

The War God's Favorite by Jhonny 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 Karen 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!”

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The Only One

As soon as Missandra had said those words, the War God's eyes became even darker, turning to Cassandra, furious.

"Who did that?"

"What?" Asked Cassandra, confused.

"Who dragged you by your hair?"

She shook her head, baffled he had been angered by something that had happened to her so many years ago.

"I don't remember, it was such a long time ago," she said. "The men who raided our village and sold us. Calm down, please, it is not important right now."

He kept himself from asking again, but Cassandra could tell from the look in his eyes, that matter was not over yet. She turned to her younger sister, but this time, Missandra seemed baffled. The War God's reaction had obviously defeated her expectations on him, and she seemed confused.

"Missandra, stay for a few days, please? We have so much to catch up, and I want to show you I'm not unhappy with that man. Please?"

Though her sister seemed unsure, her eyes on Kairen had changed from a glare to a doubtful look.

"...Fine. But I am not leaving you."

"That's alright," said a voice behind them.

As splendid as ever, Kareen appeared, along with two servants. Shareen, who was sulking behind her, immediately rolled her eyes.

"Princess Shareen? Didn't you go back to your apartments?" Asked Cassandra.

"That was the plan until Mother's people dragged me here to know what had happened."

So Kareen was already aware of the whole situation? Indeed, she was glancing at Missandra again, with a little smile. Cassandra immediately turned to her.

"Lady Kareen, is it alright for my younger sister to stay here? She'll be

safer with you...”

“Sure,” replied the Imperial Concubine. “I am curious, and she can act as one of my servants. Anyway, we shall all go the those New Year Celebrations. That old Dragon will make a fuss if I don’t at least appear.”

“Older Sister, that’s...”

“She’s a good woman, Missandra, you can stay with her.”

“Why can’t I stay with you?”

“I have to be by my Lord’s side during the Ceremony, and I would rather not show people you are my sister. They can use you to hurt me.”

“So there are people who want you dead!”

“Yes, but I am fine,” insisted Cassandra, taking her hand. “Missandra, please?”

The younger sister glanced at the three people behind her, still unsure, but eventually nodded, holding on a bit tighter to Cassandra’s hand.

“Fine... But it’s because I trust you, not them.”

“Likewise,” growled Shareen.

Cassandra smiled and caressed her cheek.

“I’m so glad I finally found you...”

They hesitated a bit before tightly hugging each other. Cassandra was on the verge of tears, but those would have been happy tears. After nine years separated, she had finally found her younger sister, alive and well. She could barely believe it after she had dreamt of this day for so long... Even as they stepped away, both sisters were reluctant to let go of the other’s hand.

“Cassandra, you should go and get ready dear, or you’ll be late,” said Kareen. “Do not worry, your younger sister is in good hands. I’ll make sure no one notices her, too.”

“Where are you going?” Asked Missandra, worried again.

“I’ll be right back, I promise.”

Cassandra smiled to her, before following her Prince outside. She didn’t like parting with Missandra, even if it was for a short while. However, the Imperial Concubine was right, she had to get changed before the start

of the Ceremony.

The New Year Celebrations were special of the Dragon Empire and put the whole Country in a joyous mood. When they got back to the Prince's apartments, Cassandra was surprised to find half a dozen Imperial servants, all waiting to help her prepare. Before she could say a word, she was taken into a whirlwind of hands, taking care of every bit of her skin and hair.

The War God, as usual, intimidated most servants away, and only got one of them to help him put on his armor. While he was ready why before his concubine, he was happy to watch her get all prettied up. Cassandra's shyness was terribly cute, as she kept blushing t every compliment or accessory given to her. He could tell his Father had sent a lot from the Empire's precious treasury. Every bit of jewelry she wore was sparkling on her skin. It was mostly diamonds, gold, and emeralds, that suited her and her pink dress best. The Dress Cassandra had on was exquisite, too. It was seductive enough for a Concubine's apparel, yet the pale pink and delicate fabric made her look pure as a flower. There were little diamonds embroidered in it, too, and several long layers flying around as she moved.

Cassandra felt relieved when all of the servants were chased out by her prince. She had never been good with crowds, especially not crowds of imperial servants all gathering around her to touch and manipulate her. She looked at herself in the mirror, surprised she could barely recognize herself. Was that really the woman who was just a slave a few weeks ago? Now, she truly looked like a Princess. Even her hair had been beautifully done, with little braids and some beautiful gold jewelry in it. She turned to Kairen with a smile on her lips and walked up to him. She had noticed how much the Prince enjoyed seeing her getting all dressed up, compared to her usual simple looks. Cassandra knew he was satisfied since she had been finally able to wear pink, too.

"...I want to take you right here and now," he whispered.

"Can we wait after the Celebrations?" Cassandra chuckled. "I think I

really like this one.”

He smiled and pulled her in closer. They exchanged a long, tender kiss. As he was sitting and she was standing, Cassandra caressed his neck and hairline, as she loved. After all the events of that day, she was happy to be back in his familiar embrace. She was slowly realizing how much she loved to have him close and missed him when he wasn't.

“Are you happier now?” He asked.

“I am. I finally found my younger sister... She has grown so much, but she's still a baby in my eyes.”

Missandra was sixteen years old, now, and Cassandra herself had turned eighteen a couple of weeks earlier. She was glad they had finally found their way back to each other, despite the years. It was better than if they had waited ten years, or never reunited at all. Cassandra wanted to feel grateful for that incredible chance.

“It is good then,” whispered the War God.

“Are you still concerned that I am unhappy here?”

He nodded, putting his forehead against her little tummy bump. She had noticed he seemed to like touching and caressing her where their baby was growing, too.

“As long as you are satisfied. Your sister can come anywhere.”

Cassandra couldn't help but smile, a bit moved by his words. She also had a tiny, little worry that had grown like a thorn in her heart, but Kairen had extinguished it without even knowing.

“Truth is... I was a bit worried, about you seeing my sister.”

He frowned and looked up, staring at her and wondering what she could have been worried about. He never had any intention to harm Cassandra's kin or anyone she liked. He wouldn't even have thought of hurting Missandra, he just didn't care much about her. He couldn't understand her train of thought.

“I wouldn't hurt her,” he said.

“No, I didn't mean it in that way. I was more concerned that you might... like her.”

Cassandra was red while saying that, and a bit ashamed, too. She had just found her younger sister, yet that hint of jealousy in her heart wouldn't go away. Since she had been with Kairen, her heart had grown into that of a woman's heart, and some darker feelings came along. She couldn't help it anytime she saw the other concubines, all so pretty and dolled up, constantly striving to get men's attention. She had realized her own jealousy and worry when those women had tried to seduce the Prince right in front of her.

Despite the joy of finding Missandra, she was also struck with the same horrible feeling after seeing her sister's beautiful body and appearance. Missandra had grown beautifully, with curves and natural charm, enough to make a lot of women jealous.

"I thought... She looks like me, but... prettier, and more womanly, too... I was worried you would... get attracted to her, more than me."

The Prince stayed silent for a few seconds, looking at Cassandra with a complex expression. She couldn't even tell what he was thinking, which made her nervous. Did she seem too shallow, or egotistic? She had never fought of herself as a narcissistic woman, but her words may have made her sound so... envious, and selfish.

After a few seconds, Kairen finally spoke, nothing she could have expected.

"She... looks like you?" He asked, looking confused.

Cassandra was speechless. Of course she looked like her! Missandra was so obviously her copy! How could he not see that at all!

"...You didn't think Missandra resemble me?" She asked.

"No."

"Really?"

"I thought you were very different."

She couldn't help but break in laughter after a few seconds of shock.

What kind of man was that! Even Shareen had said how they resemble each other so much! They had the same green eyes, the same pale skin, almost the same faces! People confused them for one another in the Red

District, too.

“...So you didn’t... feel attracted to her?” She asked, trying not to think about how that sentence could be shallow.

“Not really.”

Cassandra didn’t expect that at all. Her Prince had never seemed responsive to any other woman besides her, but Missandra was her younger, prettier and curvier copy. And yet Kairen didn’t feel anything or even see the similarities between them!

She couldn’t stop laughing, realizing how stupid she had been, and how incredible that man was. The whole thing seemed so funny now.

Kairen, confused by her sudden laughter, couldn’t help but smile too.

Cassandra rarely looked so genuinely amused, and her laugh and sparkling eyes were beautiful.

“Does it makes you that happy ? That I’m not attracted to your sister?”

She shook her head, kissing him softly. Then, she put her hands on his spiky cheeks, unable to stop her smile or the wave of love she felt for that man. She stared into his dark eyes, lovingly, her feelings about to burst out of her chest.

“I’m happy because you see me in this kind of way,” she muttered. “Like I’m the only woman you can see... the only one you want.” (2

He was a Prince. He could have any other woman, slave or noble, anywhere in the world, even the prettiest ones, yet he only saw her.

Cassandra, the slave, with her scars, thin body, and pale skin. She was among the least beautiful women in that Palace, in her opinion, but he never seemed to see that.

Kairen thought it was true, but was more surprised about how Cassandra didn’t seem to realize that sooner. Truth was, he had barely ever looked at other women, except to satisfy his sexual desires. He knew what beauty in a woman was, of course, but Cassandra had come and destroyed every standard he had long ago. Since he had set his eyes on her, this inexplicable and unmeasurable attraction he had towards that woman eclipsed everything else. She was the only beauty that appealed

to him anymore, and the more he learned about her, the deeper he felt every day. The numerous scars and the skinniness she was always so self-conscious about were, for him, only the infuriating reminders of what his woman had gone through. He hadn't even realized how he didn't care for other women anymore until she had pointed it out. What he had gotten aware of, however, was the devouring desire to keep her all to himself, and the bloodthirst for any man who touched or looked at her.

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He nodded, and stood up, holding her in his arms gently,

“...I want to see you in a gold dress.”

“A gold dress?” Cassandra asked.

She had never heard about gold dresses before.

“The dresses for Imperial weddings.”

She was left speechless. So women in Imperial Weddings wore dresses in... gold? How fancy! She had fought they married in purple, or in orange or yellow, like the commoners... She tried to imagine a dress of gold, but it only came as some strange sculpture in her mind.

However, she knew what he had meant by that.

“Can we ask your mother's permission first?” She asked.

“My mother? Why?”

“I am not sure it is a good idea... I want Lady Kareen's opinion.”

“My mother loves you.”

“I know, but she is also a very reasonable and smart woman. If I hear her opinion, I will make up my mind faster. Please?”

The Prince frowned. He didn't like the idea of Cassandra needing anyone else's opinion to become his wife. He wanted her to say yes here and now, and get married right away. That she would include anyone else in the matter annoyed him.

However, the Imperial Concubine liked her. She liked Cassandra a lot.

The Prince was certain she would approve and eventually nodded.

“Thanks,” said Cassandra, giving him another quick kiss.

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The New Year Celebrations

Cassandra didn't know much about the New Year Celebration in the Imperial Palace. In most modest families, a little dinner was made, prayers were done to the Dragon Gods, and the family spent the night in their garden or the streets, looking at the stars. Street fairs would appear everywhere in the Capital, for people to go out and enjoy the festivities, with the stalls full of hot food, prayer candles or incense and decorations. In the rich or noble families, the festivities came to them. The garden was set out for a reception, where they would invite friends and family, to watch entertainers and spend the night out. They wouldn't mix with the commoners, however.

Hence, Cassandra was pretty sure most of the festivities would happen inside the Imperial Palace as well. She wasn't surprised when her Prince took her to a large area, a garden surrounding a beautiful lake. With the night slowly falling, the colors reflected on the water were absolutely gorgeous. It was a very flowery garden, and the servants had to hang hundreds of decorations, paper lamps, and dragon puppets.

All the Ladies wore their prettiest attires. Thick makeup, every gold jewelry they owned was worn, and their dresses looked brand new and fancy as well. A lot of people turned their heads when Cassandra and Kairen appeared. Everyone but the Imperial Family had to bow, and that's when Cassandra realized there weren't many outsiders invited. She recognized a handful of generals, some ministers, and the Emperor's counselors, but aside from those people and their families, it was the full Imperial Family that was present. It equaled about a hundred people total, including all the Princesses and Concubines.

The servants were working hard, constantly bringing food and drinks to the tables, while serving the whims and being careful of each guest. For once, there was no Dragon in sight, but truthfully, there wouldn't have been much space for them to sit. The whole garden was filled with

people and tables, or the lake.

Cassandra immediately thought it was a beautiful scene; She stayed close to her Prince, holding on to his arm, and he guided her towards his mother. Kareen and Shareen were already there, and no one dared to approach the duo. The Imperial Concubine had picked a simple burgundy dress and some gold jewelry for her hair, but that was it. Cassandra knew how she didn't want to look like she had given too much effort in front of the Emperor. Shareen had simply put on one of her purple dress, and her military belt, keeping her sword by her side.

“Did you two get lost?” She growled when they arrived.

Cassandra bowed respectfully as she was supposed to, and Kareen gestured for her to come closer and sit next to her. The Imperial Concubine had her own table, big enough to seat eight or nine people, but everyone around knew there was no way all those seats would be used. She had probably been given a large table and close to the Emperor's out of respect, as one of the favorites and Princes' mother. The Emperor hadn't arrived yet, so the four of them were free to drink and chat freely. The chatting was mostly done by Shareen and her mother, however. Instead of seating with them, Kareen stood behind Cassandra, his arms crossed, without saying a word.

“What are usually the celebrations for the Imperial New Year?” Asked Cassandra.

“Oh, that old man will give a speech about it, then we get to see a few shows, some concubines might sing or dance, and we eat and drink all night until we are too tired.”

Cassandra was surprised to hear some of the Concubines might demonstrate their talents tonight. She hadn't expected that. The women usually watched professional performers along with the Imperial Family, but she had never seen any take part in it... She hoped she would be left alone, though. She hated having the attention on her, and would rather go unnoticed, staying by her Prince's side. (3)

“The ministers and generals usually use that occasion to have their daughters or younger sisters noticed by the Emperor or the Princes, too,”

said Shareen. “You can expect some fighting between the Concubines and the greedy newcomers...”

Cassandra understood that perfectly. No wonder all the young concubines had gone the extra mile to appear prettier than ever... They were probably hoping to eclipse all their opponents. Indeed, some younger girls by the Generals’ side were dressed in their best outfits, with lots of jewelry, and already sending glances here and there. Cassandra couldn’t help but frown, seeing some of them shyly eyeing her Prince.

“Those little pests,” sighed Shareen. “As if the Concubines weren’t already annoying and petty enough, they give them kittens to play with.”

“Do the Princes usually... notice them?”

“You bet,” scoffed the Princess. “Our fifth brother is a real dog when it comes to beautiful women, he just wants them all.”

Indeed, she could see the fifth Prince already talking to two young Ladies, despite the numerous concubines glaring behind him. How could he handle so many women...

She heard one of the servants behind Kareen click their tongue and smiled. Missandra had been given a cloth to cover her hair and most of her face, and a large servant’s dress. It wasn’t uncommon for the young servant women to hide their appearance, to be unnoticed. She was a bit relieved that her sister was hidden that way, yet able to be close enough.

“So shameless,” she sighed, swiftly going behind Cassandra.

Try not to be noticed, Missandra, please? She whispered.

“I will, don’t worry big sister. Who wants to be in those leeches’ way...”

“I still think you should have left that girl at your apartments, mother,” growled Shareen. “If she gets killed...”

“The one who got tricked by a sixteen-year-old girl does not get to speak,” retorted Kareen.

Shareen’s red ashamed face was an unusual sight, Cassandra could barely hold her laughter. Even Missandra made a little sound to show she was a bit proud of herself, and somehow, glad for the Imperial Concubine to

have mentioned it. Apparently, Kareen had managed to win a bit of her trust in that short lapse of time...

Cassandra could tell her younger sister was silently checking their surroundings and everyone present, but she silently prayed Missandra wouldn't do anything crazy, or put herself in danger...

Suddenly, the usual music announced the Emperor's arrival, and everyone stood to welcome the most powerful man in this Empire. It was quite strange to see that man arrive last, in his purple and gold outfit, without his Dragon or anyone to guard him. He silently walked, everyone around their head down, and took place in the large golden throne placed in the best spot, a little hill that allowed him to oversee all of the Garden.

"Please rise, dear family, dear friends. It is my highest pleasure to welcome you all tonight, as we burn the ashes of the past year, and open our arms to a new one, full of prosperity for you beloved Empire."

After everyone stood, he began a long speech, about the past and difficulties the Empire Kingdom had faced that year, but also the greatest accomplishments. Cassandra was surprised to hear him mention some difficult topics like war, disease and poverty in the Empire, but also congratulate some great medical discoveries, new markets or new alliances found with neighboring countries. She had expected a much more shallow speech, not something so deep, and found herself entranced by every sentence.

"In the light of our past mistakes, it has come to my attention that we shall retaliate, improve our ways and by so, enrich our culture and people. We shall no more turn a blind eye on the misery and suffering of others, and lavishly enjoy the blood spilled by others for our own comfort. The sons and daughters of the Dragon Empire shall act wise, strong and fairly. I, as the Emperor alone, am Justice. I am the Golden Dragon the rules over this Empire. For the new year, Your Emperor has a new edict to proclaim. Hear my words, children, and obey."

Cassandra was surprised, and noticed everyone around seemed as surprised as she was, and holding their breaths. What did the Emperor

suddenly mean to say ?

“From this year on, let it be known that the Dragon Empire will no longer ignore the misery of its people. Every child, man or woman in the Dragon Empire, is my people. As such, I declare, from this day on, that no man, or woman, will be the property of anyone but the Dragon Empire, and the Golden Dragon! Let it be known that the Golden Dragon will not turn a blind eye on the blood spilled and the lives taken.”

Just as she was, many people around were confused. Only some of the Princes and Princesses, and the scholar, seemed in utter shock.

Cassandra, too, couldn't understand what was going on.

She turned to Kareen who had an intriguing smile on. Next to her, Shareen was smirking, too.

“Lady Kareen, what does that mean?” Whispered Cassandra.

“He's talking about the slaves,” replied Kareen. “From now on, no one will be able to own any human being, the slaves will be the property of the Emperor and the Empire.”

“But that...”

“Father wants that no one will be able to kill a slave,” whispered Shareen.

“You cannot kill or harm the belongings of the Empire. Our people will have to buy them from the Emperor, which means a close monitoring of the slaves, and won't ever have the ownership to allowed them to kill their slaves freely.” (3

Hearing all those words, Cassandra was stunned. She felt like crying, but she couldn't. It was too much of a shock for her. If she hadn't been seated already, she would have most likely fallen to the ground.

Then, she realized the Emperor was suddenly staring at her.

“This year has been a year of great change in my heart. The Golden Dragon has seen many things and heard greater things. Because the most beautiful treasures can be hidden to the bright eye of a Dragon. Because the weak, frail envelope of a simple slave woman can hide a great knowledge to save hundreds of lives. Tonight, this Emperor is most proud of his third son, for the Black Dragon was wise to find a raw

diamond among the coal. Our Nation's God of War has done great, both in matters of War, and matters of the Heart. All rise in my son's name, Kairen, the War God and Third Son of the Golden Dragon."

In a few seconds, every person present was bowing, not towards the Emperor but towards Kairen, and Cassandra lost her breath. Seeing all those people, rise and bow to her Prince was an incredible sight. Aside from his father, everyone else had no choice but to obey and show their respect to the War God.

Her heart could probably not bear any more emotion, but she was about to bow when Kairen held her hand for her not to.

"Let them bow to you too."

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The White Lily

Cassandra was left speechless, and hesitant. How could all those people bow to her? The most powerful beings of this Empire were all gathered here!

She could understand them bowing to Kairen. He was the Third Prince, the War God with many achievements behind him. It wasn't just about his parents' relationship, he was truly a remarkable man by himself. No matter how much the Emperor loved his concubines, he wouldn't have been so proud of a useless son no matter who his mother was.

Cassandra, however, didn't feel like she had achieved enough to deserve such treatment from the Emperor. Her medical accomplishments had been restricted to the military camp, for a few weeks...

The Prince was holding her hand, and looking at her with that determinate expression in his eyes. He would not let her bow.

So, a bit afraid, Cassandra didn't bow, despite her hands shaking and that little fear, crawling on the back of her mind. However, as she looked around, the only other person not to bow was, of course, The Emperor

himself. To her surprise, as their eyes met, he gently smiled at her. That was the most heart-warming, unexpected exchange she had with that man so far. With just one look, he gave her the confidence she needed to keep standing and wash away that fear that her years as a slave had instigated in her.

“Alright, you may all rise,” announced the Emperor shortly after.

As everyone stood up, Cassandra only had one thought she turned toward the Second Prince and his entourage and, sure enough, the whole group gathered there was glaring at them.

Cassandra wasn't clueless about what the Emperor had just done by putting one of his six sons forward. Though he couldn't be named as the official heir yet, Kairen was clearly his favorite, and the fact that Cassandra was bearing his child was bringing the most joy to the Old Emperor. As soon as their son would be born, in a few months' time, the Third Son would be appointed as the official heir. 2

She tried to understand the reactions of his brothers. Sure enough, the Second Son Vrehan had a sullen look on his face that said it all. Anour, as expected, was as happy as usual, discussing with one of their sisters. The fifth and fourth princes didn't seem to care much, for one was gawking at the young ladies, and the other looked bored to death. The first Prince, however, was looking their direction with a gentle smile. Cassandra had heard little about the first Prince Sephir, but he was clearly favorable to Kairen being picked. Even during the usual Banquet Dinner talks, to which she tried to listen to a bit, he was often on Kairen's side and supportive of him. She wondered how was their relationship so good... ?

“Your Highness, this is too much! A lot of Nobles won't accept this change,” suddenly said one of the ministers, stepping forward. “Slavery is an essential part of our Empire's economy. Moreover, we are doing a great favor already to all those war prisoners by giving them jobs, and a chance to stay alive! We should...”

“How many slaves do you personally own, Minister?” Asked the

Emperor.

“I... I would say roughly thirty, your Highness, but my wife manages such things in my stead, so...”

“How much do you pay your slaves?”

“I... I am not sure... The usual amount for a lower servant, I guess...”

Several people around clicked their tongues. The Emperor sighed.

“My dearest White Lily, come here please.”

After a few seconds, Cassandra realized that the nickname didn't belong to one of the Emperor's concubines but to her. Kareen gently pushed her forward, and Cassandra walked up to the Emperor, who was holding out his hand. A bit hesitant, she put her hand in his, and he caressed it, like a grandfather would have shown affection to one of his grandchildren.

“Do you see this beautiful young Lady, Minister?”

The man had his mouth open, clearly confused. Despite her gorgeous pink dress, and the jewelry she was wearing, Cassandra's scars were visible. Thin white lines on her pale skin, like the disturbing canvas of the perfect beauty she could have been. He seemed to slowly understand but didn't dare say a word yet.

“My son has taken her for Concubine a few months ago, and she is now bearing my grandson.”

“C... Congratulations, your Highness...”

“Thank you. But before this wise son of mine picked this flower, do you know where she was blooming?”

“N... No...”

“Tell him, White Lily.”

“I was a slave,” said Cassandra.

The few people around who were guests and had no idea gasped. Some may have remembered the unusual incident that had happened during the Dragon's offering on the Red Sun Festival, and make the link between the frail slave back then, and the beautiful young lady standing to the Emperor. Both due to her Prince's care and her pregnancy, Cassandra

had regained a few pounds, and she was nowhere near the dirty and scrawny girl they had seen before.

“Exactly. This young Lady was the slave in the House of the previous Minister, the exact same spot you acquired six months ago.”

Cassandra was surprised. So her former Master had been replaced by this young man... He was as shocked as her, and bowed, a bit ashamed.

“I had no idea, your Highness.”

“My White Lily, how much did you earn back then?”

“N...Nothing, Your Highness.”

“Not a coin?”

Cassandra shook her head, a bit embarrassed by the memory of those days. Not only she didn't get any money for herself, but she also had to beg for scraps from the kitchen, and considered herself extremely lucky on the days she could have a hot meal, or have her stomach full...

“Do you think this young Lady is a War prisoner, Minister?”

“I... I would think it's unlikely, your Highness,” admitted the man.

Indeed. Any scholar present knew who the enemies of the Empire were, and none would include white-skinned people. Moreover, a young woman like Cassandra had nothing to do with war prisoners, who were captured on the battlefield, usually enemy soldiers. She was proof that the Slavery system was unfair, and put innocents in shackles for the wealthy people's sake.

“See,” said the Emperor. “A young woman was made a slave. Not because her country lost a war, but because some greedy scum captured young innocents for profit. Then, she was sold in the house of one of my subjects, and made to thrive for years to survive. No wages, only whips and work.”

Cassandra was blushing. She was standing next to the Emperor, the old man holding her hand firmly but gently, and hearing him tell her story, all eyes on her.

On the side, the first Prince coughed a few times, breaking the heavy silence after the Emperor's words before he resumed.

“And yet, did you know? That woman is a doctor. A precious, knowledgeable healer, with new techniques our own doctors are struggling to understand. Instead of resenting this Empire, who treated her worse than livestock and brought her to the very brink of death, she worked along with my third son. Despite being a young woman, she willingly went to one of our Army camps to heal our soldiers. Our people, Minister! Not just a handful, but hundreds of them were sent back to their units! I still receive her praises, day after day, from men on the front, from our own Generals. Now, tell me once again, Minister, I dare you to tell me how much your slaves are paid!”

Despite the shock, the young minister seemed reasonable enough to acknowledge his wrongs. He bowed lowly, not only to the Emperor, but to Cassandra as well.

“Not enough, Your Highness. I thank your Highness and the young Lady for opening my eyes on such unfairness. I promise to pay closer attention to my household’s slaves from today on, and will give your Highness my full support on the changes to be made in the Slavery System of our beloved Dragon Empire.”

Cassandra was surprised. Most people would have been terrified by the Emperor’s anger, but despite his obvious fear, that man was also truly acknowledging his mistake. Not only because the Emperor had been angry, but because he seemed shocked by Cassandra’s Story as well. Behind him, some other people bowed as well, stating they would do the same, and bring more support to the Emperor for his reform.

Meanwhile, the young Minister stood and bowed again, clearly to Cassandra alone this time.

“Lady, please, accept the apologies of this blind man for underestimating those issues. I am grateful for this lesson, and hope you haven’t been hurt by my ignorant words earlier.”

“It... it is alright,” said Cassandra, unsure of what she was supposed to say in this situation.

“The Third Prince is truly wise, for picking such a precious Concubine,”

said the Minister.

Behind him, many more people praised Kairen too, and Cassandra realized, this was a political move on their part. They wanted to make sure the Third Prince knew he had their full support early on after the Emperor has pointed him out.

“Alright, alright!” Declared the Emperor. “Please all of you now enjoy those Celebrations. No more politics, we will have plenty of time to discuss those topics later! Enjoy yourselves!”

A wave of applauds and praises rose before all the guests went on to chat, drink and eat. The Emperor, however, still was holding Cassandra’s hand, not letting her go, hence she turned to him. 1

“Are you having fun, White Lily?” He asked her.

“Your Highness, thank you for your generosity. That matter is truly important to me,” Cassandra replied, trying to hold back her tears of gratitude.

“I know, my dear White Lily. It is for me too. Now, tell me, how is my grandson growing?”

“Fine, your Highness,” she said with a smile, rubbing her little bump.

“Good, good! I can’t wait to meet him. Be sure to rest lots and bring him to me as soon as he’s born! You make sure to give my son a girl or two, after that! I want a granddaughter as cute as his mother!”

Cassandra chuckled. Did the Emperor want granddaughters to dote on instead of Shareen or Kareen? He smiled back to her.

“I have a present for you, my White Lily! Wait a bit...”

He gestured for a servant to approach, who was carrying a little chest.

“Look at this!”

Looking very proud of himself, the Emperor opened the chest, that contained... a gold tiara.

Cassandra was speechless. The design was thin and intricate, beautiful. Despite the little tiara being so thin, she could tell that was a valuable item. Moreover, aside from the gold, there were little lilies, made of white jade, with pink diamonds in their center, making her realize why

he had picked that item for her.

“Your Highness...”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful...”

“Isn’t it! I had one of our best Imperial artisans craft it for you. Wear it, wear it!”

She was a bit overwhelmed. Was it alright for her to wear a tiara? That kind of item was usually reserved for the Imperial Family... She couldn’t refuse the Emperor, and let him put it on her head.

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The First Prince

Despite looking so thin and delicate, the precious piece of jewelry felt quite heavy on her head. Cassandra stood up, and the Emperor looked satisfied.

“Perfect, perfect! I knew this one would be perfect for you, my precious White Lily! Now, go and enjoy the festivities! This stubborn son of mine will be mad at me if I keep you with me for too long. He and his sister never learned how to share!”

Cassandra chuckled a bit before thanking him once again and walking away. Sure enough, she felt many, many stares following her as she made her way back to her Prince, who was indeed waiting. He held out his arm but was staring at the item on her head.

“That old man...” He said.

“You don’t like it?”

“I don’t like you wearing another man’s present.”

His jealousy was really something else... Cassandra smiled gently, though, and gave him a quick kiss to appease him. It worked, as he helped her sit back with their little group. She heard her younger sister step closer.

“Hmpf. I guess that old man is not completely rotten to the core after all...”

“Are you admitting His Highness might not be a bad man?”

“...I’m still thinking,” said Missandra.

Cassandra knew how stubborn she was, and that having her revise her judgment, even just a bit, was quite an achievement after only one day in the Palace. She smiled at her younger sister, who blushed under her hood.

“Oh... So the wild kitty can be tamed I guess,” said Shareen, who had watched the whole scene.

Missandra frowned and turned her head away, ignoring Shareen.

Meanwhile, everyone had resumed their chatting and drinking, and the first performers had arrived, playing songs and singing to some hymn to the glory of the Dragon Empire.

“What language was that, with your younger sister?” Asked Kareen, whispering to her side.

“Our native language, from the southern tribes. All tribes spoke the same language, though each had their own changes to it...”

“It’s impressive you two remember things you learned so young,” admitted the Imperial Concubine.

“I used to sing,” suddenly said Missandra. “I remembered our mother’s prayers and sang it over and over again, to remember it...”

“I did the same,” whispered Cassandra, surprised her younger sister had the same reflex that she had.

In their tribe, children learned a lot of the language through songs and prayers. It was a big part of their culture, as respect to the Nature Gods Cassandra still firmly believed in. On the scene, the songs the musician performed were only about men. About the Glory of the past warriors, emperors, and savants of the Dragon Empire.

Cassandra hadn’t sung out loud in years... Her previous master had heard her sing once and beat her half to death for it. She accused Cassandra of cursing her in that savage’s language, as she had no idea what her song was about.

Cassandra was looking at the performers, and something silent and painful was blooming in her heart. She missed her homeland... Meeting

Missandra, so changed after all those years, had brought back memories she had buried deep in her mind. The familiar sounds of the water, the smell of the seaweed and soaked wood were still engraved in her. She loved the rivers surrounding her village, the wild streams, the fresh winds, and little waterfalls.

Playing barefoot in the mud, diving with her sister and swimming with the fishes, learning from her mother about everything treasure their Nature Goddess had to offer...

“Are you okay?”

Kairen had put his hand on hers, scrutinizing her with a concerned frown. Cassandra nodded, smiling back to him.

“I was lost in my memories,” she admitted,

She was about to add something but, not far from them, the first prince started coughing loudly again, so much that people were distracted to the performance to watch him. The closest woman to him, patting his back, looked genuinely worried.

Cassandra, too, frowned. This was a bad cough... She turned to Kairen.

“Do you mind if I...?”

“No, I’ll come with you.”

Kairen frowned, but she didn’t say anything to stop them. They both stood up and walked over to the first Prince, who had trouble catching up his breathing. Cassandra politely bowed to him.

“Are you alright, your Highness? Do you need any help?”

“Ah... Lady Cassandra... If... if you don’t mind...”

“He’s been coughing more than usual,” explained the Lady in pink next to him. “He had a bit of a fever, too...”

Indeed, he looked extremely pale. Kairen pulled a chair to help his older brother seat a bit, as the first prince’s concubines were gathering around. Kairen’s glare kept them at bay, though, leaving only the first concubine next to them.

“His Highness was born with weak lungs,” she explained. “Usually, he only gets sick once in a while, but...”

Cassandra was careful, but she had to check him out. She put her fingers on his forehead, confirming his fever, and put a hand on his back and chest as he was coughing again, closing her eyes.

“What are you doing?” Asked the concubine, confused.

“I’m trying to sense how are his lungs reacting to his coughing... The sound resonates through his thoracic cage...”

As the Prince’s cough subsided, Cassandra’s expression was getting gloomier. She knew that kind of chronic disease. It wasn’t so rare, but unfortunately, it had to do with his weak respiratory system, and she knew no definitive treatment.

She stood up, looking around.

“This kind of environment will make his Highness’ disease worse... The air is too cold, and the smokes from the food and candles will make him sicker.”

“What do you suggest, Lady Cassandra?”

“Put him in a very clean room, with fresh sheets and not one speck of dust. I’ll write you a recipe for an herbal tea, make sure he drinks it with a bit of honey and at a warm temperature, not too hot or too cold. Let him rest and sleep, I’ll visit tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, Lady Cassandra, thank you so much!”

As soon as she was done writing the recipe down, the worried concubine escorted the first Prince out. Compared to the other young ladies who were reluctant to leave the party and follow them, Cassandra could tell that one was genuinely loving and worried for her Prince.

A lot of people, who weren’t watching the first Prince’s exit, had their eyes on Cassandra, once again. The Concubines rarely cared for anyone but their own Prince, yet she had spent several minutes checking Sephir, and chatting with his favorite concubine, too.

She walked back to Kareen and Shareen, trying to ignore all the stares.

There were way too many people around...

“Father!”

All eyes turned to Phetra, and Cassandra frowned. Whatever that woman was about to say, she knew she wasn't going to like it...

"Isn't it time for the young Ladies present to show off their skills? It would be boring to only have professionals do it, right? Fifth brother, didn't you mention some of your ladies just yesterday?"

It wasn't like Phetra to praise anyone else... Shareen and Cassandra exchanged a look, unclear about what was to happen.

"Let me guess... This one is as cunning as a snake?" Whispered Missandra.

"Dieni. Stay away from her, Lihue."

Missandra nodded. She had already noticed how that woman was often glaring their way. It was indeed a nest of venomous snakes...

"Oh, I know!" Replied the fifth Prince, Lephys. "Where is the redhead! Show them!"

Cassandra was disgusted. He didn't even bother to remember his concubines' names! No wonder, when he had over two hundreds of them... Actually, he had brought about forty of fifty of them along to the party, which made a huge feminine crowd around him.

Cassandra sighed, glancing at Kairen.

"What is it?" He asked.

"Seeing your brother reminds me of how lucky I am," she sighed.

Kairen clicked his tongue. He could look over Cassandra touching Sephir for medical reasons, or getting close to Anour as he was younger, but he wouldn't let his concubine near that pervert Lephys. He was notorious for his complete lack of restraint when it came to women. He had even forced down two of the Emperor's concubines, who had been executed as soon as it was found out.

The red-headed Concubine stepped forward and bowed lowly, but did not introduce herself or say anything. Cassandra immediately noted how short her red dress was, and she wasn't wearing any jewelry. She looked very unsure and unwilling to be there. However, she took out two long

red ribbons and started dancing. It was beautiful, and the musicians soon began playing to accompany her.

After some time, she realized the concubine's two ribbons had started burning. She had to keep dancing, making the flames dance in the air, people having fun watching this. It was mesmerizing, watching to fire snakes dancing around, menacing to set fire to the grass under her feet or her red hair at any point.

When she was done, she threw her ribbons into the lake, the flames dying in the water. Everyone around applauded, and the young lady bowed before going back to the fifth prince, her head down. Cassandra could tell she had not done this out of her own accord....

"It was a bit boring, brother," said Phetra with a sigh.

Even though most people probably didn't agree with that statement, no one dared to interrupt an Imperial Princess. Cassandra frowned. Phetra had her brother put one, two, three, to six other of his concubines to dance or sing, one after another, but no matter how talented they were, she acted unsatisfied.

After the seventh one, Lephys was upset to see her still so unhappy.

"Aren't you too hard to please, Phetra? Why don't you suggest a performer!"

Her vicious smile appeared right away.

"Should I? I mean, I would be curious to see our third Brother's concubine perform. If she is so talented as everyone praises her, certainly she should have a talent to show us?" ?

Cassandra frowned. So that was what Phetra had intended from the beginning... To have her play an act in front of the whole crowd, reminding her she was just a Concubine. Kairen, furious, immediately put a hand on his sword, but Cassandra stopped him.

Next to them, Shareen clicked her tongue.

"If you need a show, I'm good at throwing knives, sister. I would love to show you how skilled I am..."

The threat was so obvious, no one dared to breathe too loud in the area.

However, Cassandra stood.

“If you want a performance, I’ll show you one,” she announced fiercely.

“Cassandra,” said her Prince, holding her back. “You don’t have to...”

“Don’t worry,” she said with a gentle smile. “I’ll be quick.”

Cassandra didn’t care for Phetra’s childish ways, but it was high time that woman stopped underestimating her like some toy she could freely play around with. If she was hiding behind Kairen to ignore her again, Cassandra would forever be seen as a weak concubine who couldn’t stand for herself.

It was time to get rid of that image, for good.