

The War God's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 21

The Hot Springs

Maybe it was because he hadn't seen her for a while that Krai acted exceptionally clingy and demanding; growling every time Cassandra stopped scratching it. Eventually, Kairen had to intervene, calling for the dragon to stop and allow them to walk.

Night-time was already falling. Cassandra had no idea when the sun was supposed to set in the mountains, but the purple waves in the sky indicated it wasn't very late yet. Careful not to slip on the thin layer of snow, she followed Kairen closely. Perhaps due to Krai's presence, or because the Prince's tent was so isolated, there weren't many soldiers in the area. After a few minutes, however, they crossed paths with many soldiers who were heading in the same direction. A lot of them gave Cassandra a look. But as Krai was following closely behind her, nobody could afford to stare without getting growled at.

They progressed along, past the soldiers, but somehow, everyone was careful to stay away from the trio. Kairen didn't pay any attention to the soldiers, only slowing down to wait for Cassandra, who was walking slowly so as not to fall. She was curious to know where they were headed. The Prince had mentioned a fire pit, did it mean everyone actually ate outside?

Cassandra saw the flames long before they arrived. The fire was so high, she wondered how she did not notice it sooner. In the middle of the camp, a very large space had been organized with long wooden tables and hundreds of men gathered around them, making it loud and lively.

Kairen actually walked to what seemed like a special area, where a square of wood had been arranged with a throne, some fur over it, and a table with gold cutlery. It even had a marquee to protect him from the wind and snow. Cassandra felt a bit relieved that she would be able to sit on a warm floor, because some fur carpets were covering the wooden planks. However, once Kairen sat down, he grabbed her to sit on his lap. Cassandra's cheeks immediately flushed.

“My Lord!” she protested.

She could handle this kind of thing when they were alone in his room, but they were currently in front of hundreds of his men! And many of them were staring, too!

But as always, Kairen ignored her pleas and insisted that she settle on his lap. Cassandra was frustrated. She looked at him with an annoyed pout. Was there no end to his shamelessness!

“Good evening, My Lord,” said a man who was standing a few steps away, along with two younger servants.

He was probably supposed to assist Kairen during his meal, like was normal for the Imperial Family, but of course, the Prince had no need for that. However, to Cassandra’s surprise, he made a little gesture for the young man to approach.

“You. You’ll assist Cassandra from now on.”

“Cassandra?” repeated the man, confused.

Only then did he make the connection with the young slave on their master’s lap. That slave actually had a name! Regaining his composure, the man bowed lower.

“Understood, My Lord. How does the Lady need assistance?”

“Just do whatever she asks, and go with her whenever she leaves my tent.”

If the man was surprised by those orders, he made sure not to show it this time. Cassandra thought this man was obviously a trained Imperial Servant, not a soldier. He was too thin and too polite for that. He simply bowed.

“Understood, My Lord. This lowly servant will do so.”

Then, he stepped back a bit and stood there, waiting. The two young men behind him glanced at Cassandra, but when they realized she had seen them they immediately looked down again.

“Tonight’s dinner, My Lord.”

A large selection was provided, all presented on a large gold tray. Once again, Kairen had the best meat pieces, fish, fruits and bread. Cassandra

felt her stomach tighten just by the sight of all the food. She felt like she hadn't eaten in ages! Kairen caught her stare and chuckled softly, making her blush. He really never let an occasion to embarrass her go. Behind them, Krai growled loudly and laid down in the snow, circling their space with its huge body. Cassandra frowned.

"Isn't Krai eating?"

"He went to hunt already," replied Kairen. "Leave us alone."

The servants bowed and left the place, leaving them, but they weren't far enough from the soldiers to truly feel alone. The closest tables were only a few paces away, and Cassandra could see every man's face. Kairen started eating, and so did she. She was starving and actually took a bit of the grilled fish on a stick. After eating for a while and watching the loud chattering, she remembered something.

"Nebora mentioned a food shortage. Are the soldiers alright?"

On the tables, as she looked around she couldn't help but notice that indeed there wasn't much meat, mostly vegetables that didn't look too good either.

"The cold is chasing the biggest prey away. It's hard to hunt enough for everyone."

Cassandra slowly nodded. She didn't know much about hunting. All the food she had ever gotten was either bought, stolen, or found.

As they kept eating, she noticed a few stares on her, but overall, most were too cautious of the Prince and his dragon's presence to say anything. Though, Krai was only focused on Cassandra. The Black Beast watched every move she made with curiosity, tilting its head from time to time. She wondered if the dragon had anything to do while its master was at the camp. Maybe Krai would accompany her the next day?

"Cassandra."

Kairen handed her a cup. Cassandra took it, but right before she brought it to her lips, she realized it wasn't tea or water, but wine! It smelled strangely sweet and good, and felt warm in her hands.

"What is it?" asked Kairen after she had been staring at it for a bit too

long.

“I’ve never had wine before.”

He smiled and drank his in one go. Cassandra was a bit more hesitant, and tasted just a small bit with her tongue. It was good! She had imagined it would be more sour, not actually sweet. She drank again, under Kairen’s amused eyes.

“You like it?”

She nodded, her cheeks a bit pink. She drank again, feeling the hot drink go down from her throat to her stomach, bringing her some warmth. After a while, Kairen frowned and took it away from her.

“Enough. You’ll get drunk.”

“I’m fine, My Lord,” she protested.

But Kairen ignored her and drank the rest of her cup himself, then ordered for the wine to be taken away. Cassandra was a bit disappointed, but she didn’t dare to ask again, and shifted her interest to the cheese instead.

Suddenly, a big ruckus took place at one of the nearby tables. For a reason she hadn’t caught on, two men were now fist fighting and insulting each other. Cassandra was shocked.

“Shouldn’t someone stop them?” she asked.

However, no one around them appeared to want to stop the fight.

Actually, the men around were laughing and cheering, telling them to hit harder and get the other. Cassandra was shocked to see such violence, as well as so many people happy to witness it. Eventually, one of the men was thrown down and admitted his defeat. The men around laughed, and to Cassandra’s surprise, his opponent helped him up with a laugh.

“What...?”

“It’s fine. The soldiers like to fight.”

“But, it could have ended so badly!”

Kairen grabbed some meat and shook his head.

“There are rules. They are not allowed to fight their comrades with any weapon, disable them, or kill them.”

“Everyone respects the rules?”

“Krai gets an extra meal from time to time...”

Cassandra looked at the dragon. She had almost forgotten about Nebora’s warning. Krai was so cute to her all the time, she had a hard time remembering that the dragon was actually a man-killer too. Seeing she was staring, the dragon raised its head, curious, but Cassandra only sighed and turned her eyes to the men again. The two that had fought before were now laughing together and showing off their injuries to each other. Men were truly too complicated to understand!

They kept eating in silence. From time to time, one of the generals or lieutenants came up to pay their respects to the Prince and give him a report, but none of them reacted to Cassandra’s presence at all. She didn’t mind, as she didn’t want to attract extra attention to herself.

About an hour later, they were done with their meal, and Cassandra was starting to feel cold. With the night, an icy wind had come along and was biting her exposed skin. The men too, came to eat and left as quickly as they could, to shield themselves from the wind in their tents. She shivered.

“Are you cold?” asked Kairen, putting his hand on her back.

She nodded. How did he never get cold? No matter what, she had never seen him shiver or get goosebumps, despite being less clothed than she was!

Kairen stood up, and they left the table, without a word for the servants waiting close. But instead of heading for his tent, the Prince actually pulled Cassandra towards his dragon, and Krai raised his head.

“My Lord?” she asked.

Without an explanation, he whistled at Krai, and the dragon stood up. But instead of mounting him, Kairen only held on to an area behind Krai’s head, with his hand. The other held firmly around Cassandra’s waist, she frowned. She had a bad feeling about this.

When Krai suddenly took off, she couldn’t even find the air in her lungs to scream. The Black Dragon had gone up so quickly, she felt the wind whip her skin, and hid her face in Kairen’s fur coat by mere reflex.

However, she didn't have any more time to be scared. Before she realized it, her feet were touching the ground again, with Kairen's arm around her.

"Are you alright?"

She wanted to say no, but could only shiver and stay still instead. Kairen caressed her neck until her nausea was gone.

"Wha... Where..."

Her throat couldn't formulate any sentences, so she raised her head to look around. It was only at that moment that she realized they had totally moved locations, and were surrounded by a warm fog. Cassandra was completely lost. Where were they? But in front of her, Kairen suddenly started undressing, making her blush again. Couldn't he at least warn her before getting naked right in front of her!

"Cassandra."

She dared to look at him again, as he stepped into what seemed like a natural pool. That's when it finally hit her. Hot springs! They were at a natural hot spring!

Cassandra was amazed. It was a completely wild area, where dozens of cavities were filled with natural hot water. She had only seen man-made hot springs so far! Kairen held his hand out to her, and she undressed swiftly before joining him. The water was strangely blurry, and she couldn't even see her feet. She held onto the Prince's arm the entire time, too uneasy to let go. The ground under them was uneven and only Kairen was moving around without worry.

The Prince sat up in one of the hole's corners, while Cassandra was still glancing sideways.

"This is incredible," she whispered.

She just couldn't get the smile off her face, and observed the fog as it melted under her fingers. Meanwhile, Kairen couldn't take his eyes off her. Naked, with her long hair falling over her shoulders, Cassandra was truly a beautiful sight to witness. He moved her to sit on his lap, facing him, making her blush again.

“Kiss me.”

She softly smiled and obeyed his order right away, putting her lips on his. For once, she wasn't hesitating, and Kairen liked that. They kissed, slowly and deeply. Cassandra's body was finally warming up in the water, and Kairen caressed her legs below the surface. She shivered, but it wasn't because of the cold this time.

Cassandra put her arms around her Master's neck, kissing him more, and caressing the base of his hairline where it was shorter. She liked to brush it. Meanwhile, the Prince was busy exploring her body. His hands were slowly going up her legs, caressing her thighs, before stroking her little bush. Cassandra couldn't help but gradually react to his hands, and gasped as soon as his fingers reached her slit.

Kairen kissed her neck, breathing in her scent and exploring her skin with his lips. He hated that damn collar that kept him from entirely touching her. He would take care of it, sooner or later. He loathed the idea of anyone else having any kind of claim to her. She was his, entirely his. Angered, he penetrated her with his finger without warning, making her cry out in surprise.

“Ah! You... Your Highness...” she gasped.

But Kairen was too pissed to listen. He kept rubbing her clit with his thumb, while his fingers were going in and out of her, fast. Cassandra was lost by his sudden reaction, and could only clench her hips and bite her lip, undergoing this sudden treatment. She didn't want to come just with his fingers! (1

“My Lord!” she cried out, hoping he'd hear and at least slow down before she went crazy.

This time, however, he stopped and she caught her breath, her pussy still throbbing from this sudden torture she had endured. But the Prince was still angry, and hungry for her. Cassandra's voice had him excited, his member rose below the surface. He suddenly stood up, and guided her to stand on another side, in front of him, bent over the spring's edge.

“Spread your legs.”

She obeyed, yet having her butt exposed outside of the water was definitely the most embarrassing position ever. This was the last thought she had before Kairen abruptly penetrated her, filling her without warning. Cassandra moaned loudly from his brutal incoming, unprepared. With the Prince behind her, she couldn't see his movements, and only felt his strong hands holding her hips, while he started taking her fast and hard. She couldn't withstand his rhythm, think, or react. She could only let him do it, using her hands to hold on and cry out everytime he went in and out. It was brutal, erratic, savage, and she heard his hips slamming into her butt repeatedly, the sounds of their intercourse echoing in the springs. "My... My L... Ah! Please... Ah! Slow...Uhm... Down..." she begged in a hoarse voice.

She felt like she was about to explode every time he filled her to the brim. Her legs were shaking and her pussy was on fire. But, Kairen's frenzy wasn't showing any sign of slowing down. He just kept going, making her cry out.

Cassandra had no idea why he was suddenly so rough and insatiable, but among the mist, she couldn't respond. His hard member inside her was making her burn, with the frantic rubbing driving her crazy. She was surrounded by her own voice, crying out with pleasure in her ears. She had become another woman, one who took pleasure in her Master's brutal fucking.

Kairen kept going, and she kept moaning, her legs going weak. It was never ending, and she closed her eyes, feeling his hardness inside her. Her thighs were unconsciously clenching and her pussy throbbing as he hammered into her again, and she felt his pleasure coming as hers was near too. His penetrations slowed down, and he gave two last deep, brutal, poundings with a groan of relief. Cassandra, shaking, moaned faintly in response. Out of breath, with her insides reeling from the sudden change, she contemplated the sensations of the weaker orgasm that filled her pussy at the same time as the Prince relieved himself. (2)

She was too tired and her legs suddenly gave up from under her. Kairen, holding her by the waist, took a couple steps back and had her sit on him, as they both came back to reality.

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The Forge

Exhausted, Cassandra was still feeling numb even while lying on the Prince's lap. Her mind in a daze, she still felt her hot insides from their wild sex just a few seconds ago. She couldn't believe it. Kairen kissed her shoulder, caressing her hair. His recovery was faster than Cassandra's, and he observed her, as her eyes were still closed, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Cassandra?" he called, softly.

"I'm fine... I just...wonder if you've been holding back all this time."

He chuckled against her shoulder, and helped her to sit better on his lap, her arm around his shoulder. Looking at each other, they naturally exchanged a long, softer kiss. Cassandra wasn't afraid anymore to caress his face while they were kissing, and Kairen liked her soft fingers on his cheek. It lasted a while, as they sat still against each other, softly kissing and caressing each other. They were completely alone in the hot springs, under the night sky. It was a beautiful, eerie sight. Surrounded by the steam, the only noises were those of water, or night creatures coming out to hunt in the nearby forest.

The sky was clear, the moon was throwing a white light on them, making Cassandra's skin even paler than usual. The contrast with Kairen's dark skin was striking. The two were opposites, but they found the other even more beautiful because of that. Kairen was mesmerized by Cassandra's beauty in this setting. Her long brown hair was wet and falling like a cascade on her shoulders, floating around her when she moved around in the water. Her green eyes were shining bright, too.

"What is it?" she asked, blushing a bit from his intense stare.

"Are you unhappy? That I brought you here?" he asked.

Cassandra was a bit surprised. Was the Prince worried she was against coming here? Sometimes, his questions about what she thought or felt were so sudden and disarming... She shook her head.

“No...I’m glad you didn’t leave me alone.”

She couldn’t have endured so many nights in an empty bed, not after she had gotten used to the War God’s warmth. The only thing she regretted a bit was to be the only woman here. She missed Nebora and the others somehow. But if she said anything about that, she feared the Prince would actually go back and bring her friend here by force.

Cassandra and the Prince cuddled and enjoyed the hot springs a bit longer, not talking much in the meantime. Cassandra loved the difference between the hot water and the icy air outside, and wondered if she would ever feel like leaving. Especially when she was like this, held firmly against Kairen’s chest.

“Your skin is always so warm,” she whispered.

She had noticed before, but no matter the temperature, Kairen’s body never seemed to suffer from the cold. Even when they rode Krai, his heat was enough to keep her warm for the whole trip.

“It’s the dragon’s heat.”

He grabbed her hand and put it up against his chest, where his heart was, and Cassandra realized that spot was even warmer than the rest. She frowned, a bit confused and surprised. She could almost feel a core, like a fire burning inside his chest.

“Is it because of your dragon? Because of Krai?” she asked.

“We are connected...in some ways.”

As if it had known what his Master was saying, at that same moment, the large black dragon came back, landing on a big rock nearby. The dragon crawled down, walking towards them until its large body circled half of the spring Kairen and Cassandra were bathing in. Krai’s big head leaned towards her, and Cassandra scratched the dragon’s favorite area briefly. She had noticed how the Prince and his dragon didn’t even seem to interact or look at each other.

“Can he read your thoughts?” she asked.

It was a bit odd to ask such a thing, but Cassandra had always felt Krai’s actions were linked to Kairen’s temper somehow. His dragon growled when he was unhappy, got mad when he was upset... And they both yearned for her, too.

“No. Dragons don’t think like humans. But he feels...the things I feel. Some say our dragons are our instincts, some say they know our inner thoughts. Sometimes they know what we want before we do.”

While saying that, Kairen was intensely looking at Cassandra, and she knew he was talking about their first encounter. Krai had been instantly captivated by her, before even Kairen himself had spotted her in the crowd. Cassandra suddenly blushed, realizing what he meant. She turned to the dragon to avoid looking at her Master, trying to hide her embarrassment. 5

Krai, only too happy to get more scratches and cuddles from her, leaned in closer, growling softly. But Kairen wrapped his arm around Cassandra’s waist and brought her closer to him again. The dragon growled at its Master, a bit unhappy, but Kairen ignored him. Cassandra was still amused anytime those two got jealous.

“It seems like he has his own will though,” she whispered.

“He does. Dragons are not pets. He’s just connected to me.”

“Are you connected in other ways? Like your warmth?”

Kairen showed his arm to her, making her caress his skin.

“I have dragon-tamer skin. It’s thicker than humans. My vision is better too, and I can see you in the dark.”

Cassandra had noticed that too. Whenever they had sex in the dark, Kairen always knew her moves and expressions. He kissed her shoulder softly, while she was still observing the dragon. Krai had apparently given up on the scratches, and was just lying lazily next to them.

“He’s stronger than others, isn’t he?”

“How do you know?”

“I noticed it in the arena. The other dragons stayed away from him, and

they never turned their backs on him either. Is it because he's your dragon?"

Kairen looked up at his dragon, exchanging a look with the red-eyed beast.

"My brothers' dragons are not well-controlled. They are too weak to have their dragons listen to them."

Cassandra wondered if it was really only about their willpower. She felt like Krai's strength and behavior were linked to Kairen's personality, not his strength. Those were only her thoughts, though. She felt a bit sleepy, staying so long in the baths, and she leaned her head onto Kairen's shoulder.

"We should go back," said the Prince, noticing her fatigue.

They dressed quickly, and once again, Krai transported them back to the camp. Without them noticing, it had gotten pretty late. When the dragon landed in front of the red tent, there were only a few soldiers patrolling around. Once again, Cassandra did her best to ignore them, following Kairen in his tent.

Someone had made up the bed and had brought some more food to snack on, but Cassandra was still full and tired. She hesitated for a second, but Kairen brought her to lay with him under the covers, pulling the large fur blanket over them. She was still sore from the brutal sex earlier, and felt glad when the War God only laid beside her. He put his arm under her head and had her sleep over his chest, where it was the warmest. Her cheek against his skin and his fingers caressing her hair, Cassandra fell asleep in a matter of seconds.

When she woke up the next morning, she could tell it was already pretty late just from all the noises outside. It was still cold though, and she was alone in bed. She sat up, covering herself with the fur, and looked around. A dress was waiting for her on one of the chairs. Had he brought it with him when they had come here?

Cassandra dressed herself up quickly, and did her best to tie her hair up too. Long hair wasn't too great in such chilly weather, though she didn't

feel like cutting it either, since Kairen liked it long. Some breakfast was waiting for her, too. On a little gold tray, there was the usual fruit and cheese, as well as milk. Cassandra ate it slowly, wondering if Kairen had eaten here before going, while she was still asleep. She didn't drink the milk, and just grabbed one of the large fur cloaks in the room to cover herself up before going outside.

To her surprise, it seemed a bit late in the morning, as the men were already very busy. A few of them looked surprised to see her as soon as she stepped out of the tent, but no one dared to talk to her.

“Good morning, Madam.”

Cassandra had forgotten about the Imperial Servant from last night. However, the man was waiting for her right outside the tent, standing straight and ready. She felt embarrassed to have an Imperial Servant wait on her.

“Good morning.”

The man didn't add anything after that, and it was a bit awkward. Cassandra had a hunch that he would simply follow her everywhere she went, but it would definitely be uncomfortable if he just tailed her like a shadow, in that awkward silence all day.

“Can I ask your name?” she said, a bit unsure.

“My name is Evin, Madam. You do not need to ask my permission to ask things, Madam.”

“All right. Can you show me around the camp then?”

“Yes, Madam.”

Evin was a very cold, serious, and stone-faced man. Cassandra listened to him as he walked around, explaining to her how the camp, and it's two hundred thousand men, worked, day and night. Most men were there voluntarily, but the higher ranking men all came from wealthy or noble families, as it was hard to rise through the ranks. Military service was mandatory for any man in the Dragon Empire, but not everyone could join the War God's

Army. Hence, the soldiers in this camp were all considered the best, and were proud to be there. Aside from the regular soldiers, there were also

many other professions in the camp. Like the blacksmiths, servants, dressers and farriers for the horses, accountants, and there were even architects and strategists.

“The men are divided between three main units. The Cavalry, the Infantry, and the Artillery. Each is under the command of one of the Generals, and above them are two Assistant Commanders and then our Commander-in Chief.”

Cassandra already knew that Kairen was, of course, the Commander-in-Chief, the highest ranked man in the camp. She wondered if she had already met the Assistant Commanders.

As they kept walking around, Cassandra was conscious of all the stares she was getting. Some leaders scolded their soldiers for staring, but it was hard for the men not to notice a woman like Cassandra. Even covered in the fur coat, they could tell she was very pretty, with her emerald eyes wandering around. Her pale skin and slender figure attracted all the men’s eyes to her. It was a bit oppressive, but she did her best to ignore them and act normal.

After walking a while, she realized she had come to a large forge, where several blacksmiths operated. It was probably one of the hottest places in the camp, and also one of the most interesting to watch.

“Madam!”

Orwan had spotted her, and came to meet Cassandra right outside of the forge, his face dark from the smoke and ashes.

“Did you come to watch?”

“I just meant to observe for a bit, I was curious. I hope I didn’t hinder your work,” said Cassandra.

“Not at all!”

Orwan seemed a bit happy to have a visitor, and proposed to show her around the forge. Most of the time, they had to stay at a good distance from the blacksmiths working, but Cassandra was still very happy with what she got to see. Orwan was proud to tell her all about how their group contributed to the Prince’s Army, and showed her several weapons

they had already made that day.

“How is your arm, by the way?” asked Cassandra.

“Oh, it’s...fine!”

He hid his arm from her though, and Cassandra frowned.

“Can I see it?”

Orwan hesitated, and after a while, agreed to show it. It didn’t look any better. The flesh had turned a bit dark, and Cassandra shook her head.

“You need to get it healed properly.”

“I’m really fine. I don’t need to go to the Red Room.”

“Why are you so against it?”

“We don’t heal there! It’s not somewhere the injured want to go, Madam.”

Cassandra was not content to hear that. She turned to Evin, but he was already shaking his head.

“This is not a place for a concubine to go.”

That answer wasn’t good enough. Cassandra was wondering if she could insist when one of the nearby men clicked his tongue.

“A concubine’s place ain’t in a forge either! How about you go to His Highness’ bedroom? Or do you need someone else to warm you up, beautiful?” he said with a disgusting tongue noise.

Cassandra frowned. She didn’t want to get in any trouble, but Orwan got mad at the man.

“Show some respect! She is His Highness’ concubine! Our Commander-in-Chief!”

“She’s just a bedroom toy!” said the man. “What does he care if we play with her a bit too?”

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The Red Room

Cassandra stared at the man, a bit lost as to how to react. She was no stranger to men’s unwanted and dirty solicitations. As a slave, she had gotten her fair share. She even got touched a couple of times, though she

would rather forget those. She even found herself lucky to have preserved her virginity until she met the Prince.

“Isn’t she just a slave? We know our Commander-in-Chief doesn’t care about his concubines anyway! I bet he doesn’t care if we get a taste of this one either.”

“You idiot, didn’t you attend last night’s dinner? His Highness acted differently with this one,” said another of the blacksmiths. “Go ahead, Moar, but don’t blame us if you lose your head for that!”

Hearing this, the man seemed to hesitate. Actually, Cassandra also noticed the other men seemed torn as well. Those who had been leering at her were now reconsidering the question, looking at her in a new light. Some apparently felt the question wasn’t worth losing their life over, and got back to work, ignoring her. The man named Moar, however, clicked his tongue, annoyed from not getting any more support from his fellow peers.

“That little pussy. You better not wander off alone, Missy, or you’ll get a taste of me.”

Cassandra didn’t like the threat, but she did not respond. She felt that man wasn’t worth it, and anyway, she didn’t want to stay here any longer. He probably wouldn’t dare to do anything in plain sight, and with so many witnesses. Ignoring him, she turned around and left, her heart beating a bit faster than usual. She knew the kind of man that Moar was, and she really hoped she wouldn’t see him again.

“Should we go back to His Highness’ tent, perhaps?” suggested Evin.

Cassandra didn’t really feel like it yet. She had visited only a small portion of the camp, and she felt like she would be losing to that horrid man if she went back to hide in the Prince’s tent. She hesitated for a second wondering what would be the right thing to do.

“Madam!”

They turned around. Orwan had left the Forge to come to them, running, and out of breath. He shook his head, a bit fidgety.

“I’m very sorry about that, Moar is...a jerk, Madam. I’m very sorry, I

wish I could have shown you around some more.”

Cassandra didn't hold Orwan responsible at all. She didn't really care about the incident because it was only words and she was fine. Instead, she just gave him a gentle smile.

“It's alright, Orwan. Actually...”

“Yes?”

“Could you show me to the Red Room?”

He shook his head even faster, very embarrassed.

“I can't, Madam. It really isn't a place you should go.”

“I'm curious about it, please?”

Orwan exchanged a look with the servant, but as usual, Evin didn't betray a single emotion, staying quiet and still the whole time. It was hard to say what he thought about Cassandra's request, even if he had voiced his opinion against it earlier. However, he didn't say anything now. He probably had to respect Cassandra's choices anyway.

Eventually, Orwan sighed.

“All right, but...please, don't make His Highness mad at me for showing you this.”

“I promise.”

She followed the young man across the camp, ignoring more stares on the way. She wondered where the Prince was. Probably busy with some high ranked general. Krai was nowhere to be seen, too, so she assumed the dragon might have been napping or hunting somewhere. Finally, they reached a building that had actually been carved into the mountain, with a narrow entrance guarded by two soldiers. They only gave a glance at Cassandra's red dress, but let them through without questions. Inside, Cassandra was surprised to find several rooms that had been dug deep into the rocks, most of them were for storage of food or weapons. A lot of people were also working there, and seemed busy enough not to pay attention to the trio.

But Orwan took her to a further, isolated room, where he stood at the entrance. Unlike what they had seen so far, there was no one around that

place. The apprentice frowned and stood at the entrance, turning to her. “The injured are brought...here, Madam.”

“Here...?”

Cassandra took a step inside the room, and was immediately horrified. This was no place for people to rest and recover! The whole floor had been tainted with blood, a sad explanation for this place’s name. She walked in, still a bit disgusted, but she couldn’t ignore the dozens of men laying there, right on the ground. A lot of them were in a really, really bad state. Cassandra had seen a lot in her life, but the fresh wounds, cut limbs, and disfigured faces still gave her nausea, especially since nothing was being done for them. She even suspected there were some dead bodies lying among them.

“What about doctors?” she asked Evin, who was following her with his mouth covered.

“We don’t have enough at the camp. They usually take care of the most important soldiers first, which means the higher-ranked ones.”

Cassandra frowned. This was horrible. So many of those men didn’t even get the most basic treatment and were just left here to suffer! She looked around, but this place definitely wasn’t a place to heal. Orwan was right. This was a place to die. It was obvious that no one cared. There were a few men working around, but they only seemed to check on the injured, take out the corpses, and excrements. It was a horrid place, and that only made Cassandra madder. She kept walking inside, surprising Evin.

“Madam, don’t you want to leave? This place is...”

“These people need help,” Cassandra interrupted him. “This place doesn’t even have windows, or water.”

“Wh...why would they need windows?”

“The air needs to circulate! A stagnant place like this will only help the sickness spread around.”

“They will spread it if we take them out!”

“I doubt it. It’s way too cold outside, and the tents are spread far from one another. The cold would kill the viruses and they aren’t spread easily

anyway. Not when it's from these types of infections”

The servant was speechless. How could a mere slave know so much! Even for a concubine, this was truly hard to hear. Moreover, Cassandra didn't seem to mind the horrid smell, or sight of the injured men, at all. Instead, she kept going from one bed to another, observing the injuries, and checking around as if she was looking for something, or counting.

“Who is working here?”

“Only volunteers...or people who got punished, Madam.”

Cassandra turned to one of the men present, who had been observing her in awe. She addressed him, to his surprise.

“Excuse me, are you working here?”

“I came to check on my friend, Madam. He was injured last week.”

“Do you come every day?”

“Yes, Madam. I come in my free time, but...”

He didn't end his sentence, but shrugged and sighed helplessly.

Cassandra nodded, and started to interrogate the other healthy men that were present. Three of them came of their own will to check on their peers, the six others were sent here as a punishment from their superiors. They didn't seem to have any precise orders though. The Prince's concubine listened to every one of them, making them all the more curious to know what made a woman of her status so interested in this cursed place. When they were done, Cassandra turned to Evin.

“Is anyone in charge here?”

“Not that I know of, Madam, this is for the full army.”

“So, it's fine if I work here, right?”

The servant almost choked.

“If you what? You can't be serious! You can't stay here!”

“It's fine, I have to keep myself busy, and these men need help.”

“Madam, I strongly oppose this. Those men are not for you to take care of! I doubt Our Lord will agree to this either!”

But Cassandra decided to ignore him. She looked down, and tore a bit of her dress, using the fabric to cover her nose and mouth. Then, she turned

to the men present.

“Can you help me create a list of how many men are in here and their condition? There should be about...one or two hundred, right?”

The men exchanged looks. Were they supposed to listen to the Commander-in-Chief’s concubine? Her request was so odd and sudden. However, one of the men, who was there voluntarily, took a breath in and stepped forward.

“Yes, Madam. Last week, there were about a hundred and fifty-seven men, but more were brought in than were taken away, in the meantime. Can I ask how much you want us to write?”

Cassandra smiled, a bit happier now that at least one of the men was willing to help her. She took her fur cloak off, which Evin immediately held for her, and readjusted her hair up in a large bun while talking.

“I would like their names and ages, and the details of their injuries, everything you can see. Also, if you can find out how long they have been here for, or when they were brought here, that would be great. I guess it would be best to mark them with numbers also.”

As she kept exchanging with that man, Cassandra noticed the other men were listening too, and nodding from time to time. Even the men who had been sent here against their will actually paid attention, and once they started counting, even helped too. Evin stayed silent, but he was deeply impressed. She hadn’t used her power at all or had forced those men to obey her. She had just asked for help. It was her own behavior, and her will to help those men that had convinced the others to follow a woman’s direction.

He had wondered if she was just acting on a whim, but to his surprise, Cassandra kept taking care of the injured for several hours. With those nine men, plus Orwan, helping, her list was done in no time, and she read it over.

“Most slaves don’t know how to read or write,” said Evin.

“I know,” simply answered Cassandra, before writing something.

Then, she kept writing, under the men’s surprised eyes. They had no idea what to do in the meantime. Only when

she was done, did she show them her list. There was actually quite a lot written down.

“It’s unfortunate we couldn’t get everyone’s information, but at least we know where to start. First, we need to split them.”

“Split them?” asked one of the men.

“Yes. I saw several empty rooms on my way in here, it’s fine to use them, right? So, we should first separate the men with diseases and infections from those who only have wounds, before they get infected, too. Also, some of them are already in a terminal state, and sadly they won’t make it, no matter what we do. It’s better to give them a calm place, separated from the others.”

“Madam, do you mean there is...hope for the others?”

“Of course,” said Cassandra with a nod. “From what I saw so far, I think at least half... no, two-thirds of the men here can be treated and sent back to camp.”

The men were left speechless. They had thought everyone here was bound to die! How come this slave concubine said otherwise, and with such confidence, too? They had been here a lot and knew how bad some of the injuries were. No matter what though, the concubine’s words seemed hard to believe. But Cassandra kept writing again and frowning a lot, looking concerned.

“Actually, I don’t know much about the resources you have here. Do you get any medicine?”

The men looked at each other, totally clueless on the matter. Cassandra wasn’t surprised, however. The Dragon Empire wasn’t very advanced in healing techniques, herbology, or medicines. The very few doctors they had weren’t affordable for most people, who only went to their local apothecary for basic treatments and natural remedies. The common folks didn’t have even the most basic knowledge on how to properly tend a wound or treat a common cold. She sighed and turned to Evin.

“Do you know anything about that?”

The servant sighed. He had initially thought his job would simply be to

follow a whiny, airhead concubine on her wanderings around the camp, making sure she doesn't break her nail, or hinder other people's work. Turns out he had it all wrong.

"We have some dedicated accountants who make sure of the stocks provided and trade weekly with merchants. If there is anything that is needed urgently, we put a request in for some of the cavaliers to go and fetch it from the nearest village. Also, any trip the Prince makes is supposed to be to bring more provisions."

Cassandra nodded.

"I guess we could gather herbs around the camp, but it would be better if Krai could fly me to the nearest village to buy the first necessities."

All the men around looked at her as if this woman was completely crazy. Did she just suggest she would borrow an Imperial dragon??

The War God's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 24

The Prince's Arms

As if it was too impossible to think, the men present didn't even dare to comment on Cassandra's suggestion. How would a mere concubine borrow a Prince's dragon anyway? Wasn't she just a delusional woman? They all decided to just ignore it. That slave was already weird enough to willingly take care of all those sick or injured soldiers, so why wouldn't she think she could actually use the Prince's dragon. Maybe the Commander-in-Chief just had a thing for crazy ones.

"Evin, could you tell me where I can find those accountants? I want to speak to them, and see if we can get some necessities."

"I don't think that is a good idea, Madam. It is quite late already. His Highness might be looking for you."

Cassandra suddenly realized she had spent a considerable amount of time there. The Red Room didn't have any windows, and was only lit up by candlelight, so there was no way to even know if it was day or night outside. She had been so caught up in her task and notes, she had completely lost track of time.

“I’ll...I’ll go back. Is it very late?” she asked, a bit worried.

The Prince didn’t even know where she was! There was no way he would look for her all the way here, was there? She had to go back soon, or he might really be mad this time.

“We’re a couple hours away from dinner, Madam.”

Cassandra felt guilty. She still had some time, but she should definitely head back. She nodded and turned to the men, who assured her they would carry on without her, making good use of her notes. At least she could go feeling like she had done some good around here, but Cassandra still wanted to do more for the injured.

She said goodbye to the men present, and left, escorted by Evin. Orwan had gone back to the forge earlier, and the trip back with the Imperial Servant was a bit awkward without the young man present. Cassandra could feel Evin was against her actions, but he didn’t voice it outloud, which made it worse somehow.

Once outside again, she noticed the sun was going down already. The days were short here, which meant it was even later than she thought. Cassandra walked quickly to try and make her way back to the Prince’s camp, but a sudden loud growl stopped her. The familiar sound had everyone around her freeze and look up. In the sky, the large silhouette of a dragon was throwing its shadow over them. Krai growled again, and suddenly flew down towards Cassandra. She knew she shouldn’t move, but it was hard to repress that urge to run when a giant, black scaled beast was flying towards her. Many of the closest soldiers did run away in a fright, impressed by the dragon’s size and speed.

However, Krai landed a few steps away from Cassandra, its huge paws splattering the snow around.

“Hi,” said Cassandra with a smile. “Were you looking for me?”

The dragon emitted a long growl, and rubbed its huge snout against her. Cassandra scratched Krai’s favorite spot a bit before moving around the dragon’s head to climb up. Without the Prince’s help, it took her a few extra seconds until she sat up properly. She actually didn’t even know

where to hold onto, so she grabbed what seemed to be Krai's horns, hoping the dragon wouldn't hate it. Actually, the dragon didn't seem to mind at all, agitating its long reptilian tail around, splurging waves of snow on the closest men and tents. Krai kept moving his head around, as if trying to look at Cassandra, a bit annoyed.

"Come on, let's go see him," said Cassandra.

On the ground, Evin was still standing, as tall and quiet as before, but his face had turned a bit blue. He looked at the dragon taking off with the Prince's concubine on its back, standing still as ever. Once the dragon was a few meters high though, he couldn't hold it anymore. His legs gave way under him, and the poor man collapsed.

Meanwhile, Cassandra, who had no idea, was focusing hard on holding on and hoping Krai was indeed taking her to the Prince. She was flying on her own, and she was still very scared. She was a hundred and ten pound woman

on a several-tons beast's back! She didn't even dare to look down, and only focused on holding on to both the dragon and her cloak.

Thankfully, it was a very short flight, only a couple of minutes, until Krai started going down. She recognized the large area from the previous day, where the dinner had been served, except that the dragon was landing on another end, in front of a very large tent. Cassandra waited until Krai was very still and stable, then slowly climbed down, her legs still a bit weak.

The soldiers guarding the tent's entrance were totally speechless, looking at the frail woman who had arrived using the Commander-in-Chief's dragon. Cassandra was giving Krai some thank-you scratches as if it had been a well behaved dog. The men exchanged looks, completely lost at what to say or do. But Cassandra just walked up to them, looking as frail and innocent as usual.

"Is His Highness inside?"

"Y...Yes, Madam," stuttered one of them.

"Thanks," she said with her disarming smile.

The soldier blushed to his ears, and they quickly stepped aside to let her in. The men stayed a bit red and lost for a few seconds, but Krai's sudden stare had them go from red to white in seconds. (6

Cassandra stepped inside the tent, a bit unsure. To her surprise, there were quite a few people inside. Eight men were lined up in front of Kairen, who was sitting on his throne with a bored expression. One of the older ones was giving him what was apparently a detailed report about their latest weapons improvements. Staying quiet in the corner,

Cassandra wondered if he was a superior of Orwan.

After a few seconds, Kairen spotted her and held out his hand for Cassandra to join him. She couldn't help but smile a bit, and sneaked to the side, to join him while the older man was still talking. Most of the lieutenants saw the young concubine walk in silence to the Prince, but they didn't say a thing.

Kairen pulled Cassandra to sit on his lap, wrapping an arm around her waist.

"...with a higher precision, My Lord. That's it for today's report on my faction, Commander-in-Chief."

"You're all dismissed," said Kairen.

One of the men hesitated, with a frown on his face.

"But, My Lord, I still haven't..."

One glare from Kairen made it clear there would be no more reporting today. The man gave an annoyed glare towards Cassandra before stepping out. The rest of the men also left, leaving them alone.

As soon as they were gone, the Prince turned to kiss her longingly.

"Where have you been?" he asked, while taking the cloak off of her.

"Just...exploring...the camp..."

She had a hard time answering his questions, his kisses, and breathing at the same time. He pushed her hair behind her shoulder, and kissed the depth between her breasts, putting Cassandra in front of him, in that riding position that embarrassed her so much.

"What parts?"

"The Forge, and...the Red Room..."

Kairen stopped. He frowned, and sat straight again, facing Cassandra with a confused expression.

“What Red Room?”

“The one where they take the injured or sick soldiers. At the back of the camp, in the South Mountain.”

“What the fuck were you doing there?”

She became white in an instant. She had no idea he would be so mad about it, and she didn't even know how to respond. Kairen had never been furious at her before... She tried to step away, by mere instinct, but the Prince firmly held onto her wrist.

“I just...I was curious about it...”

“Why would you go there?!”

She didn't even understand why he was so furious! She breathed in, really insecure for the first time in a while, and shook her head.

“I didn't mean to...I just...wanted to see...”

“I forbid you to go there again!”

Kairen's yelling made her shiver. She tried to step away again, but the Prince's grasp on her wrist was too strong.

“I only meant to help...the sick! I...please, you're hurting me!”

Her scream was like an electric shock to Kairen. He suddenly let go, and Cassandra, who had been struggling all this time, lost her balance, stumbling backwards. Before he could do anything, she fell on her right side, brutally hitting the floor.

“Cassandra!”

He meant to help her, but Cassandra avoided his hands when he got close, getting away from him. She was shivering, holding her painful arm with teary eyes.

“Don't...please...”

He had never seen her so wary of him before. She looked at him with uncertainty, like a cornered animal, as if she didn't recognize him. But his anger was still subsiding, and he was breathing loudly, trying to contain it and not do something else that he might regret. He clenched

both his fists, and addressed her with a cold voice.

“To my tent. Now.”

Cassandra obeyed in silence, grabbing her cloak to put back on, and exiting the tent. With Kairen right behind her, she didn't even dare to look at Krai, who followed them, curious, unaware of the situation. She just walked as fast as she could to the Prince's tent, ignoring the sharp pain in her wrist and elbow.

It was an awkward but short walk back. Once she got there, she left the cloak on the bed, turning to Kairen, waiting to see if he was still as furious as before.

Indeed, he was.

“You are not going back there,” he hissed.

“What? But I need to go back! I still have a lot to do, I...”

“I said, no!”

With that, he threw his armor across the tent, crashing into something behind her. Cassandra closed her eyes, trying to stay calm. She held her tears in, and looked at him.

“Why not? Explain it to me, please.”

Turning away from her, Kairen stayed silent. She could tell he was trying hard to contain his anger, from his shivering fists and the thumping vein on his temple.

“My Lord, please, just...”

“Enough.”

He suddenly turned around, and walked over to kiss her. This time, Cassandra felt his strength and his anger in his kiss. It wasn't blissful at all, it wasn't like their usual kisses. She started trying to push him away, resisting his kiss.

“No, no!”

“Cassandra, enough!”

But she kept resisting, and opposing his hands which were looking for her body. Kairen was obviously much stronger, but Cassandra kept

opposing him, trying to elude his kisses and make him realize she didn't want to do this.

"Cassandra!"

As he yelled her name again, she suddenly stopped resisting, and stood completely still, not moving anymore. Kairen was completely at a loss. He tried to kiss her some more, but her body was so frigid, he had to stop.

3

"What are you doing?"

"You wanted me to stop resisting."

"Why are you doing that?"

He didn't even know how to be angry with her when she was acting like this.

"I can force you, Cassandra."

"I know that. I'm not resisting you."

She wasn't resisting, but Cassandra was still showing her opposition very strongly. She was inanimate as a doll, and that was it. Somehow, that made him even more furious. He suddenly punched the mattress right next to her, scaring her a little.

en me

"Fuck!"

Right after that, he stormed out of the tent without another word.

Cassandra let out a long sigh. She had been holding her breath for a while and felt dizzy. It was the first time she had seriously opposed him. She had never seen him so furious, either. Her legs were actually still shivering when she sat up, pulling her dress back down.

No matter what, she was still a slave and a woman. She knew being alive and so well treated was all thanks to Kairen's attachment to her. This could change anytime. He could kill her or rape her, and no one would say a word about it. That's the kind of world she lived in.

Cassandra stayed there for a long time, her arm wrapped around her knees, thinking long and hard on the edge of the bed. Her eyes were in a daze. She was tired, cold, and hungry, but she didn't feel like moving a

muscle.

She felt sad about what had happened. She didn't think that would happen. Cassandra kept thinking about the dispute, all of their conversation, replaying it in her head, over and over. Seeing Kairen's anger, again and again.

"Madam."

Cassandra was surprised to see Evin come in, carrying a tray of food.

"Evin. How...?"

"His Highness was quite angry, and is training with his men. Since I didn't see you at the dinner, I figured you might be...hungry."

Cassandra felt a bit comforted by the man's kindness.

"Thank you, Evin."

Indeed, she had been ignoring her growling stomach all this time. Before, she could go days without food. But since she had been with the Prince, her stomach got used to getting good and consistent meals. She sighed. She was hungry, but her head was too heavy to feel like eating either. It was a strange feeling.

"You look tired, Madam. Have a good sleep."

Evin left the room without adding anything else, leaving her alone again. From how he calmly left the tent, she supposed Krai had left, too. She truly was on her own.

Cassandra grabbed the fur cloak to cover her shoulders, and got up to eat a bit on the couch. She ate little bites, mindlessly, wondering when the Prince would come back. But even after she was done eating, he still hadn't returned. She thought about going to look for him, but their argument still lingered in her mind. He probably wasn't calm enough to return yet.

She laid on the bed, realizing how cold the sheets were without Kairen there. She missed him, his warmth, and the way he held on to her when they slept together. Strange how the body catches onto new habits so easily. (3

Much later in the night, she woke up to someone's presence in the bed

with her. Worried for only a second, she quickly recognized Kairen's familiar smell and warmth. Without a word, he laid next to her, his back facing Cassandra. Was he still angry?

She didn't dare to move too much, and just turned around to his side after a while, the closest she could without touching him. It was heartbreaking not to see his face. She stayed like this for a long time, in the dark, conscious neither of them was sleeping. Cassandra wondered if she should say something, apologize or bid him good night, but the more she hesitated, the more awkward it became. She opened her mouth several times, but with no sound coming out. 1

Eventually, she slowly moved her arm, and, timidly, her fingers reached for his back. She was barely touching him, but she felt his reaction, his breathing halting for a second. It was a short moment, in which she wondered if he would say something. But even after a while, Kairen stayed silent.

For the first time in a while, Cassandra really felt like crying. Was he really ignoring her? Was he still mad? Would this keep going on for a long time? Or was he going to get rid of her at dawn? She closed her eyes, trying to chase away all those dark thoughts, and not to cry.

That's when Kairen silently moved. Before she could react, the Prince turned around, his eyes still closed, and put his arm around her.

Cassandra opened her eyes, confused, and felt a wave of warmth and relief. A single tear escaped her eye, and she finally fell asleep, snuggling against his chest.

The War God's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 25

The Eight Scars

She was awake for a while, but unwilling to move. Cassandra just didn't want to come to the moment when they would have to face last night's issue again. She was still at a loss about the Prince's violent reaction.

Why was he so against it? He hadn't given any reason for his sudden anger from the previous night. Cassandra was afraid it would be the same

all over again that morning, and didn't dare to say a word.

"How's your arm?"

His deep, low voice surprised her. Cassandra looked up, finally meeting the Prince's eyes. The black irises seemed free from all anger, making her feel a bit better.

"I'm fine."

"You have bruises."

How did he know? Cassandra was still covered by the fur cloak, and held against him. Had he peeked while she was still asleep? And if so, how long had he been awake?

Cassandra shook her head slowly, and leaned a bit closer to his chest.

"It's nothing. I'm fine."

She meant it. Cassandra had experienced injuries that were much worse than bruises, and she couldn't even feel them at the moment. She knew it probably looked worse than it really was because of her pale skin.

Yet, Kairen seemed unhappy. He sat up and left the bed without a word, apparently just to get himself something to drink. Cassandra sat up as well, covering her chest with the fur blanket, concerned. She observed him for a while, but the Prince stayed silent, avoiding her gaze until she couldn't take it anymore.

"My Lord, can we talk?"

"What?"

"About last night. Please."

Kairen sighed, suddenly putting his cup down.

"I didn't mean to."

"What?" asked Cassandra, confused.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. It wasn't my intention."

She stared at him, completely caught off guard. Is that why he was so silent? Sometimes the Prince had such a strange way of thinking, she just couldn't guess what was going on. His silence wasn't from anger, but guilt? But it was just an accident! She had fallen as a result of him being a bit too rough, but... She didn't think he was responsible for that. Plus,

she was still a slave, and him a Prince! Even if he had slapped her, any other Prince wouldn't have felt anything about that.

"I know. I'm not upset about that," she said in a soft voice.

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

"No! Sometimes you scare me a little, that's true, but not now, not when we are talking calmly like this."

She watched him release a sigh, and felt her heart warm up a little. Is that what he was truly concerned about? That she would be really scared of him? Cassandra felt her heart melting a bit more for her strange War God, who could act like a normal man at times.

Kairen slowly walked back to the bed, sitting next to her, and Cassandra made the first move by giving him a little kiss. He grabbed her hair very gently and kissed her some more. For a while, it seemed like all the frustration and uneasiness from their dispute was washed away in that instant, with that long kiss.

They parted slowly, still sitting close to each other. Cassandra hesitated a while, but she wanted to ask him while things were still calm between them.

"What were you so angry about? Last night?"

"Because you won't listen."

"The Red Room. Why don't you want me to go there?"

Kairen frowned and turned to her, with a silent anger.

"Why would I want you there? Why do you want to go?"

"I only mean to help your men. The sick, the injured. I can't stand doing nothing, My Lord. This isn't how I'm used to living."

"You're my concubine."

"I'm a slave, also. I've worked all my life, I'm not used to lazing around all day, and spending money, or giving orders."

"Then do something else."

"Why not the Red Room?"

"Cassandra," he said with an angry tone. "I'm not letting you go. Do you know how many diseases are there? All the men there carry those

diseases. If you go there, you'll get infected and sick too."

She was stunned. She hadn't even thought of that, she hadn't thought of...herself. But Kairen had. He had seen what normal people would think, why everyone was so surprised to see a concubine among the sick and injured.

Normal people would prioritize their own health, but Cassandra never learned to think like that. Like any slave, she wasn't used to putting her security first. From her own character, she just thought of helping others. "You were worried...for me," she muttered.

"I don't want you there. If you get white fever or something..."

Cassandra pulled the blanket, and suddenly showed the little scars that were on her hip. There were eight little cuts, perfectly aligned, and were all the same size and shape. Kairen frowned, wondering what kind of weapon could do this.

"White fever, yellow fever, grey skin plague, the nine days disease, swamps sickness, black tongue plague, Samsah, and infection of Krah," she enumerated, showing each of the little scars. "I got all of those when I was a child."

Kairen frowned. Those were very common and deadly diseases that common people could die from, except the two last ones he had never even heard of.

"What do you mean, you got them all?"

"Back in the village where I came from, all the children are infected with each of those diseases when we reach a certain age. It's a dangerous technique our healers practiced, with a one in three chance of survival. But if we do survive, we never get any of those diseases again as an adult."

The Prince looked at her scars again, speechless. This was such a strange technique! To have the children pass this kind of deathly test, with that low rate of survival. But the diseases Cassandra had mentioned were the most common ones, and the main causes of natural death in the Dragon Empire.

He often forgot that Cassandra wasn't born there in the first place.

"In your...village?"

"Yes, my Lord. The Rain Tribe I was born in had...advanced healing techniques, compared to here, I think."

Kairen stayed silent for a while. Cassandra had mentioned her long lost younger sister, but aside from the fact that she wasn't born in the Dragon Empire, he knew very few things about her. To be precise, he didn't care. All of her past as a slave was something that made him angry, if anything. She covered her hip again, hoping this little explanation would have made him more inclined to let her take care of others, but Kairen was still frowning.

"But you can still get infections, and other diseases."

"I can take care of myself. I promise, I'll be careful."

Truthfully, Cassandra knew perfectly well she was still in great danger by doing this. The germs contained in the Red Room were probably different from the common diseases. She wasn't totally invulnerable, and her body wasn't even used to cold environments in the first place. It was still unknown how she would resist things like a common cold or fever. However, she was still stubborn about doing this. She would have done it even if she hadn't been vaccinated by her Tribe, but that's nothing the Prince needed to know.

Seeing Kairen was still frowning and silent, Cassandra bit her lip, and leaned a bit closer.

"My Lord, please. I can't help you with matters of war, and I will go crazy with nothing to do all day."

"You can accompany me."

"I will only hinder you and be useless. It's the same..."

She was really hoping he would agree, but he could be so stubborn at times. After a while, she saw him stare at her collar, lost in his thoughts. What was he thinking now? Cassandra waited in silence, as she couldn't think of any other ideas to persuade him.

After a while, Kairen sighed and got up.

“I want you back before sunset. And you stay with the Imperial Servant at all times.”

Cassandra’s face lit up, and she immediately got up as well.

“Really?”

Kairen nodded. He was a bit unhappy, but he didn’t add anything after that, confirming Cassandra’s hopes.

“Thank you, My Lord.”

“Kairen.”

She suddenly stopped moving, speechless. The Prince turned to her, walking in her direction again, and put his arms around her. Cassandra couldn’t react, still taken back by what she thought he meant.

“M...My lord?”

“Kairen. No more My Lord or My Prince. Call me by my name when we are alone.” &

Cassandra turned red then white immediately, completely shook. Oh, could she call him by his first name? He was an Imperial Prince, not even his own siblings were all allowed to call him simply by his name! Yet, he wanted her, a mere concubine and slave, to call him that! That felt even more intimate than anything they had done before!

“I...I can’t possibly...just...”

“Kairen. Say it.”

She shook her head, torn between confusion and surprise. She didn’t even understand that strange feeling of fear in her stomach, like it was something deeply forbidden. Cassandra felt like the sky would open and kill her on the spot if she dared to say his name. She had always been the one with a deep, solid vision of the walls between them; between an Imperial Prince and a slave. She shouldn’t even have been able to look him in the eye, or stand in his presence, if things had been normal between them!

But Kairen kept ignoring everything his own Empire had established as normal. He took a slave as his concubine, let her express her thoughts and desires, respected her choices, and now, he even wanted her to use

his first name!

“Cassandra.”

“I...I can't!”

She was almost more scared of that than anything else. As if the Imperial Guards would come in at any moment and kill her if she dared to cross that line. It was like the most unthinkable thing for a slave to call her master by his first name! She was so overwhelmed, her hands were shaking.

She kept shaking her head.

“I can't do that, I can't. It's not... You're my master.”

“I don't care.”

“I care! I'm not... You can't have me call you that, like I'm an equal to you. I'm not!”

That's what she had been told for the last ten years. She was a slave, a nobody who stood at the bottom of society. She didn't deserve comfort, warmth, nothing. She was treated worse than livestock, like a shadow who lived to do her chores and suffer in silence.

She had almost forgotten that, in the bliss she had experienced with the Prince.

Kairen had made her forget what it meant to be a slave. But Cassandra couldn't completely forget, and now, it was all coming back to her. She felt her throat become sore, and her eyes teary, from just remembering. Before, she could endure it, because it was normal for her, because she was used to ignoring her own pain. She had learned to close her eyes, let her body become numb and endure it.

However, things changed when she was allowed comfort again. Kairen had given her all that, so much and so fast that she had barely taken the time to adapt. The warm blankets, the tasty food, the gentleness. It had replaced the cold ground, scraps, and pain, so fast. But it was still there, like a scary voice, a monster lurking at the back of her mind. Like the scars on her skin, the collar on her neck. It was heavy and painful.

Kairen, seeing her distress, silently embraced her in his arms, waiting for

Cassandra to calm down. He couldn't understand what she had gone through, but he saw what it did to her. She had never panicked like that before.

“Fine... I'll wait.”

With those words, like she had been given a bit of rest, Cassandra nodded and calmed down in a few minutes. Meanwhile, Kairen was glaring at her collar. That damn thing had to come off, and soon!