

## His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 26 - Tips

0 9 minutes read

"Everybody, leave!" Empress Ta.ssia commanded, eyes locked on Raena, as if afraid she'd say something else if she so much as looked away. The soft rustling of clothes and the quiet steps announced the departure of her servants, including her lady-in-waiting.

"Kara, wait for me outside," Raena ordered without turning to look at her maid. When she heard the click of the doors, Raena let her smile drop.

Standing in front of the Empress and keeping her cool was proving way more difficult than dealing with an angry customer demanding to speak with the manager because they found hair in their food.

Raena swallowed the lump in her throat, waiting for the Empress to speak.

"You seem to have a death wish," Empress Ta.ssia spat, strolling to her previous seat and dropping into it with an angry expression. "How do you know those names? Do you even know what they mean?"

"Those are some of the names of the foreign nobles that have agreed to provide support to the second prince's claim to the throne in exchange for returning their land and titles once he succeeds the Emperor. Also, turning their conquered countries into vassal states with independent governments instead of being just regions in the Empire managed by imperial officials. Did I get that right?"

With every word, the Empress's eyes grew larger and her body turned more and more rigid.

Even her skin looked less shiny than before.

"How do you know all of that?" She breathed, unable to hide her panic anymore.

I read it in a book I transmigrated into ' Raena thought, smiling. She couldn't say that, of course.

"I'd rather not reveal my sources," she replied instead.

"Who else knows?" the Empress asked briskly, glancing at the door behind Raena.

"Not a maid, that's for sure." Raena scoffed. "I can't trust servants with such sensitive information now, can I? Who knows who would buy their loyalty or torture my secrets out of them? We are talking about high treason here, just as you said. However, I did share these details with a trusted associate of mine and prepared several letters with that same information and other interesting bits I found out. They will be delivered to my

father as well as my husband, in case, you know, I get into an unfortunate accident. One can never be too careful.”

The Empress’s nostrils flared in anger and a few small wrinkles formed around her eyes as she glared at Raena. She took a minute to calm herself, her neutral expression returning.

“Then what do you plan to do with that information?”

“Nothing.” Raena shrugged. “I only shared a bit of what I know to show my sincerity. After all, knowing this much and not reporting it immediately to the Emperor is also treason. So this way, we are in the same boat. Your success is tied to my success and vice versa, which is why I want your support.”

Raena smiled. That part wasn’t entirely true. She could have aligned herself with any one member of the Imperial family; she knew enough about them to blackmail them. But since her husband was bound to die first, followed by the crown prince’s poisoning, she had to go with the safest choice. By the time the book had become too tedious and she dropped it, Prince Rissen was still alive, although he was in a tight spot. Either way, she didn’t plan to support him for long – just until she had the means to leave this place.

The Empress stared at her thoughtfully, weighing her options. She picked up another of the plates, staring down at the dessert on it before taking a small bite.

“So what you want from me is to use your restaurant to cater for my social gatherings? And you want my son to visit it on the day of its opening?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Why do you need my son, though? Notoriety?” the Empress asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Precisely, Your Majesty. If my establishment is good enough for a prince, then everyone else would want to come and see what the fuss is all about” Raena replied. She had gotten the idea from the book, of course. She had first considered waiting for the scene with Elene and the third prince, where they visited Ruby Street together, but seeing the complete lack of interest Elene showed in the third prince, Raena figured that it may not be their time yet. Still, she couldn’t wait. So she had to recreate the same conditions, but with someone easier to control. “I’d also appreciate it if you give me written permission to use ‘Her Highness’s Secret Palace’ for the name of the restaurant.”

Raena added, trying to make her racing heart settle.

The Empress looked like she was trying really hard not to roll her eyes, but then she let out a heavy sigh.

“Anything else?” Raena fought a smile.

“No, Your Majesty, you’ve been most generous. I really appreciate it.” Raena beamed. “I look forward to working together.

“Then what do you plan to do if your husband finds out what you’re doing behind his back?” the Empress asked, leaving the empty plate on the table and pouring some tea for herself. She took a sip and grimaced, setting the cold drink down. “He will kill you if he finds out you’re supporting my son instead of his brother. Not to mention he is especially sensitive toward the word treason.”

“I can handle my husband, don’t worry. As you said, he is just a disrespectful brute that only knows how to fight and glare,” Raena replied, fixing the skirts of her dress. The Empress snorted.” In fact, I..”

The door behind Raena opened without so much as a knock, and she trailed off, turning around in surprise when she noticed the Empress frown angrily. Raena’s eyes landed on the young man that strode inside like he owned the place, his eyes fixated on the two of them.

His likeness with the Empress was more than evident even at a first glance – the chocolate skin, the shiny hair, the brown eyes. Even the way they frowned was the same.

He strode inside the room with a confident gait, stopping by the Empress’s seat.

“Mother,” he said, leaning down and kissing her on the cheek. His eyes moved to Raena, narrowing as he inspected her from head to toe. Raena tried to hide her surprise- she didn’t expect to see them act so familiar with each other in front of her. Not that they weren’t close. In fact, according to the book, they were extremely close and they trusted each other completely, thinking everyone was against them. Still, keeping in mind their positions, Raena had expected the Empress to require a bow and a formal greeting, even from her son. At least in an unfamiliar company like Raena’s. “Who is that?”

“Rissen, meet Raena. She is your younger brother’s new wife and the Prime Minister’s daughter.” The Empress introduced her with a forced smile. Raena got up and curtsied. It didn’t hurt to have him not hate her from the start.

“Is that so?” Rissen said in a biting tone. She barely stopped herself from jumping when she raised her head and found him right in her face, staring down at her with calculating eyes. “At least this one is pretty.”

Raena forced another smile, trying not to be bothered by the way his eyes undressed her without a hint of shame.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness," she said instead, turning then to look at his mother. "If you'll excuse me, Your Majesty, I'll take my leave now. Thank you for your warm welcome. I'll send you our menu and invitations for our opening night. Have a good day."

Raena bowed again, turning around and heading for the door. She kept her smile up just in case, counting the steps that separated her from her freedom. Nobody called for her to stop, so she opened the door with her heart in her throat and stepped outside. Kara was standing across from the door with the other servants, and when she saw Raena emerge from the chamber, she immediately moved toward her.

"This way, Your Highness," Kara said, pointing to the corridor they had come from. Raena followed with a stiff nod and they left behind the palace servants, who threw them a few curious glances when they thought they weren't looking.

When the two turned the first corner, Kara stopped and caught her shoulders, helping her lean against the wall. Raena hadn't realized it until then, but she was shaking, cold sweat streaming down her back. She had thought she nailed the whole blackmailing thing, but now that she was out of that room, it felt more like she had survived being locked in a cage with a hungry lion.

She might have overestimated her power this time, but she couldn't let Kara know that or she'd just worry even more. Besides, it all ended like she wanted. She just had to be more careful now that she had made one more enemy.

"Are you okay? You are really pale!" Kara whispered, glancing around to make sure there were no other people that could see them. "Did she do something to you?"

"No, but she was really intense. I feel like I aged ten years today." Raena forced a laugh, pushing herself off the wall. Kara's eyebrows knitted together, but Raena just smiled at her. "I'm fine, don't worry so much. Let's get out of here."

"So what was all that about?" Rissen asked. "I ran into Miriam outside. She told me you chased everyone out to have a private conversation with that girl."

Ta.ssia rose from her seat, glaring at the door where Raena had disappeared. The Empress circled the sofa, picking up the little bell that stood on one of the tables. She rang it once and the door opened, letting in her servants with her lady-in-waiting leading them. Miriam bowed her head at the two of them, then took her place by Ta.ssia's side.

"Clean this up!" Ta.ssia called to the servants, motioning toward the table. Rissen had just taken the seat Raena had occupied a few minutes ago, picking up one of the tube-

like sweets that Raena had called cannoli. The servants hesitated as they saw him eating, but he motioned for them to carry the rest without even glancing at them.

Ta.ssia turned toward Miriam once the rest of the servants had cleared the space.

“Find anything you can about her and report to me immediately. I want to know every little detail of her childhood, every friend and acquaintance. I want to know the nicknames her family gave her and even what the servants thought of her.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Miriam nodded.

“And have people watch that restaurant of hers. I want someone working inside of it as well, I want to know everything she does!” Ta.ssia added, her hand balling into a fist.

“This is not bad!” Rissen’s voice made her turn just as he was finishing the cannoli. “You should tell your cook to make me some.”

Ta.ssia let out an annoyed sigh, turning to look at Miriam. Her lady bowed down and quickly left to carry out her orders. Despite Miriam’s meek and forgettable character, she was really useful. People rarely noticed her, but she had a cunning side to her, which served Ta.ssia perfectly.

“So what has got you all riled up like that, mother? What did she want?” Rissen asked, flapping his fingers. “I haven’t seen you this unsettled since. I don’t know, before you became the Empress.”

“She knows about our plans.” Ta.ssia turned to look at him just in time to see his smile freeze on his lips. “In detail. I don’t know how she found out, but what she knew only I and the other people involved knew.”

“So... what do you plan to do with her?” Rissen asked, straightening up.

“Nothing.. for now” the Empress replied, flapping her lips. “I want to see what she will do next. She is just a little kitten that thinks itself a lion, but she doesn’t look ready to step into the wild yet. She might have taken me by surprise with her knowledge, but she is clearly in way over her head and she doesn’t even know it. Blackmailing me? That was her first mistake. Thinking she is safe in that brat’s mansion would be her second mistake”

“So you plan to kill her?” Rissen asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I said not yet” Ta.ssia sighed, running her fingers over her dress. A crease had formed over her skirt and it was annoying her. “Once she serves her purpose and I find what else she knows, I’ll have our dog in Ka.sisian’s residence take care of her.”

She focused her attention back on him, just as he was studying his nails. "I'll need you to do something."

He looked at her with a raised eyebrow, indifference reigning over his face.

"What is it?"

"I want you to go to the opening of her restaurant. Go and find what other secrets she is hiding there."

## **His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 27 - Tips**

0 10 minutes read

"They're dead," Ka.ssian said.

"All of them?" Yulien exclaimed in disbelief. How?"

"We only caught one of them alive, but by the time I got there to interrogate him, somebody had slipped poison into his food. Or maybe he carried the poison with him and killed himself when the guards weren't watching," Ka.ssian explained, trying to contain his anger.

They had run out of leads about who was instigating these incidents or what the purpose was of causing such unrest. Nobody stood to gain anything from a rebellion in that region – the nobles were being treated well even after the assimilation of Caen into the Empire and most of them took leadership roles and important positions. A violent upheaval would only destabilize the region and make them lose money and their labor force. They didn't even have any military power, so even if the rebellion was successful, they were going to be devastated the moment the Empire sent its soldiers. It made no sense.

"It can't be helped" Yulien sighed. "It's obvious that someone was behind it. I don't think those people just woke up and decided their life was bad and they needed to rebel."

"Agreed. But..." Ka.ssian started when he noticed Blaine craning his neck to look at something, then turning toward him with a surprised expression. "What?" Ka.ssian frowned.

Looking in the direction his aide had been staring.

His eyes caught a movement, and for a second, something golden grabbed his attention before it disappeared around the corner.

I am almost sure that was your wife walking over there with her personal maid," Blaine said.

Ka.ssian stopped abruptly, turning to look again in the direction Blaine was pointing. Yulien paused, giving a sign to his guards to wait.

“What would she be doing here?” Ka.ssian frowned, taking a few steps back.

“Blaine, why don’t you go and bring her if it really her?” Yulien suggested, and the aide hesitated for a moment before sprinting away.

Ka.ssian sensed his brother’s eyes on him, but ignored them, trying to bring back his reserved expression. The sounds of steps returned to the corridor before Blaine came into view, followed by two women.

One of them was dark-haired and wearing a maid’s uniform – Ka.ssian quickly recognized the tanned girl with sharp brown eyes and neat dark hair pulled into a braid as Raena’s maid. The second woman had to be his wife, but her appearance didn’t quite match what he remembered of Raena. He had always seen her with messy hair falling freely around her pretty face, with no jewelry and dresses which were both indistinctive and simple. This time, her hair was carefully arranged and the dress she wore clearly outlined her curves and delicate lines. Even her jewelry matched her outfit and the ornaments in her hair.

Ka.ssian glanced at Blaine, who shrugged lightly. The maid bowed down while Raena curtsied, a huge grin appearing on her face the moment she rose.

“Ladies, what a pleasure to see you here!” Yulien spoke first, patting Ka.ssian on the back with unnecessary force. It helped Ka.ssian get rid of his surprise and he frowned instead, staring at Raena – she looked a bit paler than usual, but her smile was just as bright as ever. “I don’t believe we were ever properly introduced. I’m Yulien, Ka.ssian’s older brother.”

“Oh!” Raena said, her eyes widening.

“Oh?” Yulien chuckled, staring at her. “What Raena leaned forward, still looking at his brother, and lowered her voice.

“I’m sorry for kicking you between the legs, Your Highness,” she said. “My mother said that I should always protect my innocence at all costs, no matter who stands in front of me.”

Ka.ssian closed his eyes, fighting the urge to cover his face while trying to decide if he should frown or laugh. To his surprise, his brother burst out laughing. Ka.ssian looked at him, wondering how long it had been since he heard Yulien laugh so wholeheartedly. His older brother was always smiling politely and giving out the vibe of unwavering positivity, but Ka.ssian knew what he had to deal with every day while living in the Imperial Palace.

“Oh, no, dear sister-in-law, that was completely deserved,” he said, patting Raena’s shoulder. She stared hesitantly at him before grinning. The sudden urge to pull his brother’s hand away from her hit him so hard, he took a step forward before he even realized it. Yulien let his hand drop by his side. “So please accept my apology instead, Lady Raena. I showed you something unsightly.”

“It’s alright!” Raena laughed. “So we can be friends now?”

Yulien shot Ka.ssian a look before giving her an indulging smile.

“Of course. We’ll all be good friends now.”

“What are you doing here?” Ka.ssian asked, finally bringing Raena’s attention to him.

“I was just meeting with the Empress.” She shrugged like it was no big deal. Ka.ssian felt his body tense and shot his brother a glance. Yulien’s smile turned less cheerful, even though he managed to look nonchalant about it. “She was nice!”

“Why wasn’t I informed you were meeting with her?” Ka.ssian asked coldly. His wife’s smile faltered and she took a hesitant step back, almost bumping into her maid. Ka.ssian cursed himself. He didn’t mean to scare her, but she probably didn’t realize how dangerous meeting with that woman was not just for him, but for her own safety as well.

“The invitation was sent to me alone,” she replied, crossing her arms and glancing toward her maid. Her maid nodded, even though she didn’t look up. “I didn’t know I had to tell you!”

“Mistress, manners!” her maid hissed, but this time the girl blatantly ignored her, pursing her lips stubbornly. Ka.ssian sighed, his frustration growing.

“Blaine,” he said and his aide straightened up. Make sure Kara gets home safely.’

“Yes, Your Highness,” he replied, trying to hide his confusion. “What will you...?”

“I’m taking my wife back,” he announced, grabbing Raena’s hand. “Yulien, I’ll see you tomorrow at the council meeting.”

“Y-yes?” Yulien replied, his voice sounding startled. Ka.ssian ignored their strange looks, pulling Raena after him. To his surprise, she dug her heels into the floor, trying to wiggle her hand of his grip, but failing miserably against his strength.

“Kara!” she shouted, turning toward her maid with a pleading look in her eyes. Ka.ssian stared with shock, just now realizing what he was doing.

His wife glanced at him with fear in her eyes.

"I'll see you at home, Mistress," the maid replied hesitantly. "Please, behave yourself."

Raena gave her a betrayed look, but then stopped struggling, her shoulders slouching.

Ka.ssian loosened his grip, catching her fingers as gently as he could. They were so small and thin that it felt like they would break no matter how lightly he squeezed them. When he glanced back at her, she was pouting, dragging her feet.

"If I let go of your hand, will you walk properly?" he sighed. She nodded and Ka.ssian let go, pretending not to see how she rubbed her wrist as she hurried to catch up with him.

They walked in silence until they reached the carriage that was already waiting for them. The coachman opened the door to help Raena inside, but when he met Ka.ssian's gaze, he quickly rushed to the driver's seat. Ka.ssian offered her his hand and gritted his teeth as she hesitated before taking it. By the time he climbed in after her and closed the door, she had seated herself in one of the corners, arms crossed.

He hadn't seen or thought of her for the last ten days. Work kept him busy, and when he was too tired to work, Lara's company wouldn't leave him time for useless thoughts and dreams. Yet, looking at her now, he realized his heart was beating much faster than usual again.

Ka.ssian closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead.

"Are you mad?" he sighed, looking back at her, only to find her staring.

"Yes!" she said, still pouting.

"Is it because I pulled your hand?"

"Yes!" she murmured again. "I don't see why need to go back with you and not Kara."

"Do you not like to ride in the carriage with me?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. She would usually look much happier when she saw him, so something must have happened to put her in a bad mood. Considering how curt and unhelpful her answers were, he doubted he'd get any proper information out of her, even if he asked about the Empress.

Raena shook her head, looking out the window.

"Why?" he asked, tensing in his seat.

"Because His Highness is boring!"

Whatever Ka.ssiian expected, it wasn't that. Her honest words, in combination with that displeased expression, made him laugh before he knew what he was doing. She peeked back at him, looking surprised.

"Yeah, you're probably right," he murmured, scratching the back of his head. "I'm sorry for hurting your hand and for leaving without Kara. Just wanted to ask you a few questions."

"What kind of questions?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"What did the Empress want from you?" he asked, keeping his smile on so that he wouldn't scare her again. She seemed to relax a little, her eyes studying him for a long time.

"She wanted to congratulate me on becoming part of the family," Raena replied. "She asked if you treat me well and if I see you often. I told her I don't see you at all and she then said that I am really pretty. She was really beautiful, so I am sure she only said it to make me feel better, but she was really nice. Then she told me I could go back."

"Is that all you talked about?" Ka.ssiian asked.

"Hm, yes. She just." his wife started, but let out a surprised yelp as the carriage stopped abruptly, sending her flying forward. She landed on her knees between his legs, groaning quietly as her hands gripped his thighs to keep her from falling all the way over him. He stared at her with a startled expression while she struggled to get up.

The carriage started moving again, only to stop abruptly a few moments later. She had managed to get up by then, but the sudden jolt sent her flying right into his arms. Ka.ssiian barely felt it as her body hit his chest, but before he knew it, his hands were on her tiny waist, holding her in place to make sure she wouldn't fall again.

She smelled of flowers and chocolate and something even sweeter. Her chest was rising and falling quickly against him, and her breath was tickling his neck, sending goosebumps all the way to his fingertips. She was warm, too. He could feel the heat radiating from her body even through her dress, and it was driving him crazy.

Ka.ssiian took a deep breath, trying to compose himself as her scent engulfed him, her hair tickling his face while her delicate fingers dug into his shoulders to keep her steady.

She was so close. Too close.

What was with that woman that unsettled him so much? And what was it with this stupid situation?

"Um, Your Highness, can you put me down? You're squeezing me too hard."

Ka.ssian blinked in surprise, his eyes stopping on his hands that were gripping her waist. He set her down in her seat, getting to his feet. He pushed the door open and stepped outside, glaring at the coachman, who was just shouting at someone in front of them.

“What is the meaning of this? Can’t you drive properly?” Ka.ssian growled and the man jumped in surprise, bowing from his seat.

“My deepest apologies, Your Highness! The wheel of the carriage in front of us just broke and I had to avoid hitting them or you might have got hurt. I will go around them now and make sure to drive more carefully. Is Her Highness alright?”

“She is...” Ka.ssian muttered, glancing back inside the carriage only to find Raena in her seat with her skirts raised almost to her waist. “Dear gods, have mercy on me...” He sighed, running a hand over his face. “Just get us back to my residence as fast as you can.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” The coachman nodded eagerly, preparing to get them moving. Ka.ssian stepped back into the carriage, slamming the door and dropping in his seat. His eyes instinctively went back to her. Her hair was obscuring most of it, but he could still see her running her fingers over one of her legs.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked with annoyance, locking his eyes on the window.

“How can you just lift your skirt like that?”

“Kara will scold me if I get blood on my dress again!” Raena mumbled, and Ka.ssian’s breath caught in his throat as his eyes immediately went back to her. She seemed to have grazed one of her knees and a bit of blood was seeping through the broken skin. Pressing her handkerchief against it, she kept wincing.

Ka.ssian sighed, untying his cravat. The damn thing was making it too hard to breathe, but he had to dress up since he was visiting the Imperial Palace. He leaned down and caught the hand with the handkerchief, prying the cloth out of her fingers before pressing it gently against her knee. She hissed, but didn’t stop him as he slid the cravat under her knee and tied it around it. When he was done with the knot, Ka.ssian pulled back silently, looking out the window again.

“Put your skirts down,” he whispered without looking at her. “And stop lifting them so casually. I can’t believe even you are this unaware.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” she replied and for a second it sounded like she was smiling, but when he glanced at her she was staring thoughtfully outside as if nothing had happened.

Kassian sank deeper into his seat, closing his eyes and sighing again. It had all been fine when he was away and didn't see her. He had no problem controlling his body, his mind, his feelings. Yet now that she was sitting so close and doing all those ridiculous things, he could barely think straight without something stupid coming to his mind.

Since replacing the object of his interest didn't seem to do the trick, he had to do the next best thing – ignore it until it disappeared into oblivion.

## His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 28 - Tips

07 minutes read

"Is this all?" Raena sighed as she stared at the pile of papers on her desk. Her wrist hurt from signing so many of them, and her head throbbed from reading so many numbers. At least she didn't have to do the calculations herself thanks to Davin, who was sitting hunched over the small coffee table in her newly furnished office.

There were only three rooms that were completely renovated and furnished on the second floor – her bedroom, her bath, and her new study.

Just a few days ago, she had to do all of this in her bed, and she had to admit having her own workspace was nice. There was even a secret compartment behind one of the shelves and a hidden drawer in her desk, which made her feel like some kind of super spy.

"There are a few more documents regarding the salaries for the new servants that arrived a few days ago," Kara explained, handing her another stack of papers. If it wasn't for Kara, those piles would have probably taken her three times longer to sort. Raena would have delegated all the dealings regarding the finances to her friend, but she already knew what her answer would be.

I am overworked already. Do it yourself! Kara would have said undoubtedly. And she was probably right since she now had an army of people to boss around and she also helped with running the errands Raena couldn't trust anyone else.

"Uh, fine!" Raena mumbled, rubbing her head. "Give them here."

"Do you feel alright?" Kara asked as she stood by her desk, her arms crossed and her brows knitted. "Ever since we came back from the Imperial Palace the other day, you look out of it. And today it's even worse."

"I'm fine, just tired," Raena mumbled, signing both documents and adding them to the pile. "Davin, are you ready with those?"

"Yes, Mistress!" he replied, gathering the books and papers he was working on so he could carry them to her desk. "I've calculated the current spending as well as the amount needed for the other renovations that have not yet happened. If you look

here..." He set the two ledgers down and spread the papers he had been writing on in front of her. She hated math and accounting almost as much as she hated getting up early in the morning, but one look at Kara and she knew she wouldn't be delegating that either. As if doing this for the restaurant wasn't enough.

A knock came from the door and Raena called for them to enter, rubbing her temples as she watched Nola rush in, her expression a mix of excitement and concern.

"What is it, Nola?" Raena sighed.

"You have guests, Mistress!" the girl replied, her fingers fidgeting nervously. "A few of the concubines are downstairs. They said they are here to give their respects."

"Did you invite them to the parlor?" Kara asked while Raena was just staring at the girl, trying to figure out why they would come now of all times and how she could quickly get rid of them. She felt like crap, and she really didn't want to play any charades today.

"Yes, Kara!" Nola nodded.

"Good. You may go," Kara said, motioning for her to leave. "We'll be right down."

Nola nodded without hesitation, leaving the office at a running pace. Raena pushed herself up, staring at the door with annoyance.

"Let's go, Kara," she said, circling the desk. "

Davin, finish up here and gather the documents. I'll check them later."

Her body felt stiff, and her scraped knee burned as she descended the stairs. They passed a few of the new servants in the corridor, receiving curt, hurried bows, then Raena continued to the parlor on the first floor that was ready to house guests. So far, she had no use for it since nobody really visited her, but now she was glad she could flaunt a little class in front of others.

"Hey" Kara whispered, catching Raena by the arm. "Are you really alright? Your expression is not very good."

"Well, I can't be perfect every day, can I?" Raena snapped, regretting it immediately. "I'm sorry, Kara."

"I'm just really tired. I'll do this and then I'll take a break. Here we go."

She forced a smile on her face, ruffling her hair before stepping into the parlor. Two of her guests walking around and examining the intricately painted walls, pointing and

whispering to each other. Raena smiled as she glanced at Elene's handiwork dark green color crept from the floor to about Raena's chest, nuances and hues mixing into such a realistic picture of grass and trees and bushes that one would think they were really walking through the unadulterated section of the Concubines' Palace. Flowers in different shapes and peeked through the greenery while birds nested the branches or flew toward the ceiling.

This was Elene's first work and Raena had to admit that next to the female lead, her skills after three years of school were still lacking. Elene had grown quiet as she worked on the paintings, so focused and devoted to each stroke that Raena felt like she was seeing a different person. She even saw Elene smile once.

In retrospect, giving her this job might have been a bad idea since she barely left the house now. Raena kept sending her to do chores outside of the North Palace, hoping she'd run into Kassian and they'd get into their romantic storyline, but Elene always finished her work quickly and returned to work on the walls. There was still time until they were supposed to meet for the first time in the book, but it made her wonder – was it possible to change the storyline? What if that happened, what did that mean for Kassian or Elene? Or for herself?

"Ahem," Kara cleared her throat and Raena flinched, realizing she had spaced out instead of greeting them. She brought the usual cheerful smile back on her face, her eyes stopping on each of the women that were staring at her expectantly.

"Hi!" Raena chirped, catching the skirts of her dress and making a clumsy curtsy. "I'm Raena. Nice to meet you!"

The two women that were examining the walls returned to the table, greeting her with lowered heads. The two sitting down got up, but only one of them bowed.

Raena locked her eyes on the one that didn't, not at all surprised to see the beautiful dark-haired woman that was supposed to be the third prince's favorite mistress. Her smile was warm and polite and there was not a hint of hostility on her face, but Raena didn't like the look in her eyes. Like she was a little kitten that was caught eating from another cat's bowl.

"Thank you for greeting us, Your Highness," Lara said, stepping in front of the others. "My name is Lara, and these lovely ladies are Kela, Aria and Myla. Just like you, we are part of His Highness's harem. We apologize for taking so long to come and greet you, but we heard you were really busy with the renovation of the North Palace and we didn't want to intrude."

"It's alright!" Raena replied, waving her hand while trying to hold on to her smile. "I have a lot of servants to play with. Sit, sit. Kara, bring something yummy!"

Raena headed toward one of the cushiony chairs next to the table, glancing at the other three women, who quietly took a seat. They were all pretty in their own way, she had to give it to Kassian, but standing next to Lara and her, they could have just as well been part of the furniture.

Unlike Lara, they didn't seem that happy to be there, but politely smiled and asked questions, while Raena did her best to answer them with her usual cheerfulness.

She almost sighed out loud when Kara returned with a tray full of sandwiches and some of the desserts Raena had taught Portha how to make – they weren't as perfect as the ones her cooks in the restaurant made, but they were still better than the too sweet or too dry cookies she was first served by the old woman. Kara set them down, then stepped aside while another maid brought and served fresh tea.

"So, Your Highness..." Lara finally spoke, and Raena quickly interrupted her.

"Call me Raena! Your Highness sounds so long and boring." Raena grimaced, ignoring the faces the ladies made. Lara didn't look fazed at all.

"So, Raena," she switched without pause, "we heard that you had a meeting with the Empress recently. How was it?"

"It was alright, I guess," Raena replied noncommittally.

"Was she as scary as they say?" The woman Lara had called Myla asked in a low tone, as if afraid someone might hear her. She glanced at the other ladies, but they were already staring at Raena.

"She was really nice to me," Raena shrugged, trying to ignore the throbbing in her temples. Just thinking of that woman and their conversation was making her physically ill. She had assumed everything had gone well and her plan had been a success, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized just how reckless she had acted.

"She was really beautiful, but of course she has to be since she is the Empress."

The three women mumbled something in agreement while Lara continued to study her, silently sipping her tea. Raena brought her own cup to her lips, but just like the chocolate candy she had just eaten, the tea had a weird taste as well.

She looked down at it with a frown, only to realize her hands were shaking and everything was slipping in and out of focus.

"Raena, are you alright?" Lara's voice came from her side, dull and distant. Raena looked around for it, but everything was becoming more and more blurry. The teacup slipped from her fingers, and she distantly felt the hot liquid soaking her skirts. She got up before it burned her legs, reaching to catch herself on the back of her chair.

“Kara...” she mumbled, her throat tightening as she struggled to stay on her feet. Lara’s face appeared in front of her, staring down at her calmly.

She disappeared a moment later, replaced by Kara’s panicked expression. Raena tried to keep her eyes open, but her strength had already left her, so all she could do was lie back and listen to the distant voices surrounding her. One thought lingered in her mind, though, while the rest of her consciousness drifted away.

This can’t be it. She couldn’t die there. She wasn’t done.

## His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 29 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

“Azure and white for the flowers, just like those. His Highness likes blue, so let’s stick to it” Sarea nodded, pointing at the display in front of her. She moved to the table that held the different plates and utensils she had to choose from, narrowing her eyes at them. She needed something silver to go with the rest of the decoration, but the ones in front of her looked too plain for the occasion. “None of these would work. Find me others.”

“We have the new food menu ready for your approval, Your Highness,” the Grand Chamberlain announced, motioning toward another table that held even more documents to go over.

There were only a few weeks until Ka.ssian’s birthday party and there was still so much to do.

The menu had to be revised and the quest list had to be double-checked. The invitations were already sent, but without the replies, she couldn’t finish the sitting arrangements. Ka.ssian had said he’d prefer a less strict atmosphere, allowing everyone to move freely and enjoy themselves. He also wanted to hold the reception in the garden and he had told her that just a couple of days ago. She had already arranged for almost everything to be set up in the banquet hall in the Main Palace, and now she had to start from scratch.

She was very close to telling him to deal with it himself, but she knew that if she passed on the responsibility to him, he’d probably delegate it to that woman, giving her even more reasons to be smug.

“I’ll take a break and we’ll go over the menu after,” she said, motioning for one of the maids to bring her something to drink. The girl hurried to pour some of the fresh tea Sarea had ordered while she took a seat under the shade of the pavilion, letting out a tired sigh.

She was just taking a sip when she noticed Ka.ssian striding through her garden with a heavy, annoyed gait. The servants he passed by bowed, but he just ignored them, eyes locked on her.

“I got your message. You wanted to discuss something?” he said directly, and Sarea almost laughed. He wasn’t in a good mood by the looks of it. Not that he was especially cordial on the rare occasions when all the stars aligned for him, but lately he seemed even more irritable than usual.

“Hello to you too!” she said with a bitter smile, motioning toward the chair across from her. “Please sit. My neck is going to break if I have to keep looking up like that.”

He seemed to consider it for a moment, then slid into the seat he was offered. Her maid promptly served him a cup, retreating toward her station to give them privacy. Sarea watched him as he took a sip, staring at the hot tea for a second before setting it down and looking at her.

“So what is it?”

“I need your signature for several matters related to the banquet. I thought it would be best to get them out of the way now since with the military inspection coming up, you’ll probably be too busy,” she replied, and he let out a sigh.

“Wasn’t the point of me giving you free rein to do what you want so that I am not bothered with such details?” he asked, leaning back in his chair.

“We are talking about financial matters. Since the expenses will be coming out of your account and not the harem’s, I’ll need your signature. You can complain to your Chamberlain for that.” She shrugged and watched as Ka.ssian glanced at the man responsible for managing his estate. The Grand Chamberlain bowed with a calm smile, not at all disturbed to be put on the spot.

“Fine!” Ka.ssian sighed, turning back toward her. “What do I need to sign?”

Sarea gave the Chamberlain a sign and he stepped toward the table where the food menu was waiting for her, picking up the pile of papers next to it. He brought them over along with a bottle of ink and a quill and set them in front of Ka.ssian, who did his best not to grimace. For a moment, he looked much younger, just like the stubborn, guarded eighteen-year-old boy she had to marry all those years ago. He had changed a lot since then – he was taller, more muscular, and his features had turned even sharper. His palms seemed even rougher than before as he squeezed the quill – no doubt thanks to the fact that he was constantly holding a weapon even when he didn’t have to.

She thought once that she could make him happy even though they didn’t marry for love, but soon realized that no matter what she tried, he just refused to open up and let anyone beyond the sturdy walls he had erected over the years.

Considering his family and his past, she wasn't all that surprised, but by refusing to become even a bit vulnerable and express his feelings clearly, he was closing himself off from the possibility of finding true happiness. Even love.

She had figured out it wasn't her fault, at least. He was the same with all his other women too – there was always this barrier between him and them, no matter how close they got. Even Lara wasn't an exception.

"Is this all?" Ka.ssiian's voice took her out of her reverie.

"You're done?" she asked, raising an eyebrow while he was getting to his feet. "You went through them all?"

"You said you needed my signature, not my approval," he said calmly. "I trust you know what you're doing, so I am not going to read through all of that. I have enough paperwork waiting for me after being gone for almost two weeks. If that's all, I'll be off..."

"Right." Sarea sighed in resignation. "Good luck with your paperwork." Ka.ssiian narrowed his eyes at the sudden encouragement, but then shook his head and turned to leave. Before he had done more than two steps, he stopped and turned again.

"One more thing," he said, licking his lips.

Make sure Raena attends the celebration as well."

Sarea blinked in surprise, searching his face for an explanation. His expression was calm, but just for a moment she noticed a little spark flash into his serious eyes before disappearing behind the facade of disinterest.

"Why?" she asked, frowning.

"What do you mean, why?" Ka.ssiian frowned. "Because she is my wife. The Prime Minister and his family will be coming, so if she is not there, he won't be happy."

"I see," she said, "I'll inform her. But just keep in mind that..."

"Your Highness!"

Sarea jumped at the sudden shout coming from behind her, turning to glare at the person. Her eyes landed on Darla, who was panting heavily, a slight blush painting her cheeks as if she had been running. Considering she was almost sixty years of age, whatever made her run had to be something big.

"It seems you have your hands full. I be leaving then," Ka.ssiian announced, turning his back on her again. Sarea glanced after him, then switched her attention to her Head Maid.

“What is it?” she asked impatiently.

“Her Highness Raena has collapsed!” Darla replied after clearing her throat and taking a deep breath. Sarea raised her eyebrows, waiting for her maid to continue when she heard steps behind her.

“What did you just say?” Ka.ssian asked from behind Sarea’s chair. His eyes were locked on Darla, who looked startled for a moment, but then quickly bowed. “Collapsed? What does that mean?”

“I was running errands at the Main Palace when I heard a few maids talking about it,” Darla said politely, her voice slowly going back to normal.

“So I went to the North Palace on my way back and I found out that Her Highness collapsed while having tea with a few of His Highness’s concubines that went to visit her.”

“Poison?” Sarea asked, tensing in her seat.

How could she get poisoned so quickly? It’s true that she was a little dumb, but her maid seemed sharp, so as long as she was on Raena’s side, the girl should have been protected from something so silly as poisoning.

“She had a meeting with the Empress a few days ago,” Ka.ssian said, and Sarea shot him a glance. “Could it be a slow-acting poison?”

“They say it wasn’t poison.” Darla shook her head. “They called a doctor and he said that due to stress and physical strain, she got sick with a high fever and that is why she collapsed. He found no traces of poison on her or in her food and drink. None of the concubines were hurt, either.”

“Which ones were there?” Ka.ssian asked, frowning.

“Well,” Darla hesitated, glancing at Sarea. “Lady Lara, Kela, Aria, and Myla. They are all fine.”

“Damn it. I’m going there!” Ka.ssian murmured, turning to leave. Sarea caught his sleeve, stopping him in his tracks. He looked down at her with a surprised expression, his eyes moving to her fingers until she let go.

“Don’t be so rash. They won’t let you in even if you go!” she said carefully.

“I am the head of this family and I own the North Palace and everyone in it!” he snapped at her.

“Tell me again how are they going to stop me!”

“And then what?” Sarea asked. “Even if you go, what can you do? The doctor said it was stress and he probably prescribed medicine for it. You’re not a doctor nor a nursemaid. Will you be staying by her bedside, holding her hand?” Ka.ssian’s face stiffened, and he glared at her. “if you go there now, rumors will spread that it’s serious enough for you to visit. Word may get to the Prime Minister or worse, your enemies may use the opportunity to do something to you or her.” Ka.ssian pursed his lips, his stance relaxing a little. “She is part of the harem, so she falls under my care. I’ll make sure she gets well.”

“Thank you,” Ka.ssian said and she raised her eyebrows. She couldn’t remember the last time he actually thanked her for something. “I’ll leave it to you then, “

“Yes, I.” Sarea closed her mouth quickly, drawing her handkerchief from the pocket of her dress and pressing it to her face just as the fit of coughing started. Ka.ssian stared at her with a frown, so she forced a smile, waving dismissively with her hand.

“I’m fine,” she said against the handkerchief.” Just a bit of cough. Don’t let me keep you.” His frown remained, but he nodded, walking away with a heavy stride. Sarea stared after him for a second, then pulled the handkerchief away, staring at the bloody splatters with a resignation.

“It’s getting worse, Your Highness,” Darla said with a concerned voice, looking down at the handkerchief. “Would you like me to bring another doctor to examine you again?”

“There is no need, I know what they are going to say” Sarea replied, giving her a grateful smile.

Besides, it doesn’t hurt or anything. I don’t have time to roll around in bed, there is so much work to be done.” Sarea got up from her seat, stepping toward the Grand Chamberlain, who was still waiting patiently, talking quietly with his helpers. “Well then, let’s see that menu.”

## **His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 30 - Tips**

09 minutes read

“Hey, hey, what do you think you’re doing?” Kara hissed as she blocked Raena’s path. “You should be in bed, you’re still sick!”

“I’m not sick. I just overworked myself a little.” Raena rolled her eyes, adding with a mocking grin, “I’m better now, thanks to your tender care!”

“This wasn’t just overworking and you know it! Your symptoms were one of poisoning!” Kara said stubbornly. “I don’t know what happened and who might have done it, but..”

“The doctor said I wasn’t poisoned. And if I was, do you think I would be standing here right now?” Raena threw her hands in the air. “So stop it already. I’m fine, Kara.” Raena

laughed, trying to go around her, but Kara blocked her again. "I don't have a fever anymore. Nothing hurts, my taste is back to normal and my head is clear. I will not be spending another minute in bed, even if it means tackling you to the ground. And I will, I promise you!" That seemed to make Kara hesitate, so Raena took the opportunity, sneaking under her stretched arms and hurrying to the door. She quickly opened it and stepped into the corridor where the chances of Kara trying to stop her were much slimmer. She wouldn't dare act so brazenly where people could see her.

Raena's eyes landed on Zen, who was waiting by her door, leaning on the wall with his arms crossed. He looked her over from head to toe as if making sure she was in one piece before his attention diverted to Kara, who followed outside with a dark look on her face.

"Do you know what will happen if you get sick again? Or poisoned for real? I'll be flogged to death!" she hissed, looking up and down the corridor."

The third prince sent his personal physician to check on you, and the first wife sent a nurse and medicine! They are both watching the residence right now! They can't be seeing you going out and about like this! Please, think of the people working here!"

"I am aware, Kara," Raena said, letting her smile drop. "But I can't stay here any longer. The restaurant opens in two days and I have been cooped up in here for five. I have to check in with them and make sure everything is ready. Marden sent three messages asking to see me. I am not doing this because I am bored."

Her maid pursed her lips, letting out annoyed sigh.

"Fine. Then how do you plan to get out" Raena smiled, digging into the bag she was holding and pulling out a long, dark wig.

"Through the front door, obviously!" she grinned. "I asked Elene to lend me a maid's uniform, but she is late, so I was about to go find her."

"She is probably still drawing. I'll go get her" Kara sighed. A group of maids appeared from one of the doors at the end of the corridor, looking toward them. Kara shot her a glance and Raena raised her hands in surrender, retreating into her room. She motioned for Zen to follow, and he slipped after her, closing the door.

"You can get ready here. You should hide the sword too, since nobody but you and the guards are allowed to carry a weapon inside the residence," she said, turning her back on him and stepping toward the mirror. She picked her hair and pulled it in a bun on the back of her head, tying it with a ribbon while watching his reflection move to take off his jacket and the scabbard on his waist.

"Are you sure you're well enough to go out?" he asked, glancing at her as he slicked his hair back before putting his short black wig on.

"I'm fine!" Raena replied readily. It was strange looking at herself with the same hair color she used to have before coming here. Her old face was getting even blurrier in her memories, and she wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

"I don't like this color on you," Zen said, making her focus on his reflection, which was now standing right behind hers.

"Well, I'll keep that in mind" Raena chuckled, pulling her dark hair in a low, loose braid like the maids usually wore theirs. As she finished, she stared at the mirror thoughtfully-her disguise wasn't going to fool anyone who had seen her up close, but it was good enough for the new maids and the guards.

She felt something tickle her cheek and flinched, only then realizing it was Zen's finger that had touched her. She stared at him in surprise, wondering when he had moved so close.

"There is a string of blonde hair sticking out" he said, pointing at her ear. "May I?"

"Sure, thank you." Raena said awkwardly, looking forward. From the corner of her eye, she watched him tuck the strand behind her ear and under the wig.

"Do you have something to say?" he asked suddenly. "You keep looking at me as if you want to say something."

"Ah, no." She smiled, running her fingers over her ear to make sure there was no more blonde hair sticking out.

"Do I make you nervous when I stand this close?" he asked, leaning further down so his eyes were at the level of hers. Raena was about to say a firm no, but the gray storm brewing in his gaze made her forget what they were talking about. A pleased smile blossomed on his lips, softening his sharp features. "I'm glad. If I can make Miss Raena flustered when she is always so in control of herself, then I can make her have other feelings as well."

"How cheeky!" Raena laughed after she took a moment to compose herself. Zen beamed happily.

She was afraid things would continue to be awkward after that confession, but he didn't try to pressure her even once. He was just the same as before-well, mostly. She had no idea if this new balance was going to lead to something, but as long as he wasn't pushing for things she wasn't willing to give, she could play along and see where things would go.

The door behind them opened, and Kara walked in, giving them a suspicious look. She strode to the bed and put the maid uniform she was holding on it, circling Raena and stopping behind her. Raena sensed a few pulls as Kara unfastened the ties on her dress when the maid suddenly stopped.

“What are you doing?” Kara asked, and Raena froze, wondering what she meant. She turned her head only to find out that Kara wasn’t looking at her, but Zen. “Get out of the room, or at least turn around. Have you no shame?”

“My apologies,” Zen murmured, turning his back on them.

Raena sensed the dress slide off her shoulders and stepped out of it, picking up the maid’s uniform and slipping it over her head. Kara helped her with the buttons on the back while she did the ones on her wrists, and in a couple of minutes she was staring at her reflection, barely able to recognize herself.

“That’ll do. Let’s go.”

“We’re all set for the big day!” Raena sighed as she adjusted the veil on her face, looking around the restaurant. They had reached it without being followed and she had changed into one of Madam Lydia’s dresses that Kara had ordered a few weeks ago.

Raena had inspected the restaurant from top to bottom, tested the cooks, the two managers and the two girls that had come from the brothel and were going to take the roles of hostesses. Everyone knew their task perfectly, and she was glad to see they were almost as excited for the big opening as she was.

Two more days and she was going to either make it big or crash and burn pitifully. She believed the Empress would keep her word, but considering the reputation of the street and the fact that she was a no-name in a very competitive business venue, there was always a risk.

A knock came from the door and Raena called for them to enter. Jaswyn, one of the hostesses, poked her head in, looking around anxiously.

“Sorry to disturb you, Madam Lydia, but Marden came looking for you. He asked to tell you to go next door once you’re free,” the girl said quickly, throwing Zen a nervous look.

“Thank you, Jaswyn. I’ll be right there,” Raena said. “If everyone is ready with their work, you can go. We’ll lock up.”

“Yes, Madam!” The girl nodded, her head disappearing from the door.

Raena gave Zen a nod, and he got up from the sofa, following her without a word. They snuck out through the back door, moving down the narrow alley behind the buildings

that led to the brothel's back entrance. The space was properly cleaned now and someone even tried scrubbing the cobblestones clean close to the restaurant.

Zen opened the door for her and they stepped through the short, dark corridor that led past the bar and into the reception room for the nobles. The whole place was sparkling clean, with the lights dimmed just enough to create a sensual atmosphere. There was a sweet aroma in the air, but Marden had promised they wouldn't use any more opium.

"Ah, you're here!" Marden's husky voice made her turn just as he appeared through one of the other doors. He turned around and shouted.

"Arissa, call everyone here!" He looked back at Raena, his smile dropping. "What's with the dark circles under your eyes? Have you lost weight? Are you sick?"

"I'm fine," Raena said, surprised at his sudden attentiveness. Marden narrowed his eyes at her as if planning to say something else, but then Arissa appeared from the same door he came in, followed by a line of men and women all dressed in an assortment of clothes ranging from teasingly transparent down to leather straps and skimpy underwear. Raena had to give it to Arissa, she really was innovative in picking the outfits.

Raena glanced at Zen and almost laughed for the first time since she met him he seemed taken aback by something and his expression was a mix of confusion and surprise.

"What do you think?" Marden asked with proud smile, glancing at her while his workers lined up in front of them. "They cost me a lot more than I expected, but you said not to spare expenses."

"They are all here of their own volition?" Raena asked.

"What's with the sudden distrust?" Marden frowned, crossing his arms. "You said no slaves and decent pay. When they heard my offer, they literally begged to suck my dick!"

"Right." Raena nodded, looking at the group. "You told them about the other thing?"

"M-hm." Marden nodded quickly, glancing at Zen for a second before turning toward the group.

"So? Do you approve?"

"They look great!"

He had taken her advice and focused on diversity – tall and short, slim and chubby, they were all standing out on their own. There was even a woman with flaming ginger hair

and freckles dotting her cheeks, whose eyes were such a beautiful shade of green, even Raena felt jealous for a second.

She moved her attention to the men and smile – one of them was even taller than Marden, with thick muscles and piercing black eyes; the one next to him was short and skinny and his face was so pretty, he could have passed for a girl if it wasn't for the flat chest beneath his unbuttoned shirt.

This felt weird. She knew that in this time and place, working in a brothel was a normal thing for many people and those who frequented the brothels found it even more mundane, but in her world, this situation would have been viewed very differently. She had to remind herself that she was no longer in the real world and all of those people were old enough to make their own decisions.

“Listen up!” Marden said, raising his voice. “I am not one to give speeches, but here we go. We are trying to do things differently here. It may be hard and strange in the beginning, but I expect you all to try your best to fulfill the role you've been given. We may be in charge, but without your hard work, we can't succeed. So do your best and come to me if there is a problem.”

He glanced at Raena, then returned his attention back to the group.

“In my absence, Arissa is in charge!” He added, motioning toward the woman. She was leaning on the bar with a glass of alcohol in hand and a pose showing perfectly the outlines of her body underneath the black dress she was wearing. Her chest was moderately covered this time, and her skirt had no slits on it. The fabric of the dress and the cut made all of that irrelevant, since one could imagine every little thing underneath the cloth.

“Also,” Marden continued, moving his hand to point at Raena, “this is Madam Lydia. She is the manager of the restaurant next door. She is also my business partner, so what she says goes. If I hear that anyone refused an order from her or disrespected her in any way, you're out, no questions asked” Raena felt their eyes on her, studying her curiously, then one by one everyone nodded.

“Great!” Marden smiled as if he hadn't threatened them just a moment ago. “Bathe, eat, rest. I want you all in top shape for our big debut.”