

The War God's Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 116

#116 The Old Emperor

Cassandra was rendered speechless. What was that young woman doing locked here? She had a chain around her ankle, too... She looked absolutely terrified. Her eyes were opened wide while staring at Cassandra, and she was curling up the further away from her she could, shivering like an injured animal.

Cassandra gently stepped closer, while Missandra and Opheus were left in awe at the doorstep. The young woman curled up even more, obviously afraid of her. In her appearance, she was somewhat reminding Cassandra of herself, months ago. She was very skinny except for her womb, and her lower lip was cut. Her body bore traces of old bruises, scars, and everything in her attitude screamed fear. Her long black hair was strangely short in some places as if someone had randomly cut it, and some of those strands were still lying on the ground. She was wearing a worn-out green dress, too.

"Who is that...?" Muttered Missandra, turning to Opheus.

The Prince shook his head. He had no idea, or wasn't sure, but all three of them could see that the young woman had features of the Imperial Family. It was very unsettling to notice that, with her current state.

Cassandra took a deep breath, and got closer, being careful not to scare her. That woman was obviously traumatized, not used to seeing strangers, and she didn't want to scare her.

"Hinue, what are you doing..." Whispered Missandra, a bit worried.

"We can't leave that poor woman here," replied Cassandra.

She looked for the chain, but it was closed with a lock on that woman's ankle.

"Mie, give me the key from earlier."

Gently, Cassandra approached the key from that woman's ankle. Each of her movements was extremely gentle, clearly letting that poor girl see what she was about to do. That unknown woman hadn't uttered a single

word so far, and Cassandra suspected that she wouldn't. Her quiet wailing was the only sounds they had heard from her, and she was shivering non-stop, unable to avert her eyes one second. It was as if they had locked eyes and neither of them could look away.

Cassandra tried the key on the lock, but it didn't match. She frowned, upset.

"This isn't going to work..."

"Let me see," said Missandra, walking up to her with a sigh.

Her younger sister stared at the lock for a while, and turned to Opheus after a minute.

"Can I borrow your earring?"

The Prince seemed confused at her request, but handed it to her. Under their eyes, Missandra started fidgeting and trying to force the lock with it. Cassandra didn't know if she should have been surprised at her younger sister's skill, but she was scared to ask how in the world she had picked that one up.

After a few seconds, they heard a click, and the iron ring fell on the bed.

"You little thief," chuckled Opheus.

As soon as he had talked, though, the young woman suddenly whimpered, staring at him like he was absolutely terrifying, and curled up even more on one end of her bed. Cassandra's heart broke a little witnessing this, and she turned to Opheus.

"Your Highness, would you mind... stepping outside a little bit?"

You're... scaring her."

For a few seconds, Prince Opheus made an offended look, but that woman's pitiful attitude was not something he could ignore. He eventually rolled his eyes over and backed away a little. Cassandra waited until he was completely out of sight, and gently rubbed the poor woman's ankle.

"It's alright... We won't hurt you," she whispered.

"Hinue, what do we do?"

Cassandra hesitated. She could never leave that woman here in her state.

She was obviously malnourished and mistreated by whoever had locked her up in there. Cassandra had a faint idea of her identity, too, but either it would be confirmed later or not wasn't her priority for now. She took a deep breath and turned to Missandra.

"Take her to Lady Mariana, she will know what to do."

"What? But you..."

"I will keep going with prince Opheus to find the Emperor. Missandra, we can't leave that poor woman here. Moreover, she is already dressed as a servant, and chances are high the Imperial Guards will have no idea who she is either. Grab the tray outside, and you can walk out with her and pretend you two were just bringing out some food for one of the concubines here. They won't worry about someone going out if they never saw you coming in, and if anything happens, Lady Mariana will be around to vouch for you."

Missandra hesitated, glancing at the woman. Would that plan work? That poor woman looked barely able to understand what was going on.

Cassandra insisted.

"Missandra, please. We can't leave her like that. It might be her only chance to ever escape that place and whatever they did to her; You know I can't leave someone in need, and she is pregnant, too."

Missandra sighed.

"Fine, fine. Don't worry, I'll find a way to take her out of here, and to Lady Mariana... God, Hinue, I hope we are not going to get ourselves killed for being too nice once again... Be careful, please. Even that Prince just killed a grandma without feeling the slightest sorry about it."

Cassandra smiled faintly to her. She had a heavy heart about letting Missandra leave here with that woman, but on the other hand, she would probably be safer out of Prince Vrehan's apartments, with Lady Mariana. If anything happened here, at least Missandra would have higher chances to survive. She had the wits to make it out by herself, and Cassandra highly doubted many people in here would even recognize her as her younger sister.

“So?” Asked Prince Opheus as soon as she stepped out of that room. “I already hid the body in another one of the rooms, who actually was a storage room this time.”

“Missandra will take care of... whoever this is. We should find the Emperor quickly, someone will notice that old servant’s disappearance sooner or later.”

Opheus frowned a bit for a second, surprised by her decision to part ways with her younger sister, but he eventually nodded. With one last look at the room where Missandra was left with the pregnant woman, they both got on their way, still trying to be as discreet as possible.

“Do you really have no idea who that woman was?” Whispered Cassandra.

“No... I mean maybe, but... to be honest, I might not like the answer.” She nodded. No matter how they looked at it, if Prince Opheus couldn’t recognize a young woman that looked so much like him and his siblings, something was definitely off and wrong about it. Moreover, if that young woman really was a member of the Imperial Family, for her to be locked up like this couldn’t mean anything good. The fact that she was locked up in Vrehan’s apartments was a big clue, and Cassandra clearly remembered the story about that missing sister of his, but... that pregnancy was a heavy mystery, too. She hadn’t said a word, but Cassandra had immediately thought about that abortion potion Phetra had asked for, and she was sure Missandra had caught on that too. 2
Cassandra’s thoughts couldn’t spend too much time on that matter, though. She and the fourth Prince were still looking for his father, and they had no idea how far or close he could be. They finally arrived at the end of the forbidden area, Opheus putting an arm out to stop her before they turned a corner.

“Guards,” he whispered.

Cassandra could hear them. The private militia of the second prince was most likely guarding the area, just as they had suspected. She frowned. How to get past them? They wouldn’t be fooled as easily as the Imperial

Guards, and they were out of decoys...

Next to her, Opheus took a deep breath in, shaking his head.

“This is the moment where I know I’m going to regret this,” he sighed. Glancing at Cassandra, he brought his index to his lips, indicating for her to remain there and quiet, and suddenly stepped out, his hands on his hips.

Cassandra gasped, but covered her mouth and waited, listening to what was happening just a few steps away.

“You!” Exclaimed the Prince. “Go and get me some eighteen-month refined jujubes!”

“Ju... Your Highness, no one is supposed to enter the second Prince’s residence while he is...”

“How dare you talk back!” Yelled Orpheus, his voice going a little higher-pitched. “I gave you an order! Or do you think you can disobey an Imperial Prince!”

“That’s not it, your Highness, but His Highness the second prince ordered us to...”

“Oh, so now you think I’m not worth the trouble? Because I’m only the fourth? Is that what you are saying? I am not a real Prince, perhaps? I don’t deserve obedience? You think anyone in my brother’s household is allowed to disrespect me? Are you talking for Vrehan in ignoring me? Is that what your master told you? The second is better than the fourth so you can just ignore him? Hm? What do I do to get some respect around here! Ah, poor me! I don’t even deserve to be obeyed by my older brother’s men! All of this because I was the fourth born only? Is that how my brothers are showing their consideration? Shall I go tell this dear mother of mine how her beloved son is disrespected? Huh?”

Despite the current situation, Cassandra had to repress a chuckle. The fourth Prince might deserve a prize for his acting skill. Opheus was talking non-stop, pressuring them relentlessly and she could hear all the men getting flustered by the sudden threat. The poor guards started talking all at once as soon as Opheus gave them a chance to, making a

little ruckus. She mostly heard them begging Opheus to keep his mother out of this. She waited a bit more, but he wasn't done.

“Really? Aren't you just standing there for nothing then! What is there even to guard when he isn't there! You are so busy you can't even obey me? This prince is hungry and you are all letting me starve! Where is it? There is no damn servant in this Palace, and all I can find is you useless people!”

“W-we have to guard, though, y-your Highness...”

“Guard what? Walls, perhaps? Three concubines sipping tea? What do you think I'm going to do with those women anyway!” 3

The flustered guards seemed at a loss for words, mumbling something Cassandra couldn't understand again. Opheus wasn't letting them much space left to protest, as they probably couldn't talk about the Emperor either. The guards were obviously at a loss on what to do without risking to offend an Imperial Prince. They most likely feared there would be retribution later if they didn't obey him.

“We... we will send someone, your Highness....”

“You better hurry! I want eighteen month-dried jujubes, a full bottle of wine, three red apples...” 2

The list went on and on, and Cassandra did not even know what half of his requests were about. Was he making up some of those on purpose? With the list being so long, the guards would have no choice but to send a lot of people to gather up all the items. Did that mean Vrehan had really left no servant in his aisle? That made it easier for them, but also didn't mean anything good for the Emperor...

After a while, she heard some of the men leaving. She had no idea how many there were initially, but Opheus' long list was obviously meant to reduce their number. He kept scolding for a while, and Cassandra was getting nervous. He was never going to be able to get rid of all of those men, there were at least half a dozen... 2

“You two,” said the Prince.

Cassandra froze. There were only two men left?

“What are you doing?”

“We will wait with you for the others to return, your Highness. We have to stay behind to follow the second Prince’s orders to guard this place.”

“I see... I didn’t know my brother was so adamant about guarding this place. Why are you two here instead of patrolling around, anyway?”

...We were given orders to stay here specifically.”

“I see...”

She suddenly heard a loud noise, and closed her eyes by reflex.

Cassandra recognized the sounds of a fight and, for a few seconds, she pondered about checking if Opheus was alright. However, if she came out too soon, she risked getting them both killed. Not knowing what was happening just a few steps away was frightening. For the next few seconds, Cassandra stood there and listened. Then, she clearly heard two weights hitting the floor.

“You can come out.”

She let out a little sigh of relief. When Cassandra stepped out of her hiding, the two guards were dead at Opheus’ feet, their throats sliced open in a little puddle of blood that was growing. She was disgusted but impressed. Those two men were imperial guards, but he had gotten rid of both of them within a minute. The Prince didn’t drop a pearl of sweat either, while the two men were obviously in a bad shape. 2

“Let’s hurry,” said Opheus, not commenting on what had just happened.

“We probably don’t have long until the others come back...”

Cassandra nodded. She carefully walked past both bodies, but they had nowhere to actually hide them. They had no time to find a good hiding place either.

Opheus pushed a door that was on their left, letting her walk in first. It was a very large bedroom, with what was most likely a large bed hidden by curtains at one end. Cassandra almost ran there, but Opheus caught her wrist before she lifted the curtain. Gently pushing her behind him, he lifted it first. A wave of relief appeared on his face.

The old Emperor was lying there, looking very pale, but his eyes were

open and staring at the two of them.

“Your Highness!”

“Father...” whispered Opheus behind her.

Cassandra was astonished. How could he have lost so much weight in such a short time!

“White Lily...” whispered the Emperor.

For the first time, his appearance was matching his age, but he looked very sick. Cassandra could tell he had high fever without even touching him, and the bony hand he raised was even thinner than hers. He grabbed her hand, shaking his head.

“Your Highness, what happened?”

“Vrehan did this to you?”

“You... Your son...”

Cassandra was astonished. He was asking about Kassian now? What was going on?

“He is born, your Highness, he is fine. But please, tell me what they did to you? Did they make you eat something?”

“Good...” whispered the Emperor with a smile.

Cassandra was devastated. He couldn't even seem to hear her questions, the poor man looked so weakened. He was nothing like the mighty Emperor she had seen just a few weeks ago. All this time, she had prayed for him to be alive. She had hoped to be able to save the Emperor, but he was already on the brink of death!

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#117 The Worst Father

There was a horrible silence weighing on them, except for the erratic, raspy breathing of the Emperor. Cassandra had no idea what to do. His lips were somewhat livid and purple at the same time, his mouth was dry, and the Old Emperor was obviously running a horrible fever. He had lost weight, too. Was there even something she could do when he was already

like this? She looked around, but there was only a little basin of water. It couldn't be that the poor old man had simply been left to die here! This was the Emperor, of all people!

Next to her, Opheus looked just as shocked and lost as she was. He hadn't given much thought about his father being sick, and seeing the ever-so-powerful figure now lying in bed like a dying old man was just too much for him. He stumbled back, at a loss for words.

Cassandra couldn't just sit still in that situation. She looked around, trying to find something, anything to help. She ran to the little basin of water, tearing some of her dress' fabric to make a compress. The water was just lukewarm, which made her even madder. No one was caring properly for the Emperor, how was that even possible? She walked back to him, trying to wipe away his sweat. He was no longer the powerful Emperor to her, now, he was a patient. A patient in a severe condition she couldn't allow to die like this. Not when she hadn't tried anything she could to save him...

"White Lily..."

"Your Highness, what did they give you?" She asked, desperate for an answer. "Did you eat or drink something? Do you remember what it tasted like?"

Cassandra was struggling to hold back her tears. If she had been in a proper medical space, with all of her plants, she may have done something. If she had only a hint for what had been done to the Emperor, anything, she could have tried something, but here, it was just too desperate. She had been too hopeful. She thought she could do something, help move him somewhere, or find a cure to whatever he had. She had never imagined it would be too late already. 3

Her fingers were trembling on the little piece of wet clothes, as she kept asking him, in utter despair. Even Opheus was remaining silent, slowly realizing how bad this really was.

"We have to move him."

He turned to her, staring at Cassandra as if she was crazy.

“Move him? We will be lucky if we get out of here alive! We can’t move him!”

“But we have no choice!” She retorted, almost crying. “I can’t heal him here, I can’t. I... I have nothing, and he is....”

Opheus sighed, and put a knee down, grabbing Cassandra’s shoulder. He tried to ignore his father while doing so, and contain his own emotions.

“Cassandra, you can’t. I am no physician, but I am not blind either.

There is nothing you can do to save my father, dear, not here or anywhere else. It’s just... too late.”

She refused to hear it.

Cassandra wasn’t an unreasonable woman, but this truth was too bitter for her to simply swallow. All this time, she had been looking forward to this moment. To when she would be able to heal the Emperor, get his help, and have him set things straight. Make sure Kairen was named as his successor, their family was safe and his brother’s madness was finally put to an end. She really thought they had a chance, as Vrehan was away. She hadn’t thought things here would have been so bad already. How many people inside this Imperial Palace had rallied his side already? How long had he been planning this? Maybe she hadn’t been able to see the truth, or just couldn’t. However, there had been clues. How poorly guarded this place was. There were fewer soldiers than she had thought, only because there wasn’t any way left to save the Emperor. Vrehan had deserted the Palace,

knowing he had already won this battle. His father was dying anyway.

What had he used? Poison? The purple lips of the Emperor suggested so... She wished she could have gotten at least one answer to her questions. Maybe then she wouldn’t have felt so powerless.

“Your Highness...”

“White Lily, don’t... worry,” muttered the old man. “Just... the Lake...”

Cassandra frowned. The Lake? What about a lake? Was he hallucinating?

She tried to get closer to him, but the old Emperor was weakening by the minute. Her heart was getting cold, seeing life leaving his eyes gradually

and with no way to help him. She leaned over his bed, trying to listen. Opheus had his hands on her shoulders, but he didn't dare to get any closer either. Somehow, he was affected by the death of his father, though they had never been close.

"Your Highness, what are you talking about?" She asked, wiping away her tears clumsily. "What lake?"

Was that a dying wish? Or something he had to confess? Cassandra was at a loss once again.

"And... Kareen... I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

"Your Highness, you have to hold on, please," she begged. "Kairen will be here soon. I promise he is on his way back, with the Imperial Army. We can..."

"Kareen... And the dress...."

None of what he was saying was making any sense to her. Was he reminiscing some old memories with lady Kareen? She couldn't tell. Why was he talking about a lake or a dress? Cassandra had no idea. Could she comfort him, or at least find a way to ease his pain? He didn't look in pain, just...

"Father."

To her surprise, Opheus stepped forward, grabbing his father's hand. He seemed about to say something, but just then, his lower lip twitched, and he stayed mute. A veil of emotions covered his face, and Cassandra's heart broke a little more upon seeing that.

This was the reality of being an Emperor's child. They had no real bond, not the one that should have been between a father and his son. Yet, this bond was present, now, manifesting itself at the cruelest moment possible. Cassandra felt his pain resonate through her whole body and felt even sadder. Even more defeated.

Opheus simply held his father's hand, in a long, painful silence. The Emperor turned his head to him, and faintly smiled, closing his eyes with some pain in his eyes. Cassandra couldn't take it anymore. Some tears escaped her eyes, and she bit her lower lip, devastated. He was truly

dying, and she was there, powerless.

...How touching.”

Cassandra and Opheus turned around in the same movement, surprised to hear a third voice.

On their left, coming from another door, was Prince Lephys standing with an annoyed expression. The fifth prince was draped in his purple robe, leaning against the wall with something like a smirk on. He was staring at both of them, shaking his head.

“You really had to do this kind of dumb mistake now, Opheus.”

The fourth Prince placed himself between Lephys and their father, looking furious.

“You fucking knew.”

Lephys rolled his eyes over, shrugging, and stepping closer.

“Of course I knew, you big idiot. Vrehan was always going to need an ally inside the Imperial Palace, and who else but I would have gone along with it?”

“Why?” Said Cassandra, shocked. “This is your father!”

“My father?” Scoffed Lephys. “You call that man a father? Do you have any idea what kind of father he is? He might be nice towards Kairen and Shareen, but do you think anyone else in this Imperial Palace holds any fond memory of our dear daddy? Really? What do you say, Opheus?”

Cassandra glanced at the fourth Prince, but he obviously had nothing to answer to that. Lephys was right, in some ways, and even Cassandra couldn't say otherwise. The fifth prince stepped a bit closer again. He was acting arrogant and totally unaffected about the dying old man behind Cassandra and Opheus.

“A father,” he said. “I wonder what kind of father doesn't give a damn about his children dying. How many of our siblings do you think died, over the years? Father had so many concubines, they all gave birth to his children... when they didn't lose them or died before that.”

“His Highness was not responsible for those murders,” retorted Cassandra. “The concubines...”

“Oh, I know. The concubines are the ones who always dirtied their hands. One of their rivals was pregnant? Let’s kill her. The baby was born safely? Let’s kill it! Who needs more children, anyway? The Emperor already has so many!”

Cassandra glanced at the Emperor, unable to reply to that. She knew very well how rotten this family was. She would never forget the horrible stories of how Lady Kareen had lost three of her children. That was one fear that had been growing in Cassandra’s mind ever since she had heard about it. That one day, sooner or later, Kassian would become a target too. He already was. She couldn’t even stand the idea of a child being injured, let alone hers! None of his children had done anything wrong. They were born, that’s it. They were conceived, without a say about it, and yet they were already used like pawns and killed before they could even understand the cruel world they had been brought in. Even those who survived had to endure countless scars. The pain of losing their siblings. The constant hatred coming from their step mothers, from their half-siblings. The monsters like the one Kareen had experienced...

“Do you know how many brothers and sisters I lost? I saw five of them die, but there were so many more. My own mother died, poisoned, and yet he didn’t even care. See, to the Emperor, no one but his precious favorite and her children ever mattered. All the other women and children were only there for his own satisfaction. He’s the kind of man who wouldn’t even weep for his own children to die, and yet you are crying for him? You are doing nothing but wasting your tears on some scum!”

—

Cassandra felt horribly bitter listening to this.

She understood where Lephys’ hatred came. Even his hatred towards Kareen and her children was somewhat justified, as he had suffered from their mere existence. Yet, Cassandra couldn’t agree to this. She moved slightly, placing herself between the Emperor and Lephys.

“You can’t trust Vrehan either,” she said. “Your second brother will get rid of you too as soon as he gets the throne.”

“I don’t really think so. I am his ally. Do you think Vrehan could have taken control of our Father’s council so easily if it wasn’t for my help?”

“You son of a... What the hell did you do?” Growled Opheus.

Lephys chuckled.

“Oh, I was rather active. Do you know how many concubines I have, Opheus? How many of those women are daughters of ministers, scholars, generals? It wasn’t easy, but if you look carefully, all those women are nothing but pawns for their families. If I just hinted a little bit at making one of them my wife, those whores were so quick to beg their father to support me! I have my own army of little sluts, all ready to do anything I want so that I’d give them a little bit of attention!” (3

Cassandra was utterly disgusted. This man was completely rotten, to use all his concubines like mere tools to get

what he wanted! Was that why Vrehan had decided to include his fifth brother into his plan? It explained so many things! She hadn’t

understood how he could have taken control of the Imperial Palace so easily all by himself. However, with three of the Princes absent, and one of the two remaining being on his side, all Vrehan had to do was to get rid of the Emperor, and all of his attendants had no choice but to follow!

“And you call our father scum?” Retorted Opheus, disgusted. “Would you call yourself a saint, perhaps? You’re worse than our father ever was!”

“Am I?” Said Lephys, tilting his head. “I am not doing anything our Father hasn’t done before. Actually, I’m probably nicer than him, as I don’t take any favorites. He used my mother and sisters like pawns for his own entertainment, for nothing but to make his woman jealous. What am I doing that isn’t the same?”

“You’re wrong,” retorted Cassandra. “It’s true that His Highness loved Lady Kareen, but he never wanted your siblings’ death!”

“Oh, are you trying to make me cry for the old man, darling?” Chuckled Lephys. “Don’t worry, I truly don’t care about his death. As soon as he passes, I will have Vrehan officially named at the new Emperor.”

“Just you wait until Kairen comes back and wipes the floor with your blood...” Hissed Opheus.

Lephys chuckled.

“Kairen? Oh, you are so mistaken if you think our precious War God will simply fly here. We have the whole roof trapped, every single wall. As soon as they spot a black dragon, all of our army will fire. He will be taken down like a fly!”

Opheus laughed.

“Is that why you hid Father’s dragon! You and Vrehan are such cowards, you can’t even face Kairen on your own and have to resort to such tactics! Did that coward leave you alone to defend the Imperial Palace, Lephys?” Saying that, Opheus took out a little dagger he had hidden in his sleeve. Lephys’ eyes suddenly went as cold as eyes as he saw this, and he took out a long whip as well.

“You are defying me, brother? You are many things, Opheus, but you are not a fighter. Are you really willing to die for this woman? For Kairen’s woman?” (1

Cassandra didn’t like how things were going. She didn’t know how strong either brother was, but fighting in such a tight room, a dagger against a whip, did not leave her with any good feeling about this. She kept glancing at the fourth Prince, but his expression was telling her this was not going to be solved with an easy win.

She glanced behind them, at the Emperor. He wasn’t dead yet, but his breathing was definitely slowing down. Maybe a few hours, or a few minutes, but it wouldn’t get any better than that. Cassandra had no idea how far Kairen was, she couldn’t wait for him.

“Don’t,” she suddenly said.

Lephys looked at her as if he was amused.

“What is it? You don’t even want to see me kill my brother? Trust me, it will be over quickly...”

“Don’t fight,” she repeated. “...I want to make a deal with you.”

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#118 The Bargain

This was obviously a desperate attempt on her part, but desperate she was. They had not foreseen the fifth Prince being an ally of Vrehan, and this was just revealed at the worst timing possible. Both brothers were just about to fight, and Cassandra could see very few ways they would get out of there alive and unharmed. No matter what, she had to make it happen somehow. She felt cornered, but in this position, she at least wanted to take Opheus and his father into where they could be safe. Anywhere out of the fifth and second Prince's reach would be nice. The fourth Prince hadn't asked to be involved in the first place, and if there was the tiniest chance for him to walk out of here unharmed, Cassandra felt that she at least owed it to him. She was well aware of all the risks Opheus had taken until now, more or less willingly, but she couldn't simply let him be killed now. It would be entirely her fault.

Meanwhile, the fifth Prince had raised an eyebrow, visibly surprised by her sudden proposal. He still had that . annoying smirk on, something that reminded her of his other family members. She wasn't so happy about making a deal with that man, and strangely, she wished Missandra was there. Her younger sister was much better at coming up with a plan to keep them out of this kind of situation. However, she wasn't there and Cassandra was alone to find a solution,

"What kind of offer would you make now?" Laughed the fifth Prince.

"Do you have anything to offer that I don't already have?"

"...You can have me," she said.

Lephys looked confused, and so was Orpheus, glancing at Cassandra.

She took a deep breath, trying to think like Missandra would think.

"I am not bargaining with you," he hissed.

Cassandra wasn't going to let go so easily. She had seen him flinch when she first suggested it.

"You don't want to fight your brother," she said. "You will both lose

time and get injured. Regardless of who'd win, you have nothing to gain by battling each other here. So, instead of... fighting him, I'll follow you without resisting. You can have me if you leave this place with me without fighting Prince Opheus.”

This time, Lephys pinched his lips, looking doubtful.

“...Why would you do that?”

“I will let you capture me without resisting, on the condition that you leave the Emperor and Opheus alone. You leave them here, and I will follow you to your residence, or the cells, wherever you want to take me.”

The fifth prince laughed, staring at her as if she was crazy;

“Why would I want to capture you? Do you have any kind of value? You are nothing but Kairen's woman!”

“I am his favorite,” she retorted. “Unlike your concubines, I am the one he deeply cares about. We both know he will come here, for me. No matter what trap you have set, he will definitely come.”

This time, Lephys seemed to hesitate, staring at her suspiciously.

Cassandra wasn't sure of anything, she was making this up. She wasn't sure of when her Prince would come back here, or how he would do, but she had complete faith in him. Something in her heart told her he was coming back, he was coming here for her. He would never let the Imperial Palace and her in Vrehan's hands. Maybe he was confronting his brother elsewhere, but if Vrehan had been chasing after Missandra and her, they were both coming here.

The fact that Kareen had already placed spies around her residence indicated the Imperial Concubine was definitely thinking the final battle would take place in the Capital, too. Even if he had left behind by his brother, Lephys couldn't ignore that his second and third brothers would come back here sooner or later,

“So you're offering yourself as a hostage?” He said.

Cassandra nodded. Next to her, Opheus was utterly shocked by her sudden change of attitude.

“Are you crazy, woman!” He yelled.

“It’s alright,” she said.

“Nothing is alright! You can’t do that!”

Cassandra turned to him, though she made sure to keep the fifth prince in her field of vision as well. She took a deep breath, trying to convey her words the best way possible for him to understand.

“I’m a sorry, Prince Opheus. If there is anyone else in this Palace who can do something for the Emperor, I don’t think it can be me, now. If I had the proper equipment to do so, I would try anything, but I am not in a position to do so now. It would only buy him a bit more time, perhaps. However, I can’t.”

She was very careful about her tone of voice and what she conveyed through her eyes, hoping he would understand what she really meant by that. Opheus was all focused on her, but with his brother listening, she had to be very, very careful.

“The only thing I can do is giving you more time with your father before he... before the Emperor passes. I do not want you to get injured or your father to be left to die alone.”

Opheus opened his lips, but did not say anything, looking unsure and terribly confused. Cassandra knew he would be smart enough to understand.

In this situation, Cassandra couldn’t do anything for the Emperor. She had no medicine, no tools. If she had had any chance to bring some in the Imperial Palace, she wished she could have. She didn’t think he would be held in Vrehan’s apartments, or in such a bad state already. She had to face reality. She couldn’t save him in the current situation, and even if she did her best, she may have only won him a bit of time, but not now, not anymore with Lephys present.

However, there was still a way. There was someone else in the Palace with knowledge similar to hers who could. Lephys did not know her younger sister was around too, but Opheus did. If only he could bring Missandra back here once she and Lephys were gone, and with some

proper medicine, maybe they could buy some time... Missandra was not as good in medicine, but she knew about poisons, and she had studied a lot from Cassandra over the last few weeks; Maybe enough to save the Old Emperor or at least win him some time. It was the one thing they needed the most right now.

Time. All the time they could save the Emperor before his sons returned
“...What is the trick?” Asked Lephys, squinting his eyes.

“There is no trick, your Highness,” said Cassandra, turning to him. “You already know I am not a fighter. I won’t resist. All I wish is for Prince Opheus and his Highness to be left alone. We already know the Emperor is condemned. I only want to leave him a chance to die peacefully, and for Prince Opheus to leave here unscathed.”

“...What tells me my brother won’t come and kill me as soon as I turn my back?”

Cassandra glanced towards Opheus, who was still glaring at his younger sibling. She could understand why there was absolutely no trust between them. It felt hard to even believe they shared half of their blood...

“You have me as a hostage. His Highness won’t risk hurting me and losing his chance to be left out of all this. I... coerced him into helping me all the way here too. He has nothing to win in this.”

Lephys looked doubtful. Opheus was not a good fighter indeed, and he was the one prince who probably didn’t care much about either side. He wasn’t close to any of his brothers. Seeing that he had helped Cassandra was already troubling, but it did confirm that he cared enough about that woman.

The fifth Prince hesitated. Where was the trick? He didn’t remember Kairen’s favorite to be a cunning woman, but he couldn’t process her sacrificing herself for his father and brother without winning anything back. None of this made sense, not even Opheus helping her in the first place...

“Why did you help that woman?” He asked his brother.

“Why indeed?” Sighed Opheus, putting his hand on his neck as if to

massage it. “Women are such mysterious creatures...”

“Answer me!”

Opheus glared back.

“Don’t start ordering me around. I helped her because I wanted to.

Satisfied?”

Lephys wasn’t buying it. He looked even more annoyed, fidgeting the fingers on his whip.

“You’re lying...”

“What do you know? Maybe Kairen and I have more taste in common than you thought?”

“Don’t take me for an idiot, I’m well aware of your tastes!”

Opheus scoffed, covering his mouth in a mocking expression and raising an eyebrow.

“You think you know me, Lephys? Do you think I’m anything like you rather than like Kairen, perhaps? You idiot...”

Suddenly, Opheus turned to Cassandra and, before she could make a move, he grabbed her chin between his fingers and kissed her.

That action shocked her just as much as the fifth prince. She couldn’t react, her whole body froze. Opheus’ kiss was deep, using his tongue and aggressively playing with her mouth. Facing that scene, Lephys’ eyes were wide open, even his mouth. Cassandra realized half-way that this wasn’t just a mere kiss and, coming back to her senses, she pushed the Prince away, blushing. She had never been kissed by another man before! However, this wasn’t her only concern. She was completely flustered by the kiss, but Opheus had grabbed her hand during that moment, and put something between her fingers. Everything had happened so fast that she had to focus to hide it quickly.

“...You’re absolutely gross,” said Lephys, still in shock.

“Oh, dear, you’re not going to tell us you’re a virgin, are you?” Retorted Opheus with a smirk.

Lephys was not amused. He suddenly raised his whip and slashed in the

air. Though it may have seemed like a mere anger outburst, the whipping still left a big dent in the nearest wall. Cassandra couldn't help but shiver.

If

he could cut that deep into the wood with just a whip, she didn't want to imagine, what if he used that on a human body...

"Fine! I'm taking that woman with me, but don't you dare move our father anywhere, Opheus. You can't anyway. I have my guards and brother's men surrounding the Palace, no one can come out!"

That was more than disputable, considering that Cassandra and Missandra had managed to walk in despite the security, but surely, the Emperor's health wouldn't allow to move him anywhere again...

Lephys walked over, and though Opheus still had his weapon in hand, both brothers only glared at each other. It was like two beasts in a room, ready to jump at each other's throat. If there had been any brotherly love between those two, it was now definitely gone. Cassandra stepped forward, trying to place herself between the two men, hoping this would work, somehow.

"You take care of yourself," whispered Opheus to her, though he was still glaring non-stop at his younger brother.

"Thank you..."

Lephys brutally grabbed Cassandra's wrist, pulling her to his side, and away from Opheus.

"You better not go anywhere, Opheus..."

"And where should I go?" Retorted his older brother, pissed.

Lephys made a sour face, but he had nothing to answer to that. Agitating his whip once again, he wrapped it around Cassandra's wrists, pulling them together, tightly trapped. She made a grimace, the fiber painfully cutting through her skin a bit. Opheus saw that too, but did not say a thing.

"Fine," hissed Lephys.

As they were still glaring at each other, Lephys pulled Cassandra to leave the room with him. She glanced back once more at Opheus. Maybe she

dreamed it, but she saw him very slightly nod with a determined expression. Had he understood her silent plea? Was he going to send someone for Missandra, or find a way to have her come to help the Emperor? She could only hope so.

It was too late, now. Lephys was quickly dragging Cassandra away, walking confidently across Vrehan's apartments. He was obviously in charge, with his brother gone. None of the guards they crossed paths with said a thing, and the servants didn't dare raise their heads either. They knew, thought Cassandra. All the people working there were already obeying the second and fifth prince as if the power was already theirs all over the Imperial Palace...

Somewhere in her heart, Cassandra was utterly disgusted. The Emperor had probably taken years and years to establish himself over this Palace, and worked for years to keep his Empire afloat, and yet it was overthrown so easily. Fear and Envy were getting the best of all those people. They didn't care which master they served, as long as they could keep their positions and money. She thought about Lephys' speech earlier about his concubines. It was always the same. People killed and threw their lives away for greed...

"How did you get inside the Palace, to begin with?" Suddenly asked Lephys as they were still walking.

"...I paid a servant to help me," she lied.

She deliberately made it sound like she had used someone she hadn't known before, so Lephys wouldn't try to find and kill the culprit. He wouldn't lose his time over a simple corruption.

"Tsk... Those little rats cannot be trusted."

Cassandra didn't add anything else. Lephys wasn't Opheus. He would have no compassion for her, and the only reason she was alive at that moment was her relationship with Kairen.

She tried to think of her next move. How was she going to get out of this situation now? She was captured so easily, it was almost laughable. She kept following Lephys. He didn't seem to fear she was going to escape,

but his whip was tied tight around her wrists. Cassandra tried to remain calm.

“Where are you taking me...?” She asked. “To the cells?”

“Oh, no, darling, that would be too obvious and boring. No... I have other plans for you.”

He suddenly turned around to face her, grabbing Cassandra throat in his hand. She almost choked, barely breathing as he was tightening his grip. He had a dark, sadistic light in his eyes, something that reminded her of his vicious older brother.

“I don’t get a chance to make my annoying older brother suffer often, but if I can, I will. I wonder what will Kairen do when he learns I had my fun with his precious woman? I knew you were interesting from the day we met, and though I find you rather ugly, you will still be a nice toy before they come back...”

Cassandra’s blood left her face.

The War God’s Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 119

#119 The White Witch

She could barely breathe, his tight fingers around her throat, yet all her blood had left her face. Her limbs were tingling, as she was fighting to stay awake. Facing her, Lephys was enjoying her panicked state, his grip tightening as a vicious smirk was spreading on his lips. This time, he really resembled Vrehan, with that look in his eyes. Cassandra tried to think, to grab his wrist, but he suddenly let go. .

Cassandra fell on her knees, coughing and gasping for some air. She could already tell the bruises he had left on her skin, but for now, she was just focused on recovering as fast as she could. She had to stay alert.

“I don’t trust Opheus enough to stay here,” he said.

Then, he grabbed her wrists, still tightly blocked in his whip, and pulled, making her fall forward, painfully hurting her shoulder. Cassandra grimaced. She had flashbacks of that time she had been dragged across

the Palace, the day of the Celebrations... This time, she fought to get up before he could drag her on the floor anymore. Lephys had started walking, without caring if she was following or not, his whip acting like a leash that would drag her along. Painfully, Cassandra managed to find her balance and get back on her feet right on time. With her hands so tightly tied like this, she had no choice but to follow him inside the corridors,

She couldn't recognize where they were headed at, but she didn't like that they were getting deeper inside the Palace and further away from the Emperor. Cassandra prayed that the fourth Brother would get Missandra to the Old Emperor, and somehow find a way to save the old man...

Lephys looked absolutely sure of himself as he was walking through the many, many corridors. Were his apartments always this far? Cassandra was completely lost, but then, she recognized an area they were in.

The Lake. They were close to the large garden, the one where the New Year Celebrations had been held a few weeks prior. She recognized the corridor they were walking through the same one that she and Kairen had isolated themselves in... Those memories had her blush slightly despite the situation. If only she could go back to those days, to those strong arms. However, she had more pressing matters to think about. The Emperor had tried to tell her something about the Lake, what was it? She could now see it through the windows, but no matter how many times she tried to glance at it, there was nothing special happening there. There weren't even any concubines chatting or taking the tea, or servants walking by! Most of the Imperial Palace seemed strangely empty now... Suddenly, two horn blows resonated throughout the Palace's walls. Lephys, still walking ahead of her, suddenly stopped, and grimaced, turning his head.

"Damn it! That bastard is back sooner than I expected!"

"What? Who?" Asked Cassandra, a cold shiver running down her spine.

"Vrehan! Anyway, let's do this quick before he gets here..."

As he dragged her faster, Cassandra's body shivered. The Second Prince

was back already? What about Kairen, then? How far was he, with the Imperial Army? If Vrehan was back now, he would go to find the Emperor, perhaps even kill him! Moreover, Opheus and Missandra were now more in danger than ever!

While she panicked, Cassandra didn't realize that they had finally arrived at the fifth Prince's apartments. Before she could fight back, he opened wide the door to a bedroom, where two women were laying, both naked except for some very heavy jewelry around their neck, arms, and ankles. The fifth Prince glared at them.

"Out!" He yelled.

After a short disappointed look, both women left hurriedly. Then, Lephys suddenly agitated his whip, and Cassandra was thrown on the bed. She fell on her side, but still moved her wrists immediately, trying to free herself desperately. She heard a chuckle.

"That's a bit too late, woman. Or do you think you can escape an Imperial Prince? A man with the Dragon's blood?"

Cassandra glared at him, not even bothering to answer. Lephys was not worthy of that Dragon Blood he carried. He was just a horrible, disgusting character she was starting to hate even more than his second brother.

She kept wriggling her wrists, trying to lessen the clasp despite the fiber cutting her skin. It was painful, and she could feel her flesh ripped, but she had no choice. She had to hurry before it was too late.

Before her, Lephys was watching her struggle, visibly amused. A snicker on his face, he started undressing, taking off his outfit slowly. When he put one knee on the bed, Cassandra froze to glare at him.

"Don't touch me," she hissed.

"Oh, I will do much more than touch you. I even bet you'll like it.

Women just can't deny their pleasure. Those whores just want sex, and just like you, they like to refuse me just for the play. You are all like that. You act all prude and innocent, but you just want to be fucked by a strong man. Don't pretend you're all about my brother. Once I'm done

with you, you will beg me to keep you, as they all do...”

“I’d rather die,” she retorted.

Cassandra felt like throwing up already. She didn’t care much about what his concubines really felt of Lephys, but she was nothing but disgusted. That man was a monster, a sick pervert. She couldn’t even fathom this man having the same blood as Kairen. She would not let him touch her, no way.

As he climbed on the bed, she tried to retreat, wiggling back on the bed, trying to crawl away as far as she could. Her hands were tied, but not her legs, and she was ready to kick if he got too close. Lephys’ smile got even wider as she kept furiously glaring at him.

“I like them feisty... I can’t wait to tame you, and show my brother that his little cunt has become mine. Kairen thinks he is so much better than all of us. I can’t wait to see the face he’ll make once he learns I fucked his woman, his beloved witch...”

“You won’t touch me,” hissed Cassandra, furious.

She was ready to fight, bite, and scratch him with all she had. Never had she had such a fiery, murderous look in her green eyes before. She had learned from Kairen.

The fifth prince suddenly laughed, and, with a sudden movement of his hands, undid his whip around her wrists. Cassandra looked at her free hands, shocked, the red mark still buried deep on her skin, but then, the Prince got closer, half of his body above her before she could react. She tried to kick him, but his hand reacted immediately, catching her ankle mid-air with a grin.

“You can’t escape me. Do you think you can oppose me, fight me? I am a Prince, and you’re nothing but a weak woman. You’d better learn to lie down and obey because I intend to have my way with you until Vrehan gets in.”

Cassandra wasn’t even listening anymore. She didn’t care what horrible plans he had for her or how long it’d take for his second brother to get there. None of this was going to happen. She struggled to turn around on

her stomach, despite her ankle still trapped in his head. She heard him laugh behind her, but she was busy retrieving what she had hidden in her sleeve earlier...

“What are you doing, witch? You think that’s it? Oh, or is that an invitation to your...”

“I said don’t touch me!” Suddenly shout Cassandra.

Before the young Prince could react, she suddenly turned around and sat up, and her arm flew in his direction. This time, he was a second too late. His other hand holding him on the mattress, and one still holding her leg, he didn’t have time to block Cassandra’s hand. He saw it coming, his eye catching the silver glimpse. Actually, he didn’t even understand the risk until a sharp pain pierced his neck. 3

The fifth Prince made a horrible screeched, and his blood heavily splattered them both. His eyes wide open in surprise, Lephys let go of her ankle, his fingers shivering, going up to touch the weapon that had just stabbed him. He could feel the warm blood running down his neck, and the sharp piece of metal stuck in his neck. He spasmed, for several seconds, completely shaken by the waves of pain. His eyes were wide open on Cassandra has she jumped out of the bed. It was clear he could not understand what had just happened. She was shivering in fear, stepping away from him, but she had done it. Opheus’ long earring was deep inside his flesh, planted there and not moving. She saw Lephys’ eyes following her moves as he gagged several times, trying to talk.

“Y... You... witch...”

“I’m not a witch,” she retorted, out of breath. “I’m a physician.”

With those last words, Cassandra turned around and ran out of the bedroom as fast as she could. She knew she probably didn’t have any second to lose. She had aimed right for his carotid artery and stabbed as hard as she could, but she had no idea how fast he’d recover. She had seen Kairen heal some deep cuts in a matter of seconds, but she had never seen how his brother’s healing abilities were. Moreover, if it was a

normal man she had stabbed, he would have been dead in minutes. She wasn't as blind as to think the fifth Prince would die from this, though... Hence, Cassandra kept running across the corridors, desperate to find her way back. The reality of what had just happened was hitting her slowly, but she didn't have time to stop. She had just tried to murder an Imperial Prince but, strangely enough, she had more pressing concerns right now. She was worried about the Emperor, Opheus, Missandra, and more importantly, she was terrified to face Vrehan, or his sister.

Cassandra wasn't familiar with this part of the Palace, and she was afraid to go the wrong way, or make a bad encounter. However, she needed to go back, and fast. If Lephys recovered, he'd soon come after her. If he didn't, someone like his concubines from before would be quick to let the guards know the white witch had assassinated the fifth Prince! Suddenly, she heard it. Steps, rushing behind her..

"Come back, you whore!"

A cold shiver ran down her spine. How could he be back on his feet and running already! Cassandra accelerated, but that was too much on her body for one day. The climbing had been easier than she thought, but sneaking by a window, riding a dragon, fighting off a rapist Prince and running probably wasn't recommended for a woman who had given birth not ten days ago! 4

She was desperate. There was no sign of Kairen's return, but Vrehan was back, and he would soon know she was here. All she had managed to do was to win a bit of time for the Emperor, but this may have all been for nothing.

Finally, Cassandra ran into a familiar corridor, the one with its windows open on the garden with the lake! At least she knew where she was, but the furious steps were scarily loud behind her. Tears grew in Cassandra's eyes. She wasn't going to make it. She knew the way back to where the Emperor was, but even if Opheus was still there, she wouldn't get there in time. The fifth Prince was catching up on her, and from the sound of his steps, compared to her speed, it would be over in a

couple of minutes. (2)

Cassandra felt like breaking down in pieces. She was going to die. What had she accomplished? She was either going to die or be captured! She cried without stopping. Kassian, her baby, her little baby, she needed to see him, hold him one last time. And Kairen. Her man, her war god. She didn't want to die before having seen him one last time, just one last time...

"You wench, stop!"

Cassandra heard the snap of the whip, and a sharp pain pierced her back. Lephys' whip. She felt like screaming in pain. He had cut her so deep! She stumbled forward, almost falling, but something kept her going. She managed to keep her feet steady and keep running.

She couldn't stop now, she couldn't give in. No matter what...

Suddenly, a loud horn resonated in the air. Cassandra heard Lephys' steps stop, and she couldn't help but glance behind her shoulder. The Prince had stopped running, his eyes wide open towards one of the windows.

"The Eastern Army...?" He whispered.

Cassandra's heart jumped in her chest. Kairen's army! The Army from the North Camp! They were in the Capital! She felt an incredible wave of adrenaline and kept running before Lephys chased her again. She still had a chance! Just a slim chance, if the Eastern Army was there, then either Kairen or Shareen, too...

"Come back, you damn witch! I will kill you before his eyes!"

The voice behind her couldn't hold her back. Cassandra took a sharp turn, entering another corridor. She stopped abruptly.

At the end of that corridor, Vrehan was standing in the middle of the way, glaring at her. Cassandra's lips trembled. She stepped back without thinking, despite the running steps that weren't stopping behind her. For a second, she wondered if she wasn't hallucinating, if she wasn't having some day time nightmare. It couldn't be. Not now, of all times. However, the second Prince was standing still, in a military outfit, his eyes on her

like a snake about to kill its prey. A shiver ran down her spine as she witnessed the long sword by his side.

“Finally,” he hissed. “We meet again, white witch....”

The War God’s Favorite by Jenny Fox Chapter 120

#120 The Creature

Cassandra felt like the ground was falling apart under her feet. She was falling into some hellish nightmare. Her mind went blank for a couple of seconds.

The second Prince Vrehan was standing in front of her. The one man she loathed the most, the one she had tried to avoid at all costs until now. Cassandra tried hard to repress her shivers. She couldn’t give up now, not just because he had appeared. She had heard the horn, Kairen had to be close, with his army. Now that she had stopped running, Cassandra could hear the noise outside. It was far, because of how vast the Imperial Palace was, but she could tell something was happening. Probably a war between the Eastern and the Imperial Army. Whatever was going on outside, she silently prayed it was coming their way...

Vrehan, too, was hearing it. He frowned, looking at the window with a sour expression.

“Kairen, that bastard... He was fast...”

Just hearing his name gave Cassandra a new wave of strength. She took a deep breath, her eyes still on Vrehan, thinking about her next move. She couldn’t stay here, Lephys would catch up any second, and going forward was now out of the question. She glanced sideways. She had hoped to find a real exit earlier, but it seemed like she would have no choice but to climb up one of the windows.

“Oh, well... At least now I got a valuable hostage,” suddenly whispered Vrehan, his eyes going back to her.

Cassandra took a step back as a reflex. She was not going to let him approach her. She had made that mistake once, and the cost was Dahlia’s

life. She had learned her lesson now.

Before he could add a word, Cassandra suddenly jumped on the side and did her best to climb the window as fast as she could. She heard him yell something unintelligible behind her, but she had no time to wonder what. It was absolutely desperate, but she couldn't stay in that corridor.

Moreover, the words of the Emperor had been circling in her mind for quite some time. The Lake, did he mean that lake? Why would he mention this lake?

Cassandra fell on her feet, in the deep grass of the garden, and started running right away. She knew she only had a few seconds at best before both brothers would catch her. She was running as fast as she could towards the lake. She had no idea what was going to happen if that lake could save her life. She just had no other option left. Diving into the lake seemed like the craziest resort...

"Come back here!"

The fifth Prince had just jumped out of the window too, but Cassandra was several meters ahead of him, and had no intention to slow down. The only thing that interested her right now was the Lake, but something caught her attention while she was still rushing. Many, many shadows of lines were on the ground. She rose her head to understand where those strange shadows came from. A grid!

That crazy second prince had laid out a grid on the roofs of that area. Thick, long silver chains were running between the roofs, covering the open area. Was that meant to keep the Dragons from entering that area? She didn't remember seeing anything like this during her flight earlier with Opheus, but it would have been impossible for him to cover the whole Imperial Palace. Had he just laid those for the areas where he had hidden the Emperor? This was insane! It also explained Glahad's absence. Where had the golden dragon gone, if he wasn't by his master's side? Had he been trapped in some way?

Cassandra didn't have time to wonder more, as she heard the slap of the whip dangerously close behind her. She accelerated, despite the pain in

her back and lower half. The strain from all that running and climbing was starting to take its toll on her body. She ignored it, only focusing on the lake, and running faster than the two princes.

“What are you doing!”

She didn’t listen. Her feet were already in the water. She tried to scrutinize the surface of the lake as she walked in, but she couldn’t see much. With the sunlight’s reflection, it was too deep or too dark to see anything past a couple of meters on the surface. How deep was that lake? While singing her song weeks ago, she had stayed where she could just sit and have the water up her waist.

Now, she was going as far as she could in the lake. The familiar feeling of the water soaking her legs gave her some more strength, and she tore the sides of her dress to walk or swim more comfortably. The whip slashed again, whipping the surface right next to her. He had just missed her, but he was far enough to hit her!

“Don’t kill her!” Shout Vrehan. “We need her alive!”

That sentence may save her life, ironically. Lephys kept trying to get a hold of her, but the Prince apparently wasn’t good at gauging his own strength. Either he was too strong and violently slashed the water, or he missed her completely. Cassandra kept going, half-swimming now. She knew the Dragon Princes wouldn’t follow her into the water, but everything was going to be about how long could she stay underneath. (1) She took several deep breaths, and when her lungs were full, she finally dived in.

She heard the whip hitting the water a couple of times above her, and hurried to go deeper down the lake. Cassandra needed to be far enough from the surface so they wouldn’t hit her. 6

She had no idea where to go. It took her eyes a long minute to adjust to the water, and finally, she saw clear. As she had suspected, it was much, much deeper than it looked from the surface. She couldn’t tell how much exactly, but she kept going down. As she dived, Cassandra couldn’t help

but silently pray the air she had stored would last the longest possible. She swam past a lot of fish and being merged in the underwater world felt a bit eerie in such a situation. Probably no one from the Imperial Family had ever bothered to try swimming in that lake. None of the fish looked bothered by her presence, and there was no threat. 5

Cassandra kept diving, again and again. Her constitution was different from the Dragon Empire people. Her legs could paddle for a long time without being too tired, and her eyes weren't troubled by the water. Her body could handle the pressure, and her lungs retain air for a long time. 5 Hence, she kept going down. What had the Emperor hoped she would find in that Lake? Was it even the right Lake he had mentioned? It was too late to wonder and worry now. She dived, soon surrounded by darkness as she was getting away from the surface.

As she soon realized, the light wasn't the only thing slowly disappearing. There were less and less fish as she dived deeper down. Why? She would have thought all those underwater creatures would enjoy the calm in the lower levels of the lake, but instead, all the little fish stayed above the surface, as if... as if they were too scared to go down. The few ones that dared go low didn't stay long, they would go back to the surface quickly. Cassandra hesitated. Should she still go down after witnessing that? What were the depths of the Lake hiding... 5

She glanced upwards. It felt strangely calm here, compared to what was waiting for her at the surface. She had no choice anyway. The danger was surely much more important on the surface...

The young concubine kept going down, her eyes struggling to see anything in this darkness. She had a strange feeling. As if something was lurking at her, in the darkness. Something dangerous.

Cassandra was starting to feel a little unwell. The air in her lungs was slowly running out, and she was tired. Her body was resenting all the vigorous exercise from that day, and the water pressure was adding to her pain. She couldn't go back up yet. She had to spend as much time as she could underwater and, even if she couldn't find anything down there, she should delay her return to the surface as much as possible...

Suddenly, something quickly swam past her. She froze. It was big. Very, very big. It had felt like a long body, something much bigger than any underwater creature she had ever heard of. A snake?

Fear was starting to crawl at the back of her mind. Not being able to see anything was even more terrifying. If a beast decided to attack her, she was completely defenseless. She had left Opheus' earring in his brother's neck to delay his healing process, and she had given her dagger to Missandra before they left for the Palace, as her younger sister was a better fighter in case they found themselves in such a situation, but she hadn't even thought of taking it back when they parted ways. She probably wouldn't have, anyway, but now she regretted it. She had nothing left to defend herself with...

The creature moved next to her again, and a loud sound resonated like an echo in the water. Cassandra's eyes grew larger. Wasn't that... a growl? It was higher-pitched than a Dragon's, but it was so similar to Krai's growl! It couldn't be, right?

Suddenly, this strange growl resonated again, and she turned towards its origin, squinting her eyes to try and locate the creature's position. If it could see her, why hadn't it attacked already? Was that thing what the fish were afraid of? Cassandra focused on the water's movements around her, trying to figure out where that creature would swim to next. It had to be very, very big, from the growl it made... A crazy theory was growing at the back of her mind, but it seemed absolutely impossible, unreal...

Suddenly, two big white lights appeared in the darkness. Cassandra had to cover her mouth not to scream and lose some of her precious air.

Those were big like diamonds, but they were definitely... eyes. A pair of reptilian eyes. .

The two eyes grew closer, and Cassandra tried to swim away by reflex. Judging from the size of those eyes, whatever creature it belonged to had to be enormous! If that thing decided to hunt her, she was already dead. However, the eyes didn't appear menacing. Instead, it was growing close slowly, without any animosity in them. Cassandra froze, though her heart

was beating like crazy. What was that thing? She decided to stop and let it approach. She couldn't go far or fast enough to flee it, anyway. If she had to die, it'd better be quick...

A giant snout appeared below the white eyes. It was covered in scales. Cassandra thought they were dark grey, but it could have been any color in this darkness, she couldn't tell. Maybe dark red, or dark purple. The creature's head approached, her, and its large snout sniffed the human woman a couple of times. Cassandra was speechless. It was impossible, but she couldn't unsee this. It was definitely a dragon's head, no matter how she saw it.

The head was a bit leaner than any dragon she had seen, and there were no little horns on the side of its face or on its head, either. Only two long ones, on the top of its head. Though one of those was broken. The cheeks were a bit rounder, however, Cassandra noticed the wide and long holes on the neck as the creature turned its head slightly. Weren't those clearly gills...?

The creature circled around her, clearly gauging her. Cassandra had a hard time calling it a dragon, but she was fascinated by that creature. The face was clearly that of a dragon, but its body was different from those she knew. It was much leaner, with shorter limbs, and more importantly, the angles of those limbs had large fans the dragon was agitating slowly or widely to move itself underwater. Cassandra was amazed. No matter how she thought about it, those had to be fins... there were several on its back, too, and the tail of that Dragon had a similar shape, as well.

This vision seemed so impossible, she wondered if she hadn't lost consciousness already, and was perhaps hallucinating all this. Yet, the creature was very real next to her. It kept going in circles around her, and she could tell its eye wasn't losing her one second. It growled again, and Cassandra wondered if that was it. If she was going to die killed by such an impossible creature. Was that what the King wanted her to find?

Cassandra didn't have much air left in her lungs. She was suffocating, her head spinning a bit. She glanced towards the surface. What could she

do? It was already a miracle that this dragon hadn't attacked her... It was at least as big as Krai! Such a magnificent creature... Cassandra had no more oxygen, she opened her mouth slightly, feeling too tired to fight anymore. The creature slowly swam closer to her, and she found the strength to extend her arm. The dragon, if it was one, slid past her, letting her finger slid on its skin. It was incredibly cold... unlike Krai's warm scales. Cassandra chuckled, her brain finding that information funny

She couldn't hold it anymore. She wanted to close her eyes...

One last growl resonated before she lost consciousness.