

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 21 - Tips

16 minutes read

"This one needs more salt and paprika," Raena said after tasting one of the dishes in front of her.

Her new cooks were standing in a line on the other side of the table, waiting nervously. She had given each of them a recipe and instructions for the cooking, and the deal was that she'd only hire those who did a good job. Considering the salaries she offered them, they had no option but to agree. She had suspected they'd all do well, but wanted to keep them on their toes so that even after they started working, they'd always try their best.

Moving toward the next dish, Raena raised the knife so she could cut the meat. Steam was rising from the juicy beef shank and just the aroma of the steamed vegetables and the seasoning was making her mouth water. Her fork went in easily, almost as if sinking in soft butter, and as she pressed with the knife, the meat rolled down in thin slices, showing a well-done crust on the outside while still being soft on the inside. She took a bite and barely stopped herself from moaning – that was probably the best dish so far and it was definitely better than all the times she had made it herself.

"This is great!" she said with her mouth still half full. She took her time to swallow, glancing at the cooks. One of the women at the end of the line beamed happily, almost jumping on her spot. "Just be careful with the vegetables, we don't want them to turn mushy." The woman nodded in agreement, her smile growing even wider.

Raena stopped in front of the last dish – a chocolate lava cake combined with raspberries to counter the sweetness since nobody here knew the joys of ice cream. She took a small dessert spoon and hesitated over the dish – it had taken her dozens of tries to make her first lava cake properly, so she really didn't want to see someone else fail.

She sunk the spoon into the dessert, scooping a bite. The warm chocolate inside spilled beautifully onto the plate, while the crust remained in place. Raena tried to suppress her smile, raising her veil a little so she could bring the spoon to her mouth. Her attempt to hide her emotions failed as the chocolate spilled in her mouth and the soft cake and fresh raspberry slice mixed together. Closing her eyes, she moaned in approval.

"Oh, god, this tastes amazing!" Raena mumbled.

"I bet." Somebody chuckled behind her and Raena jumped, looking over her shoulder. Marden was leaning on the counter between the kitchen and the restaurant, a playful smile dancing on his lips. He had discarded the ragged and unkempt look from before – now his face was smoothly shaved and even his hair was cut shorter and carefully styled back. He was wearing a black shirt with the top three buttons open, revealing his

smooth chest underneath. He even wore a small golden earring on one ear and a big ring with what looked like a family crest on his forefinger.

“Marden,” she said, smiling behind her veil. She found his flirting amusing and somewhat flattering, but dealing with it when Zen wasn’t around felt a bit too risky. Marden never crossed the line, but she thought that was because of Zen’s cold and threatening presence. Yet now she had to send the cooks away and Zen was still not back from the errand she sent him on. “Give me a moment,” she said to him, turning back to the kitchen staff.

“The cake was really amazing. Congratulations to all of you, you pass. Come back tomorrow so we can review your contracts and you can start officially two weeks from now. I’ll need you to memorize all the dishes I give you and be able to make them on the spot. I’ll see you tomorrow then. Goodnight.

“Goodnight, Madam Lydia!” they replied in a disharmonious choir, then made their way to the back door, slipping outside in groups while talking excitedly about the dishes and the recipes.

Raena turned on her heel, her eyes locking on Marden. He continued to watch her like a cat that was observing a mouse trapped in a barrel.

“Where is your guard?”

Raena slipped her apron off, hanging it on the wall and straightening the skirts of her red dress.

She had chosen a more conservative one that only exposed the top of her shoulders and neck since all day long she had been meeting with staff merchants.

“Running an errand for me. He should be back any moment,” Raena replied, avoiding looking at Marden for as long as she could. When he didn’t say anything, she glanced at him only to find him leaning on the door leading to the kitchen, muscles stretching the sleeves of his shirt as he kept them folded in front of his chest.

“Even better for me,” he smirked.

“Is there a reason you’re here or are you just looking for some free food?” Raena asked, moving past him through the door and heading toward one of the tables where she had been doing some of the paperwork earlier. She started gathering it in a pile, keeping her focus on the papers.

“You said you wanted to be kept in the loop on the progress of the renovation, so that’s why I’m here,” he replied, his steps taking him to her table.

He slid down in the chair nearby, draping his hand on the backrest. "Don't tell me you're afraid of being alone with me, Lydia?" He chuckled, his eyes drilling a hole through her head while she continued to tidy up the table. "What kind of man do you think I am? Don't worry, I'm patient. I also don't need to force you into anything, you'll yield to my charm sooner or later"

Raena couldn't help but scoff, her eyes moving to look at him. His confidence was indeed amusing- she wondered if he'd be so cocky if he knew her identity.

"Is that so?" she laughed, raising an eyebrow. "What if I am immune to your charm?"

He reached out, catching her hand. Holding her fingers gently, he placed a kiss on her knuckles without looking away from her eyes.

"No one is immune to my charm, darling," he whispered, his breath tickling her skin. Raena held back another fit of laughter – he really was good, she had to admit it. That handsome face and ruggish appearance, that smoldering look and the intensity of his gaze truly would have made her weak in the knees if she hadn't been surrounded by these types of men in the past few weeks. Kassian, Yulien, even Zender – they were all good-looking and intense in their own way.

While Kassian exuded danger and threat, Yulien had this aura of quiet authority mixed with a certain charisma that came from his looks. Zen, on the other hand, was like a shifter. Every time they were alone he was soft and sweet, but the moment they stepped into uncertain or possibly dangerous territory, his presence changed to one of a distinct threat that even men like Marden respected.

A dull pain surged from her finger and she flinched, focusing her eyes back on Marden, only to realize he had bitten one of her knuckles and was now watching her with a mix of amusement and annoyance.

"It's very disrespectful to be spacing out while somebody is trying to seduce you, you know?" Marden said, bringing her hand back to his lips to kiss the finger he had bitten. Just before his lips touched her skin again, the tip of a blade stopped a hair shy of Marden's throat.

Marden froze, his body tensing as he looked down at the sword and then up at the man wielding it. Raena did the same only to realize Zen was standing between them, his eyes such a stormy gray color that even she shuddered. His expression was cold and unforgiving as if he was barely stopping himself from pushing the blade further.

"Hands off" Zen commanded in a low, threatening tone, and Marden obediently let go of Raena's fingers, pulling back in the chair with a forced smile. Zen let his sword linger for another few seconds, then lowered it, but kept it unsheathed. After he was done glaring at Marden, he stepped next to close to Raena.

"It's done," he whispered in her ear, his eyes darting back to Marden.

"Your boy really doesn't like me!" Marden chuckled as he returned Zen's glare without hesitation.

"You're both too much!" Raena sighed, shaking her head. "Please keep in mind this is a place of usiness. I don't need unnecessary drama," she looked at Marden and then at Zen, "or bl00d to clean off the brand new floor. So behave and don't make trouble for me."

None of them responded and she sighed again, heading toward the kitchen. She heard the sound of a chair being pushed back, and then two sets of footsteps followed her. Raena strode to the back door leading to the narrow street behind the building, turning the handle and pushing it open. As her eyes landed on the group of curious eyes and nervous expressions outside, she smiled.

"Well, hello there. Who wants to make some money?"

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Raena stepped into the back alley, looking at the small group of dirty and disheveled children that stared at her with eyes full of awe and curiosity. The older ones who stood at the back showed a hint of reservation as they exchanged glances before returning their gazes to her.

Just as she was about to speak again nobody seemed brave enough to answer her the first time – the children's attention switched to something behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, not at all surprised to see Zen and Marden there. Zen's harsh and cold expression was in stark contrast with Marden's grin as he leaned on the doorframe.

"What are you going to do with these rascals?" Marden asked, glancing at her.

"Mister!" a little girl in the front of the group squealed. She ran to him without hesitation, hugging his leg and looking up at him with a hopeful expression. "Do you have more of those cookies like the last time, Mister?"

"Uh, no, I don't," he said awkwardly, scratching his head. The girl's smile turned upside down, and he grimaced, picking her up in his arms. The fact that she was dirty and leaving muddy smudges on his clothes didn't seem to bother him. She wrapped her hands around his neck just as Marden looked at Raena. "What do you need them all for?"

"A job," Raena replied, still trying to overcome

her surprise at seeing Marden in that new light. "Do you know those children? They seem to know you." She added, glancing back at the others, who seemed to relax a bit after seeing Marden.

"Uh, well, I give them food occasionally. They all lurk around these parts."

"And he hides us when somebody bad chases us!" one of the bigger boys said with a grin. "And he even gave me this shirt!" He raised his hands, displaying his tattered, too-big-for-his-frame shirt.

He had to fold the sleeves few times and the bottom was torn, so it only reached his hips.

"Shut up, Pen!" Marden said quickly and to Raena's shock, the boy grinned instead of getting scared. "So, what is the job you want them to do?"

"It's not something dangerous, is it?" Raena chuckled, shaking her head.

"That can wait," she said, tearing her eyes away from Marden and glancing back at the children. "I just thought of something else first. Everyone, come with me." She stepped toward the door, sliding between Marden and Zen that were blocking her way.

The two men followed along with the nervous children. Raena opened one of the drawers, pulled out a handful of utensils, and turned toward the children. She distributed one to each of them while they stared at the shiny cutlery as if it were something alien. Raena turned and picked up two of the plates from the table, crouching in front of the children. Their eyes immediately locked on the food, and she smiled. "Dig in. You'll have to share since I don't have that much ready right now"

She handed a plate to one of the older boys and another one to a tall, scrawny girl with unevenly cut black hair and a nasty bruise on her cheek. Raena got up and distributed the rest of the dishes while they sat down on the ground and quickly devoured the food, letting out a chorus of pleased sighs and moans, squabbling about who would lick the plate.

"I can't believe you gave them this food for free and didn't even offer me a bite!" Marden complained, shaking his head in mock hurt. Raena smiled, glancing at the excited children before looking back at him. Seeing how trusting and relaxed they became after seeing him, she figured money wouldn't be the right motivator if she wanted them to do a good job and come back for more.

She felt a light tug on her sleeve and looked down at the girl that had run to hug Marden. The child stared at her with sparkling eyes, holding an empty plate.

“Miss, is there more of this?” the girl asked hopefully, lifting the empty plate.

“I’m afraid that’s it for tonight,” Raena said, feeling like a complete villain as the little girl looked down with disappointment. “But there will be more.

“At the sound of those words, all the children looked up. “I’ll give you one meal every night if you help me keep the street clean and do some work for me. I’ll also give you one thara for every errand you run for me. No funny business, I promise.”

The children exchanged a few glances and hushed words, then one of the older boys got up and stood in front of her.

“I do it” he said confidently, putting his hands on his hips. The others slowly joined him in front of Raena, and she smiled, turning to look at Zen.

“Bring them,” she said, and he disappeared from the kitchen after sending Marden a warning look. He returned a minute later with the thick stack of flyers she had drawn in the past two weeks. He handed them to her, and she passed some of them to the children.

“I want you all to take those and put one on every door and workshop where people live or pass by. If you can, leave a few at the nearby nobles’ mansions. If there is anything left, pass them around the market tomorrow.” She distributed the rest of the flyers to the children, returning her attention to the tall boy. “Your name is Pen, right?” she asked, and he nodded hesitantly.

“I’m putting you in charge, Pen. Make sure everyone helps, so it’s fair, alright? And if there is a problem, come to me or Marden.” The boy nodded again, the look in his eyes a little less distrustful than before. “Well then, you can come tomorrow evening for your meal. “I’ll instruct the other managers here that every night around this time they should give you the food, even if I am not here.”

“Are you serious, lady?” Pen asked, narrowing his eyes. “You’ll really give us food? And even pay us?”

“That’s if you do the job well.” Raena shrugged, barely holding back her laughter.

“You can trust her, Pen,” Marden said suddenly, bringing the boy’s attention to himself. “But don’t be too cheeky, alright? And be nice or this guy over here would beat you up!” He added, nodding toward Zen, who stood with his hands crossed on the other side of the table. Pen measured Zen from head to toe before returning his attention to Raena and nodding. “Hey, b.rat, what did I say about being cheeky? Say ‘thank you’ at least!”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Pen murmured, glaring at Marden only half-heartedly. “We’ll work hard.”

“Great!” Raena beamed, patting his head. The boy froze for a second, but his shoulders quickly relaxed. “off you go now. You have work to do. You’ll get your money after you complete it.”

The children got to their feet, disappearing through the back door one by one. Raena stared after them for a second, then started gathering the plates.

“Why them?” Marden asked while Zen was locking the back door.

“Cheap labor. More incentive to work. Besides, they are pretty much invisible. By tomorrow evening, everyone would have heard of this place, but no one would know where from. People love mysteries and because they do, they’ll keep talking about it. And the fliers will help with that.”

Marden reached toward one of the remaining leaflets, pulling it closer so he could get a better look. His eyebrows almost disappeared in his hair as he looked back at her.

“You named this place Her Highness’s Secret Palace?” he exclaimed. “Do you have a death wish or something? Only the Imperial family can use that title!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get permission,” Raena smiled.

“Shouldn’t you have asked for permission first before promoting that name?” Marden asked, his usual playful self shrinking down to give way to a seriously concerned person she could barely recognize. “What are you planning to do? Go to the

Emperor and offer him a deal?”

“The Empress, actually” Raena replied, no longer smiling. She had hoped the Empress would have summoned her already, but she couldn’t wait any longer with the promotion. She had to start now if she wanted anybody to show up by the opening day. Besides, there was no way the Empress would refuse this tiny favor, considering what Raena had to offer.” This is nothing for you to worry about. “I’ll get it approved before the opening of the restaurant.”

Marden shook his head, letting out a defeated sigh.

“I honestly don’t know how you can be so confident. It’s one thing to convince a stuck-in-the-mud nobody like me to work with you, but a deal with the Empress herself? Who exactly are you? And what do you have that she might want in return?”

“It’s a secret!” Raena said in a tone she hoped would shut him up. His smile froze on his face as he studied her eyes, and in the end, he raised his hands in surrender. “You mentioned you have something to show me, right? It’s getting late. Let’s go see it now.”

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It took them a good half an hour to go over the internal makeover of the brothel, and Raena couldn't help but smile with satisfaction. She had brought the contractors who worked in the restaurant to do the job, and they didn't disappoint.

The crumbling walls and peeling paint outside had disappeared, giving way to a smooth white and gold coat. They had changed the windows and the door facing the street and the whole place looked like the house of a rich noble. Semi-transparent curtains hung in front of the windows, hinting at what pleasures one might expect inside. The walls had been soundproofed too.

The interior was almost ready since it didn't require the intricate paintings and decoration then restaurant did. The first floor was painted in dark tones – red and black, with a sprinkle of gold for subtle decoration, with heavy curtains for the private corners. The bar was upgraded and painted black, throwing a stylish gleam as the lights of the chandeliers reflected on it.

The waiting room, as Marden called it, was furnished with velvet chairs and couches to accommodate even the snobbiest of nobles. There was a smaller room too, for less important clients.

Raena had suggested making the place a tad more exclusive, but for the first time, he reminded her that this was his place of business, so she should leave the handling to him.

"The bedrooms are currently being furnished, but as you suggested, we've turned some of them into a more specific type of chambers for specific kinks. I'm off tomorrow to look for more women."

"And men," Raena added.

"And men," Marden sighed. "But all in all, I think this place will be ready even before the opening of your restaurant. Are you sure I can't open the brothel before then? The sooner we start making money, the better."

"No, keep it closed and just let the word out.

This would build anticipation. People must have noticed the new look already and are probably wondering what is going on," she said. "We'll make it exclusive, at least for the first night. I'll bring you some very important people to mark the start of your success."

Marden raised an eyebrow curiously, but didn't ask.

"I'll be gone for the rest of the week, so if you need anything, ask Arissa," Marden explained, rubbing the back of his head. He glanced at Zen standing right behind her, his smile turning sour.

You may want to get rid of him once the restaurant opens or he'll scare all of your male customers away. Who knows, if one of them steps too close, he might go and slice them to pieces."

"Great job on the place," Raena said, changing the subject. "We'll be off then, it's already late and I am tired. See you in a week!" She turned around, giving the place one last look before heading for the exit. Zen fell into step with her, opening the door before the two of them stepped into the warm night. The weather had changed its mind again, and the past few days had been warmer than usual.

As they rounded up the street, Raena put her hood on. She kept her veil in place as they walked in silence, ignoring the curious glances people threw their way.

The carriage waited for them in the usual place, a few streets away from the restaurant. Raena had paid the coachman a hefty amount to not ask any questions and forget their faces the moment he left them in the third prince's residence. So far he barely looked at them and he was always on time – she suspected his fear of Zen kept him so sharp and loyal rather than the gold in his pockets.

Just before they reached the rendezvous point, Raena slipped off her veil and shoved it in the inner pocket of her cloak. She glanced at Zen only to realize that he had already put away his black wig and was now scratching his head. As they turned the corner, the coachman jumped from his seat, greeting them with a nod before opening the door of the carriage.

Zen helped her inside, then followed silently. A few seconds later, they were already moving toward the third prince's mansion. Raena glanced at her guard as she took off her cloak and pulled the bag she had prepared, rummaging through it in search of the soft towel and the concoction she had mixed to help her take off her makeup easier.

"You're awfully quiet tonight. Did you run into any problems?" she asked, rubbing her eyes gently as she set to clean her face. Unlike Raena, Lydia's appearance required heavy makeup on top of all the different clothes and the veil. She couldn't let people make the connection this early, so making Lydia and Raena the exact opposites was a must.

She couldn't see him for a minute until she was done, and he continued to be silent, which unnerved her. When she was done cleaning her face, she looked at him again.

"What happened?"

"I apologize," he sighed, staring at his hands that were balled into fists. A cold chill ran through her body as she stared at his serious expression.

"What did you do?" She breathed, only then realizing she was whispering. Zen lifted his head, meeting her eyes. His expression was so serious and angry that it made her wonder if he had killed somebody. She waited with her heart in her throat, willing him to answer faster.

"I was late and I allowed that bastard to touch you," he replied quietly, lowering his gaze to her hands, to the finger Marden had bitten playfully. Raena blinked a few times before bursting into laughter.

"Zen, it's fine!" she said in the end. "He just touched my hands. I don't mind that much."

"I do," he said sharply, looking up again. "I didn't like seeing him touching you."

"Why? Are you jealous?" Raena laughed, unable to hold back anymore.

"Yes," he replied, holding her gaze. Raena's laughter died on her lips, and her smile froze as she studied his face, trying to determine if he was serious or not. There was no amusement in his expression, no hesitation or shame, "I know I am just a lowly servant and a former slave, but I am not ashamed to admit my feelings. I thought you already knew since I haven't been trying to hide them, but I guess not."

"Are you serious? You like me?" Raena laughed awkwardly, unable to look away from him. He tilted his head, his expression softening.

"Even a blind fool would fall in love with you, Miss Raena. You're beautiful, smart and caring. Most people don't see that, but I am both Raena's servant and Lydia's bodyguard, so I can grasp the full picture," he said, finally looking away as if suddenly conscious of what he was saying. "Don't worry, I have no expectations. It's just that after today I started thinking... if you get lonely and you're looking for someone to embrace you, I'd rather have that be me than that arrogant lowlife. No matter what clothes he wears and how much he tries, he is too filthy for you. You never know what his hands have been touching before."

For the first time since she woke up in this place, she was having a hard time finding the right words. Dealing with the characters she already knew was relatively easy since they were familiar and predictable – she knew their backstories, she knew their future and their triggers. But Zender wasn't part of the original story, or at least not part of what she had read before abandoning the book.

Yet here he was, confessing to her.

What could she do? Her plan was to get rich and get out of the Empire. She wasn't really thinking beyond that. But then what? She had discussed finding husbands with

Kara, but it had been mostly a joke- at least that's what she thought. Yet Zen was right in front of her – handsome, smart, capable of protecting her from trouble, and as a bonus, he was already in love with her. Marriage might be an overreach, but if she wasn't already married, she could have tried her luck with him.

“Zen..”

I said I didn't expect anything, Miss Raena.

Don't think too much,” he said quickly, still not looking at her. Raena grimaced.

“What I meant to say is that you're sweet and caring and I also like you. But I am married,” she sighed. At the last word, he looked back at her, his eyes flashing with a hungry spark.

“Is this the only obstacle?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Ka.ssian is a powerful man,” Raena said carefully, intertwining her fingers in her lap. “Even though our marriage is not treated like a normal marriage, I am still bound to him. And if he finds out I have that kind of relationship with some other man, I don't think he'll take it well.”

Zen continued to stare at her with a calm, thoughtful expression, as if contemplating her words. Then he suddenly moved, leaning forward and propping his elbows on his legs. Their knees were almost touching, which made her realize just how close he actually was. He didn't try anything just continued to stare at her face.

“Alright,” he suddenly said, sitting back in his seat as the carriage came to a stop and the driver tapped on the wood panel to announce their arrival.

Zen got up and stepped outside, looking around before offering her his hand. Raena stared at it for a second, wondering if it was just her imagination or his 'alright' sounded like Alright, I'll wait!' instead of the 'Alright, I give up!'.

She let him help her out, pulling her hood as glanced over the familiar segment of the path where the driver usually left them. With the roads as they were around the North Palace, it was impossible for a carriage to pass there and neither of them wanted to bring the prince or the first wife's attention to themselves. So the carriage always left them close to the Concubines' Palace, where it was easier to stay out of sight.

Zen pushed the door of the carriage closed and the driver drove off without a word, disappearing along with all the sounds disturbing the quiet of the late hour. Raena looked at her guard when she sensed Zen's fingers intertwine with hers instead of letting go as usual.

“This way,” he said, pulling her by the hand. “Stay close and be quiet.”

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"Ouch!" Raena complained as Kara pulled her hair a bit too forcefully while trying to finish the braid she was making. They had decided that leaving her hair all-natural when going to meet the Empress would be too disrespectful and a Head Maid would have never allowed it, least of all Kara.

Her hair ended up half-up in an intricate braid that twisted and turned, morphing into a beautiful display of Kara's skills, while the rest was falling in smooth waves around her shoulders.

"Stop complaining!" Kara murmured, adding a few more pins before finally pulling away to inspect her handiwork. She didn't touch Raena's head again, which meant she was satisfied with the result, but she tapped her shoulder impatiently just as Raena was letting out a relieved sigh. "Get up, I can't help you put the dress on while you're sitting."

"Are you mad at me about something?" Raena frowned as she got to her feet and stepped into the peach-colored off-shoulder dress Kara had prepared. White flowers were embroidered on the chest and the hems while the shoulders were bare: the top was tight around her chest and covered everything to her collarbones, with her sleeves brushing against her arms every time she moved them. It was the least childish dress she had ordered considering that the Empress wouldn't be meeting just the third prince's new wife, but it was still a far cry from the fashion most noble ladies followed.

Kara finished with the ties on the back and then stepped in front of Raena, inspecting her from head to toe.

"You're definitely mad." Raena grimaced. "What did I do now?"

"Nothing. I'm not mad!" Kara mumbled, still not meeting her eyes. She reached out to adjust one of Raena's sleeves and Raena caught her hand. Kara let out a sigh, finally meeting her gaze. "I'm concerned."

"About what?"

"We are going to the Imperial Palace, just the two of us," she said, her usually calm mask cracking. She licked her lips nervously, then pulled her hands away, crossing them in front of her chest.

"I know you're planning something, and the fact that you're not telling me about it is bothering me. You're confident judging by how calm you are, but you are not invincible and one of these days, you'll push your luck a bit too far and end up dead.

So at least tell me what you're planning so that I can help!" Raena smiled, catching Kara's shoulders only to feel her stiffen under her touch.

"I appreciate your concern and help, Kara, but it really is better that you don't know this time," she said, shaking her maid's shoulders playfully. "I will be fine, I promise, so stop being so gloomy! We are meeting the Empress, not an executioner. Your job is to make me look pretty and adorable. My job is to show this head is not just for decoration." Raena laughed, winking at her. "Now, I think I need jewelry with this. Something subtle maybe?"

"I'll get it" Kara said with a defeated sigh. Raena sent her off with a smile, then let it drop once Kara was out of sight. The truth was, she was concerned as well. She knew exactly what she had to do, but Empress Ta.ssia's character was a bit explosive and unpredictable, so she was not sure how she'd react to such a challenge. The Empress was never confronted like this in the book, so Raena had no idea where their conversation was going to go.

She was still going to do it. Everything she worked so hard for until now depended on that conversation, on the Empress's support. As they said, danger could never be overcome without taking risks, so she was ready to make the biggest gamble of her life.

She didn't realize when she had stepped next to the window, but when she looked out, her eyes immediately stopped on the figure in the garden, just below the shade of one of the trees. His silver hair was matted on his forehead, and sweat was glistening over his n.aked c.hest as he swung his sword again and again, moving from one position to another. She recognized some of the movements same Ka.ssiian had used to overpower his opponents when they watched him train that morning- but unlike Ka.ssiian, Zen's movements were sharper, quicker, and much less powerful.

Things had been a bit awkward between them in the past few days, at least for her, since she wasn't sure what was the best way to handle this situation. He had given her an out after saying he didn't expect anything, but the way he held her hand that night didn't feel like he'd be content with just watching from the shadows if anyone else decided to b.utt in. If she had to be honest with herself, it wasn't that she didn't notice his attention at all. It was more that his feelings weren't exactly her priority with everything that was going on. If he had kept quiet about them, she probably would have pretended to be unaware. She was lucky enough to have somebody she trusted by her side, somebody who was willing to protect her to that extent. Adding love to the mix was going to make things unnecessarily complicated.

"Here, lift your hair." Kara's voice startled her and she jumped, doing what she was told so Kara could clasp the necklace around her neck. When she was ready, her maid moved in front of her, putting two matching earrings on her ears.

"Did he do something?" Kara asked, glancing toward the window. "Zender. Did he do something? You've been avoiding him for the past few days."

"What? No, I haven't." Raena blurted out. "Why would I avoid him?"

"I don't know," Kara replied, raising an eyebrow.

"That is why I am asking. You aren't bringing him to the Imperial Palace either, although I think that is the right decision because he is from Craidal. Still, you two have practically been joined at the hip for the last two weeks. Did he do something inappropriate?" Kara glanced over her shoulder, her eyes stopping on the figure outside. She snorted, turning back toward Raena. "You're not developing feelings for him, are you?"

"Ha, like I have any time for that!" Raena scoffed. "Right now, I am trying to focus on our business. Once we're settled for life, then we can have all the men we want."

"How many men do you plan on having?" Kara asked, a smile fighting its way to her lips. Raena took the opportunity to switch the subject and get rid of the serious mood.

"I was thinking of creating a harem of my own!" she grinned. "Are we ready? This is the one time in our lives we really shouldn't be late."

"Yes" Kara nodded, stepping toward the full-body mirror and checking her maid uniform, only to confirm that it was impeccable as usual.

Raena had no idea how she kept it that way- every time she saw Nola or Elene or even Portha, they all had stains on their aprons or creases on their skirts. Was Kara a witch or something? "By the way, there are rumors."

"Rumors? What rumors?" Raena frowned as she followed her maid out into the corridor and the two headed for the stairs. There were voices coming from a few of the rooms on the second floor, and Raena looked at the half-closed doors curiously. Just as she was about to ask Kara about the rumors again, a couple of maids exited the nearest room, almost running into them.

The two girls looked around Nola's age, and their faces turned ashen when they saw them. They doubled in low bows, blurring their apologies and trembling as if expecting a punishment. Both were carrying cleaning supplies, and one of them was struggling to hold a bucket with dirty water.

Raena gave them another look, then continued toward the stairs. She heard them sigh in relief, then tiptoe toward the servant staircase.

"The renovation of the first floor is almost complete, so they are cleaning the rooms on the second floor," Kara explained as she descended the stairs, reaching the landing first and waiting for Raena. "You should check around your own house. You spend too much time at the restaurant."

“Once opening day passes and the staff gets used to working there, I’ll stop going there so often. It’s not like I want to work too much,” Raena mumbled. “But you know what they say, if you want it done properly do it yourself.”

“Whoever says that is definitely not a noble.” Kara snorted, stopping by the front door. “Wait here, I’ll go get the presents for the Empress.” Raena nodded, stepping through the front door.

Just a few weeks ago, this place looked like an abandoned field where no living soul visited. Now the grass was properly maintained and even the ground was evened out; the holes in the walls were filled and the walls themselves were painted after all the ivy was removed. There were even flowerbeds set up around the edges and in pretty shapes all over the yard. The flowers would probably bloom by mid-summer and make this place a pretty sight fit for her station. Too bad she would have to leave it soon.

“Let’s go!”

Raena turned, her eyes stopping on the maid before moving on to Davin, who was trailing behind her with an armful of boxes. He gave her a bright smile, then followed them as Kara strode toward the gate.

Kara had arranged for an official carriage this time, but they still had to walk to the road outside the North Palace area, where the path was still good enough for a carriage to pass without losing a wheel.

The coachman greeted them respectfully, helping them load the boxes and then offering each of them a hand. As they finally set off, Raena slid to the window of the carriage, staring curiously outside. She hadn’t ridden a carriage over this path, especially not in broad daylight, and she had to admit that the prince’s caretakers did a good job – well, everywhere but the North Palace.

As they passed by the Main Palace, the coach slowed down. Raena craned her neck, looking outside to see what was going on, when her eyes stopped on a group of women that had just crossed the path. They turned around to look at the carriage, whispering among each other. All of them were dressed in expensive clothes in the latest fashion, but even so, one stood among the others.

She raised one long, delicate hand to brush away her pitch-black hair, her gaze locked on the windows of the carriage. For a moment Raena thought their eyes met, but then the dark-haired Woman turned away.

“Who is that?” Raena asked, and Kara leaned in to look outside.

“Her name is Lara,” Kara replied in a second, settling back in her seat. “His Highness’s favorite concubine.”

“Huh. His taste is not bad!” Raena snorted.

“If she is back, that means His Highness is, back too,” Kara muttered, as if to herself.

“He went somewhere?” Raena asked, raising an eyebrow. “That explains why everything was so quiet around here.”

“I heard he went to investigate some insurrections in Caen,” Kara explained, adjusting her collar. “He was supposed to return four days ago, but there were some unforeseen problems that delayed him. Lara was with him the whole time.” Raena raised an eyebrow.

“You sure know a lot!” she grinned, leaning her chin on her hand. “Did you find out what kind of underwear he is wearing today?” Kara’s cheeks flushed and she pursed her lips, glaring at Raena, whose smile grew even wider as she chuckled. “That was a tricky question. He’s probably not wearing any.”

“I’m doing this for you, you ungrateful girl!” Kara said grumpily. “Do you know how hard it is to get information out of others when you’re a new person in the residence? It’s a good thing that everybody wants to know about what is happening in the North Palace, so they are willing to trade information.”

“This could be the start of a giant intelligence network. You could be my first spy!” Raena gasped dramatically.

“No, thank you. I am overworked as it is.” Kara grumbled. “Find your spies elsewhere!” Raena stared at her in surprise, her mind already forming a new idea in her head. “What’s with that look? Did you just think of something dangerous again?”

“Nope!” Raena grinned. “I just think I’m going to take your advice.” Kara grimaced, shaking her head.

The carriage stopped and Raena glanced out the window, surprised to find they had already arrived at the Imperial Palace. The coach had halted at the gates to state their business, and after a few words, the carriage continued onward. Raena felt her stomach tighten with excitement and fear as she watched the massive building grow taller and taller, and her heart raced like crazy when the coachman finally opened the door and offered her a hand.

Just as she stepped outside, a short lady with chocolate-colored hair and big, green eyes came to greet her, curtsying and smiling pleasantly.

“Welcome, Your Highness Raena,” she said. “I’m Miriam, one of Her Majesty’s ladies-in-waiting. Please, follow me. The Empress will see you now.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 25 - Tips

0 7 minutes read

"I humbly greet the Empress, Mother of the Empire! May you have good health and a prosperous life, Your Majesty!" Raena said in a respectful tone, curtsying as low as she could without toppling to the ground. She noticed Kara bending at the waist behind her, her shoulders tense.

She had been pretty collected when meeting with the third prince, so Raena had expected she'd keep her composure effortlessly, but meeting the Empress inside the Imperial Palace must have been too much, even for her. Raena would have probably been the same if she didn't know so much about the Imperial family from the book. It almost felt like she knew them all already, even though they kept surprising her every once in a while. Especially Kassian.

A short silence followed, then the Empress's voice rang through the room.

"Rise, Raena, and be at ease. We are family now after all." Raena got up slowly, looking at the woman sitting in front of her.

In the book, Empress Tassia was a robust, beautiful woman that had risen from the position of a concubine into her current title after the previous Empress, the first and third prince's mother, died.

Staring at her now, Raena realized that the author didn't like her character very much. For a woman nearing her fifties, the Empress was gorgeous. Her chocolate skin was smooth and lustrous, her hair was long and full of life; she wore a tight golden dress with a bronze undertone that complimented her complexion and hugged her body in all the right places. Her diamond-shaped face held a soft and jovial expression, but even then there was a certain edge to her features that suggested behind that warm, gentle exterior hid a woman sharp as a blade.

"Sit, sit." The Empress urged, motioning toward the couch across from her, Raena lowered herself in it, smiling at Miriam, who poured her a cup of tea. Raena allowed herself a look around the reception room as she took a sip out of her cup the place was decorated in soft, dark tones that complimented the Empress, making her look like she was shining no matter where she stood. Every move she made was like she was posing for a picture, and her expression was always beautiful, no matter what she did and how she turned. Raena wondered how much effort all of that cost her or if she was so used to doing it that it had turned into a second nature.

The silence dragged on and with every passing minute, the tension squeezing Raena's chest grew.

She knew the Empress would try to intimidate her from the start and make her uncomfortable, but she thought she was prepared for it.

Still, this was too intense. Even Miriam looked uneasy.

“So, how’s married life treating you, Raena?” The Empress finally spoke. “Has Ka.sian been good to you?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I have no complaints,” Raena replied, setting down the cup and letting her hands fall into her lap. She looked into the Empress’s eyes, trying not to blink as the two stared at each other. From the corner of her eyes, she noticed Miriam shooting the Empress cautious glance, but Ta.ssia just smiled.

“You’re not what I expected,” the Empress said, raising her hand and patting her lower lip with her finger. Her nails were long and perfectly maintained, painted in a gold color that matched the rings and bracelets dangling from her wrists. “I thought you’d be more... meek.”

“Does that disappoint you, Your Majesty?” Raena asked.

“That remains to be seen.” The Empress smiled, tilting her head as if to have a better look her. “I heard the Prime Minister’s daughter was special, in a way. The rumors seem to be false, though. How interesting.”

“I am special, Your Majesty,” Raena said boldly, ignoring Miriam, who let out a quiet gasp. “But probably not in the way you have heard.” The Empress raised an eyebrow and chuckled again. “I allowed myself the liberty of bringing you a few gifts if you’re so kind as to accept them. May I present them to you?”

“Sure, why not?” The Empress shrugged, straightening in her seat despite her aloof reply. “I wonder if your gifts are going to be.. special too?”

Raena turned around and nodded to Kara, who disappeared for a second before returning with the boxes. She placed them on the table between them, and Miriam silently got up to help her open them.

As Kara started taking out the carefully packaged desserts from inside, the Empress’s face twitched in momentary surprise.

The Empress leaned forward, her eyes studying the dozen different desserts Raena had spent all morning making. Next to the sweets and refreshments that had waited for them when she arrived, her gifts stood out like sore thumbs with their colors and shapes.

And tastes, she hoped.

“What is this?” the Empress asked, looking at the plate with cannoli that was right in front of her.

Her eyes examined the other dishes with curiosity, but her face remained perfectly neutral.

Raena quickly named them, pointing at each and explaining what it was inside of them. Once she finished, the Empress was staring at her like she was just seeing her for the first time.

“Who made this? I’ve never seen such dishes before” Ta.ssia said, leaning back in her seat without touching any of them.

“I did.” Raena smiled, watching the Empress struggle to keep a straight face. “Would you do me the honor of trying them, Your Majesty?”

The Empress stiffened, narrowing her eyes at her. Raena knew it was taboo to ask someone from the Imperial family to eat something that wasn’t prepared by their own cooks, but she had to make the Empress taste them, since their appearance didn’t seem enough to impress her. She was just about to offer to try them first when the Empress raised her hand and a woman stepped by her side, bowing.

The woman kneeled, taking one of the silver forks on the table and pulling the plate with cheesecake toward her. She dug her fork in it, taking a small bite and putting it in her mouth without hesitation. Almost immediately after her lips closed around the food, she froze, eyes widening. The Empress straightened up, tension filling the room as she watched her tester. The tester turned toward Raena, staring at her with an unreadable expression.

“What is it? Is it poisoned?” the Empress asked impatiently, and the woman quickly faced her mistress.

“My apologies, Your Majesty!” she muttered in a trembling voice. “That dish is not poisoned, Your Majesty.”

“Why did you hesitate, then?” Ta.ssia asked, her perfect eyebrows creasing.

“I was startled, Your Majesty. In my humble opinion, this is the most delicious dessert I have ever tasted. It’s sweet and sour at the same time and it melts in your mouth. Shall I test the rest, Your Majesty?”

Raena smiled at the eagerness of the woman, barely holding back her smug expression. The tester offered the plate with the cheesecake to the Empress, returning to sampling the rest of the dishes. She did so with her eyes closed most of the time, moving back with reluctance after she deemed all of them safe. The Empress had waited impatiently, but when the tester retreated to the shadows, she looked down at

the cheesecake with suspicion. She eventually tasted it and Raena couldn't hide her smirk as she noticed the Empress's eyes growing wide. Tassia turned aside to hide it, but it was already too late. As she put the empty plate down, she leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms.

"Why gift me this?" she asked suddenly. "What's the point of impressing me with your cooking? Do you want to come here and work as a cook for me?"

"Your Majesty is very sharp." Raena smiled, picking up her teacup. "I might have done it with an ulterior motive. Still, hearing my humble desserts impressed you is the biggest praise I could hope for."

The Empress's smile faded, giving place to a serious expression. Raena kept hers up, despite the galloping of her heart. This was it. If she wavered even a little now, it was all over.

"So, what is your ulterior motive?" the Empress asked.

Raena took her time to answer, adjusting herself in her seat.

"In a few weeks' time, my restaurant on Ruby Street is going to officially open," Raena started with a calm voice, holding The Empress's gaze. "I would like your support. What I mean by that is that I would like you to order the food for your parties exclusively from us. And I'd like Prince Rissen to come to the opening of the restaurant."

The Empress blinked a few times, then she leaned back.

"How imprudent!" she scoffed, disbelief distorting her beautifully controlled features. "Why would ever support some uncertain endeavor one controlled by a wife of that disrespectful brute at that? If you came here thinking that there is any chance of me saying yes to your outrageous request, then you really are as idiotic as they say you are! It just takes longer for you to show your true colors."

"My business would have nothing to do with my husband. Moreover, my connection to the restaurant will be known only by a few trusted employees, the woman who will be managing the place and now you, Your Majesty." Raena continued, trying to ignore the rising indignation on the Empress's face. She could feel the tension in the room growing and the fear on Miriam's face confirmed just how thin the ice she was walking on was. But she was already in the middle of the lake, so there was no going back. "If Her Majesty agrees to give me her support, I am willing to support Prince Rissen as the heir to the throne in return."

The Empress's eyes widened and her body grew entirely still. The annoyance in her eyes disappeared, replaced by caution.

“You do realize that what you just said is treason, don’t you?” she eventually said, her voice laced with threat. “I think I had enough of this nonsense!” She added, rising to her feet. She gave Raena another spiteful look, spinning around and preparing to leave.

“Ivis Seiren,” Raena said and the Empress froze mid-step. “Bael Craith. Rhuno Dumas.” The Empress turned slowly, staring at her with wide eyes. Raena held her murderous gaze, trying her best to keep her smile up and her voice stable.

Raena pushed one of the plates toward where the Empress used to sit. “Why don’t you try more of the dishes, Your Majesty? You haven’t heard the rest of my proposition.”