

The Last Dance

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Introduction

This story is about what happened to a girl called Cassandra in a kingdom at war. No hate, please.

Chapter 1

Cassandra peered anxiously through the round carriage window. She was going to a ball at the castle! She'd never been to any dance before, much less one in the kingdom's own heart.

"Nervous?" Her mother inquired. "You will soon see a dance is nothing to fear."

"I am not afraid," Cassandra lied, "but was seeing if there was anything worth looking at outside." Her mother gave her a stern glance.

"Lies do not become you, Cassandra. I know you." They had grown closer in the three years since her father's death than most people could ever hope to dream of.

"Right you always are, Mother. I do apologize most sincerely."

"I forgive," her mother smiled.

"The Castle Shangburg," the coachman announced. Cassandra and her mother, Charity, stepped out of the carriage. A grand, imposing structure rose out of the ground. Carved of marble, with gates of steel, no country dared go to war with Shangburg. An army of sixteen thousand awaited all who tried.

Other carriages had arrived, and some were still arriving. Men and women in elegant and dashing apparel were everywhere--entering from carriages, crossing the paths, taking walks in the gardens--all of the business overwhelmed Cassandra, who was used to her peaceful home life.

"Come, dear." Charity coaxed Cassandra out of her frozen state. "We must not be late." Cassandra nodded and followed her mother up the famed Hundred Steps to get to the drawbridge. The Hundred Steps were designed to wear out enemy attackers before they ever got near the castle entrance. There were others, too.

Soon they were by the drawbridge. Cassandra's palms were sweaty. Would she make a fool of herself in front of the entire kingdom?

Chapter 2

"Presenting the Lady Charity and her daughter, the Lady Cassandra," the announcer declared. Charity and Cassandra began their descent. Cassandra was beautiful in her blue ball gown with ruffled shoulders, brown locks in coils reaching just past her shoulders. Her mother equaled her in looks, with gentle blond hair swept into a bun and a pine green gown. They reached the bottom of the steps. The dance had not yet begun, they saw to their relief. They were not only on time, they were early.

"Mother! King Charles is about to speak!" Cassandra nodded into Charity's ear. Her mother was easily distracted. Charity's eyes widened and she stood at attention.

"Greetings to my subjects," he began, "at this time of celebration. Our kingdom is at its 250th anniversary, more than many others can say. And this is dedicated to many more years of peace and prosperity!"

"Peace and prosperity!" The people echoed.

"Now let the ball begin!" King Charles gestured to the musicians and the music started playing. He offered his hand to Queen Priscilla and she accepted. The men then offered to dance with people.

"May I have this dance?" A raven haired man asked Cassandra. She accepted and he swept her into the dance.

"What is your name? I am Lady Cassandra of Evergreen Manor."

"I am Earl Robert of Honeysuckle House," he replied. "Have you ever been to a ball--here--before?"

"Why, Earl Robert, this is the first official dance of my life!" Cassandra exclaimed.

"Have these last few minutes been enjoyable?"

"Well, yes. What about you? How dare you?" She asked.

"Very well, Lady Cassandra," Robert said. They continued dancing, and switched partners only once. They talked, also. Before they dispersed at dawn, when the ball was over, they exchanged these words:

"I hope this won't be our last dance, Lady Cassandra."

"So do I," Cassandra replied. "So do I."

Chapter 3

Two weeks later, the neighboring kingdom Marigoldson declared war. Cassandra wondered about Robert every day. She had known him only a night, but he had been kind to her, and everyone else. But it was not long before she had word of him--she and her mother were invited to a dance at House Honeysuckle, hosted by Earl Robert.

"Why does he have an event such as a dance when war is impending?" Cassandra wondered aloud.

"To keep spirits up and hopes high," Charity explained. "And we shall be going." Cassandra worried about going, but once she was there her worries ceased. Robert started dancing with her again.

"I never asked, but what age are you?" He inquired.

"Seventeen," Cassandra answered. "You?"

"Nineteen," he grinned. Suddenly an ear-splitting SCRAAAPE! Sound pierced the air.

"What was that?" Cassandra--and many others--exclaimed. The guests were looking about now, not knowing what they heard. Then the SCRAAPE! Came again.

"I apologize, Lady Cassandra, but I must go," Robert said, and with that, he dashed away. Then there was a CREEAAK, and a boulder smashed through the roof of House Honeysuckle, headed straight for the guests.

Chapter 4

They scattered, screaming. The boulder landed, breaking the floor as easily as a person breaks a stick. Cassandra didn't see if anyone was under the boulder or not, but she was unsure of her mother's whereabouts. She began frantically searching the room, calling, "Mother!"

"I'm here, darling!" Charity said, coming up behind her. They hugged.

"Is Marigoldson attacking?" Cassandra asked.

"It appears so," Charity answered. "Everyone! We must clear out of this hall! We are not safe here, but we cannot go out!" She shouted. Servants came and directed the guests to a safer place. Cassandra wasn't sure where that was, but she would not leave her mother's side. Charity was helping the guests clear out. Cassandra decided to see if there was anyone under the boulder. One man had his arm stuck under it.

"Do you think if the boulder was lifted a little, you could pull your hand out from under it?" She asked. He nodded. She set her shoulder near where his arm was, and shoved upwards with all her strength. It hardly budged, and neither did she, until the man was able to pull his arm out. Another two boulders crashed into the room, sinking into the floor and making dust float up so that it was hard to see. "Go!" She told the man, "go to the servants! They'll tell you where to go! Now!" The man ran off, and another boulder fell inches from where she was. She flinched. Then the boulder... opened? And dust poured out of it. It wasn't a boulder at all, she realized, but one of Marigoldson's weapons--a ball filled with dust, sawdust and other things of unknown origin, that opened upon pressure and made it hard for enemies to see and breathe. She coughed. It really was hard to breathe. She began to try and reach the exit, but everything was spinning. Cassandra was so light-headed and sleepy... a few moments of rest never hurt anyone, she thought. No, she firmly told herself, I've got to keep moving. This is one of Marigoldson's bombs' effects at work. She was almost there... wasn't she? Then she collapsed, unconscious.