their way. (2)

The only person to be overjoyed with the Dragon's presence was the Emperor, as if there weren't already two of his other sons' dragons there, resting in their cages behind their owners.

"Look at him! This beautiful beast!"

Krai didn't seem to care much for flattery, and as usual, crouched down next to Cassandra. His head next to Kairen's knee, he made sure to be where the young concubine's fingers could find him.

Once again, they attracted much attention. Some women were sweating to see how many fingers she was going to lose, while the others were even more jealous of her confidence, glaring at the other dragons as if they were untamed wild beasts.

"Pretty white Lily, tell me, did you enjoy your present?" Suddenly asked the Emperor. (1)

"Your Highness, you know about it?"

"Of course I know! My son steals one of the castle's aisles and destroys it to have an herbal garden made for his concubine, and I shouldn't know about it?"

Cassandra was speechless. Kairen actually had that garden made from another room, after destroying it, too? In a few days? How did he even manage to have it done in such a short time?

“Anyway, just enjoy it, child! I’ll have more herbs or plants and what-not brought for you to play with. So stay a bit longer, hm?”

So that was the Emperor’s aim? To have Kairen and her stay longer after the festivities? As she didn’t want to refuse him, Cassandra only slightly bowed. After that, the Emperor went on to try and convince Kairen and Shareen to have their mother attend the festivities, but both pretty much ignored his plea, leaving their Father to deal with his stubborn concubine. As it appeared, Kareen was still sulking over him keeping Kairen, and wouldn’t even come over, making the Emperor actually visit her instead! Cassandra couldn’t help but admire that woman a bit more every day. Meanwhile, her gaze went back to Phetra. The Princess was leaning over to chat with the fifth Prince, whispering something to him with a forced smile. Cassandra was surprised by that closeness between them, and, more worrying, the couple of glances she had her way. What was that snake preparing this time...?

The War God’s Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 58

The Sacrifice

Cassandra was waiting for that Banquet to come to an end, caressing Krai’s head. The Dragon had decided to take a nap while curled around his master’s throne, and his hot breath was warming up Cassandra’s legs. The Emperor was still discussing the New Year Celebrations, but Cassandra didn’t listen to it much. Instead, her eyes were staring right at the woman, the one who had put a snake in her bedroom. She had noticed how that concubine was avoiding looking their way. Actually, that woman’s eyes only went from her Prince, Varhen, to the floor or her fidgety hands. She knew...

The more she thought about it, the more disgusted Cassandra was. That

woman had put a snake in her bedroom, and hadn't cared for what would happen from that. She obviously didn't know much about the snake's species, or its venom. Yet, she had put Cassandra and her child at risk. Kairen too was glaring at that woman's way, making her absolutely terrified. Cassandra could see her lips trembling and her eyes on the verge of tears from where she stood. It became worse when Krai started growling, too. Despite his resting posture and Cassandra's caresses, the Black Dragon didn't look calm at all, and his ruby eyes were glowing. It had started slowly, but as the glares were longer and longer on the concubine, the dragon's growl increased along, to the point no one could pretend to ignore it anymore.

"Son, what is wrong with you today?" Frowned the Emperor. "Your Dragon is deafening us!"

"Maybe he is unhappy with snakes attempting to hurt his progeny," coldly replied Kairen.

"His..."

A cold silence spread in the room, as most people paled. The Emperor stood up and threw his cup on the floor.

"Who dares! Who dares to meddle with the Imperial children! In my Palace!"

The young concubine was still looking down, on the verge of tears, shivering like crazy. Even her Prince didn't spare her a glance, looking completely unaffected. Either he didn't know or was really good at acting ignorant, Cassandra couldn't say.

As absolutely everyone in the Hall remained silent despite the Emperor's anger, Shareen smirked.

"Leave it be, Father. Or do you think my brother won't punish those people accordingly? Who would attempt at the War God's child's life and make it out alive?"

"Kairen!" Yelled the Emperor. "If you want to settle this alone, make it quick! I won't allow those snakes in the Imperial Palace!"

"Don't worry, Father," hissed Kairen. "I'll take care of the vermin as quickly and painfully as I can..."

The concubine was wailing silently, her eyes desperately stuck on the ground, but no one around her spared her a glance. She kept trying to get Varhen's attention, but the Prince resolutely ignored her.

As it seemed she couldn't stand more, she suddenly stood up, trying to leave. Despite her attempt at slipping out discreetly, it was impossible not to notice someone leaving the room when no one else but the performers were moving

Shareen reacted first, her whiplashing the air and the floor in acute sounds. It made everyone stop moving, and the Concubine froze.

Everyone turned their eyes at her, as she seemed unsure what to do, standing there with shaking limbs.

Gently, Cassandra felt Kairen switch position with her. She was now sitting by herself on his throne, while the War God stand un and ent down the stairs, walking to that woman. Everyone around held their breaths. Despite the

four Dragons present, the most terrifying being in the room was human, and walk as silently and inevitably as death towards that woman. She gasped, taking one step back, her eyes expressing pure terror.

"I... I didn't... I just... The snake... was... not..."

She couldn't even breathe enough to talk. Even Cassandra's heartbeat was going crazy just from watching the scene, her hands on the throne's arms. In front of her, Krai was growling even fiercer, arching his back and showing of his fangs, his tail violently swinging in the air. He wasn't getting away from her, however, as if there was some invisible leash between him and the throne or Cassandra.

The third prince, however, was walking to the woman at a stable, scary pace. The woman was the very face of terror itself. She couldn't even cry or beg properly. Yet, when he suddenly arrived a couple of steps from her, she gasped again, crying ugly.

"Was it you?"

His question was only three words, yet it felt like a death sentence. The entire audience thought that woman could lie. She could deny it, pretend she had nothing to do with it. But with her trembling lips, she only

glanced once in Vrehan's direction. He wasn't even looking at her. The utter pain that appeared on her face was heart wrenching.

After a long, painful silence, she slowly nodded.

Whatever she was about to say, the Prince wouldn't hear it. He grabbed her and, without an ounce of compassion, dragged her across the hall.

The woman's cries and plea were unbearable.

"Please! Please! No! I didn't mean to kill her! I didn't! I was just...!

Don't kill me, please! Please! I beg you! Your Highness! Save me!

Please! I didn't know! I was just jealous! Please! Help me!"

Cassandra did her best not to react, but it was heard. That woman was begging both Kairen and Vrehan to spare her, but neither listened. No matter how much she screamed, no one intervened as she was dragged to the black dragon, waiting for his prey with a terrible growl. As soon as she was within reach, and without an order from his master, Krai jumped on the woman, killing her in a matter of seconds. The violent scene excited the other dragons, who all seemed to want be part of it, growling and opening their maws.

As Kairen reunited with her, Cassandra tried to calm down. No matter how that woman had targeted her, she would never feel content over someone's death. Especially since it felt like that woman had been abandoned by all...

The cold in her heart was warmed up as soon as Kairen pulled her in his arms, again.

"What a..." Said the Emperor, astonished. "Vrehan! Won't you watch your women better!"

The second prince immediately looked irritated. Cassandra couldn't help but feel he deserved that much. How could he act like it was unrelated to him? He clicked his tongue.

"Maybe my brother should keep his woman better, as well, Father. If she stirs up jealousy around her..."

"Didn't you forbid killing during dinner, father!" Claimed Phetra right after him. "How is it fine to let a Dragon kill someone now?"

The Emperor looked angry and about to shout back, but Shareen was faster.

“Rejoice, sister. Didn’t you ask for a sacrifice a few days ago? Don’t hesitate, if you or brother Verhan have more candidates. My brother’s dragon is always hungry for deceitful snakes...”

Phetra looked as if Shareen’s words had bitten her.

All four dragons were still growling, but the most furious ones were Krai and the Second Prince’s red dragon,

Vhan. They kept growling at each other as if they were about to fight, and their masters were glaring at one another the exact same way.

“Enough, all of you!” Stormed the Emperor. “No more fighting and arguing and killing, I have enough!”

Cassandra noted that despite his words, the Emperor’s words were mostly said to Verhan and his sister, and he barely looked Kairen’s way. She turned to him, whispering.

“Why didn’t you kill her yourself?” Cassandra asked.

“The smell of blood makes you sick,” he simply replied.

Cassandra would have found it funny, in other circumstances. Krai eating a human being wasn’t a much better sight... But indeed, it was a quick job done. There wasn’t any trace left of the poor woman.

After what had happened, everyone else was only hoping no one felt murderous anymore, and the conversations were changed to the upcoming Celebrations. Neither Cassandra or Kairen had much interest in those. Phetra and Vrehan remained silent throughout too, though that didn’t stop their murderous glares.

Cassandra ignored them, focusing on her dinner, and chatting with Shareen. Kairen, as usual, didn’t talk much, but he was holding her by the waist all this time and caressing her skin, reminding her of his presence every second.

“Can you really make Valeria talk?” she whispered.

Shareen frowned, looking at her younger half-sister, hiding behind Phetra.

“I can. If Phetra lets her live until she gets in my hands, that is... I’ll get her right after the Banquet, she won’t be able to leave. And she is already terrified after brother’s little show anyway. I’ll just drag her to my apartments until that little swine speaks. On a side note, do you think you can learn more about the abortion potion?”

“I’ll study it,” said Cassandra. “The bottle and content can give some information about whoever made it... Moreover, that will be another occasion to look for my sister.”

“How so?”

“If it was me... If I had a hefty sum of money, my freedom and no more people to work for, I would have tried to set up a way to collect more money. Missandra probably opened some sort of business somewhere. If she did, it has to be with something she knew well, and the only thing I can think of is our knowledge in herbs and plants.”

“She could have learned something else in the meantime,” argued Shareen. “Or she could work for any shop.”

Cassandra chuckled.

“Maybe, but I don’t see my sister taking any orders if she had a choice to. You heard it too, she is as proud as ever. If she acquired as much as that bandit said, and I would bet she saved some by herself too, she would rather remain independent. I am not too confident about the business, but medicine in the Dragon Empire is a lucrative business. With her knowledge, she could work it out.”

“But you said she was only seven when she was sold...”

Cassandra looked around, a bit worried about talking of her childhood in the presence of those people, but with the performers’ music and chatter, no one could hear them whisper.

“The Rain Tribe children learn about plants and herbs before we even learn how to write. It is considered the most basic and necessary knowledge. Missandra and I used to follow our mother everywhere, and she was the tribe’s doctor. We were the most knowledgeable...”

While she talked, both Shareen and Kairen had the same odd feeling. They often forgot that Cassandra had been born and raised in another

country, another culture. Her white skin should have been a constant reminder, yet she acted so discreet and quiet most of the time, her past was rarely brought up.

“Fine,” said Shareen. “I guess you’ll have to look into the herbs businesses...”

“You want to go out again?” Asked the Prince with an unhappy frown. Cassandra smiled to him and gently kissed him.

“I’ll be careful again, I promise. With Shareen and Krai, too.” The Dragon immediately raised his head, putting his hot snout against Cassandra’s thigh.

“I’m curious to meet that mischievous sister of yours,” admitted Shareen. “I do have a thing for troublemakers...”

The War God’s Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 59

The Smell of Rain

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

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

“Get up, sleepyheads!” Suddenly yelled a voice inside the room.

“Your Highness! You can’t barge in like that...”

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

“Come on, I want us to get out of there before the whole Palace goes crazy.”

“It’s barely dawn,” sighed Cassandra, sitting up too.

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

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

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

“Dahlia, could I get some tea, please?”

“Coming right away, my Lady!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She put a hand on her own belly, growing a bit bigger each day.

According to Kareen, she still had about four or three months to go before her son would be born. The Dragon tamers always came to the world early, but they would be healthy nonetheless. As long as she could endure one more week in the Palace, Cassandra could leave and have her son at the Diamond or the Onyx Castle.

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

"What are you worried about?" he asked.

Cassandra shook her head, giving him a quick kiss.

"It's nothing. I will go to my herb garden and then outside. I'll stay with Shareen and Dahlia."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Could it be... petrichor?"

"What the heck is that?"

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

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

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

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

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

"That potion probably came from outside the Capital," said Cassandra.

"They didn't make it in the Capital, the only reason would be that they must have found a better price having it imported from the outside... Someone must have bought a larger stock."

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

"So this is a dead-end?" Sighed Dahlia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When they finally reached the neighborhood Cassandra had set to target first, the young concubine was a bit lost. Where to start? This wasn’t like the Red District, where everyone knew pretty much everything that happened next door. She tried to think of what to ask, and as soon as she found a shop, walked to the merchant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After a while, Cassandra started to feel the fatigue, her feet and backed ached. She had been so adamant about looking for her sister, she had forgotten her pain until she couldn’t anymore. Shareen helped her sit in a chair of the closest tea shop, somewhere she could hide from the sun. Even for the first day of spring, it was too hot for Cassandra. She had spent terrible summers in the Capital, with a hard time coping with the heat. She truly wasn’t fit for extreme temperatures...

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

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

“I can’t believe we haven’t found anything yet,” said Cassandra, disheartened. “I really thought that last apothecary might be her...”

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

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

“I’m thinking, maybe I guessed wrong. Maybe Missandra already fled the capital, or she went to the poorer side.”

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

“Princess Shareen?” Asked Cassandra.

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

“Shareen!”

The War God’s Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 60

The Little Sister

Cassandra ran to the Princess’ side in utter panic. What was going on? Shareen had fallen off her chair like a lifeless doll! Her first move was to check her pulse and breathing, but in a matter of seconds, she realized

the Princess wasn't poisoned but drugged.

"Dahlia!" She called.

"I checked both cups, my Lady, I swear!" Replied the young woman, crying in shock. "I swear I drank from both! The tea was fine!"

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

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

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

"Come!" Suddenly said a voice, grabbing her wrist.

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

"Let me go!" Yelled Cassandra, despite the shock.

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

"Stop! Stop! I can't..."

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

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

“Who are...”

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

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

“Mi...Missandra?” She stuttered.

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

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

They were both in utter shock. Cassandra fell on the closest seat, her legs unable to support her a minute longer. She observed her younger sister head to toe, shocked to have found her but also shocked to see how alike they were, physically. Missandra had grown up to be a strikingly beautiful woman. Cassandra was pure beauty, but

Missandra was a cultivated one. Every detail of her face looked perfect as if it had come out of a painting. She had some light make up on, almond eyes and the piece of her skin visible didn’t have a single scar, unlike her older sister, who had marks everywhere. She was indeed a bit curvier than Cassandra, too, showing that she had probably gotten better meals while growing up. Her hair was cut shorter, to her chest’s length, and a bit more voluminous and curly.

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

“How did you...’

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

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

Of all places, they had picked her sister’s shop! She had thought about an

apothecary business but didn't think about a tea shop. Although, those were increasingly popular in that part of the Capital, as tea was considered a fancy drink.

Missandra nodded, taking off her hood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Missandra shook her head, trying to wipe her tears.

"No, it was probably nothing compared to you, big sister. To be taken as a concubine... I am so glad I took you out of there! Don't worry, I can

give you some of my clothes, and we can leave the Capital, they won't find us! I have enough money saved away. We can terminate the pregnancy, too, so they..."

"What? Missandra no!"

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

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

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

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

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

"No!"

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

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

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

"What is..."

“That’s my bodyguard,” sighed Cassandra.

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

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

“Missandra, it’s fine! It’s fine!”

“He’ll eat us! He’ll eat us! That dragon is...”

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

The Dragon, apparently unhappy or confused, kept growling over their heads, his huge claws tearing some of the furniture around them. His red eyes were glowing in anger at Missandra, despite Cassandra’s attempt to hide her behind her. 1

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

“What the hell is going on!”

“Shareen, are you fine?” Asked Cassandra.

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

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

“Yes, it is. Sorry, she’s the one who...”

“I drugged you, how come you’re already...?” Asked Missandra with a

frown.

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

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

"Hinue, li yunja ya..." Whispered Missandra. (

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

"Kaichira? Hinue, li snaira!"

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

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

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

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

"Alshengenui, Hinue. Li ghen..."

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

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

Apparently, she was still not over the drug incident. Cassandra sighed. Missandra, next to her, couldn't take her eyes off Krai. The Dragon had finally stopped growling upon Shareen's arrival, simply looking at them with his red eyes filled with curiosity, one paw on the last wall standing.

His nose was sniffing Cassandra, as if to check if everything was right. She gently patted his snout.

“That b... black dragon... That’s the War God’s...”

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

“He just destroyed my house!”

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

“Kidnap? You’re the ones who took my sister away! Snaira!”

Shareen frowned, annoyed, and turned to Cassandra.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“...Are you sure?”

“I am, Linue. Now, come.”

The War God's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 61

The Slave & The Prostitute

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

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

Cassandra, however, had other worries in mind. For some reason, she wasn't feeling too good about her sister being into the Palace. Missandra would be an easy target for anyone who wanted to harm her, and she clearly remembered Phetra's evil ways. The cruel Princess couldn't attack Cassandra as long as she wore an Imperial title and the symbolic pink dress, but Missandra, on the other hand, was a mere commoner she could kill without blinking.

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

Her apartments in the Palace had nothing to do with her own Diamond Palace, but Kareen was still ruling over the place like a Goddess over her temple. The servants, used to see Cassandra go in and out on a daily

basis, didn't even question her. Funny enough, the War God's concubine had less trouble meeting with the Imperial Concubine than the Emperor himself...

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

"Don't worry, little sister, everything is fine."

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

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

Cassandra bowed politely.

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

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

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

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

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As she talked, she kept glancing over all of the scars on Cassandra’s body, her lips trembling. The concubine was so used to seeing all those

scars, she didn't care much for them anymore. They had healed long ago, and even her Prince never reminded her about her damaged body.

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

"Missandra, what happened for you? I told you what we heard, but... I need to know..."

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

"It's mostly as you heard. I was... sold right after you, to a brothel. Until I was thirteen, they simply trained us, groomed us to be beautiful and seduce men... I had my first customer when I was thirteen, but, I wasn't tamed. I didn't want to lay and be a toy for them to play with... So whenever I could, I would rebel, cause a ruckus and make sure I was locked away from the customers for a while. I stole as much money as I could to, without being noticed. I had intended on buying myself out of slavery, but I didn't think someone would pay my debt for me."

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

Missandra nodded.

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

"...What happened, then?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Missandra, I promise he's different.”

Her younger sister shook her head in disbelief.

“They take as many concubines as they want, they toy with them and they throw them away like trash! Do you know how many times I've seen this, at the Red District? Some women are dying to be made concubines, and then a few months later, we find their bodies outside of the gates!”

“I am his only concubine.”

“He probably killed the previous ones.”

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

However, she still knew she was different.

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

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

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

“...your sister?” He asked in a cold voice..

“Yes. This is Missandra.”

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

“Can she stay with us for now?”

Big sister, I don't want to stay here! You should leave and leave that man!"

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

Kairen was surprised to hear the younger sister use another language, and even more surprised to hear Cassandra talk it back, just like Shareen had been. He looked down at Cassandra. (5

"What is it?"

"Let my sister go!" Suddenly said Missandra, not hiding her anger.

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

"I don't trust you to protect her, people like you made her a slave!"

"Missandra, my Lord is the one who freed me!"

"...I won't hurt her," said Kairen, still glaring at Missandra.

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

"I'll explain to her... Missandra, I promise, you can trust him."

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