

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 31 - Tips

0 9 minutes read

"I don't think the fur deal with the Gossa region is going to affect the market that much. If anything, it would only increase the prices of winter clothing and fill the pockets of the tailors that were sensible enough to stock up. And with the recent trouble in Caen, those Gossa bastards will no doubt reach out for the opportunity to take over the open slot"

Ka.ssian watched the group of men around the table talk, trying his best to keep a straight face while all he wanted to do was yawn. He had been stuck in a discussion with a few of the senior members of the Trade Union, and while he was lucky to be invited to such an important meeting, he wanted nothing more than to get it over with. He had no idea what half of those deals were, and most of the names they mentioned were unfamiliar to him.

The Prime Minister's son, Ramor, who was also part of the Union as a representative of his father's trading company, occasionally explained things to him, but in the past half an hour he had been so engrossed in the conversation, he seemed to have forgotten Ka.ssian was even there.

"I still don't think we should sign it," Ramor insisted, leaning back in his chair and throwing his hands in the air. "If we get our fur from Gossa, this would unbalance the scale. They supply forty percent of our grain, twenty percent of our corn and wheat, and over sixty percent of our iron. By making ourselves dependent on them for so many things, we are giving them the power to dictate rules."

"He has a point." The vice president of the union nodded, taking a sip out of his tea. "But still, if we don't do anything, that would cause just as many problems. How soon do you think things will go back to normal in Caen, Your Highness?" Ka.ssian froze, surprised by the sudden attention. So far, they had barely turned to him apart from the initial greeting and pleasantries, so to have them all looking at him in expectation made him a bit nervous.

"A month or two," he replied after a brief hesitation. "There wasn't a full-blown rebellion this time, so things should quiet down soon. The officials are doing everything they can to appease the commoners, but it's not something that could be forgotten overnight, especially among the younger generation. Still, no less than a month.

"That's still too long" another man murmured, receiving a few nods of agreement. He continued to say something else, but Ka.ssian switched his attention to the light creak of a door behind him.

His body tensed on instinct, but since nobody else reacted, he waited patiently as the person who entered moved closer.

“Your Highness,” a familiar voice whispered and Ka.ssian looked up to find Blaine staring at him.

The others threw them a quick glance, but didn’t say anything about the interruption, so Ka.ssian motioned for him to continue. “There is a message from your brother. The second prince seems to be up to something. He’d be visiting some new restaurant opening later today.”

“What new restaurant?” Ka.ssian frowned, glancing up at him.

“It’s a new establishment on Ruby Street. It’s called Her Highness’s Secret Palace’ ” Blaine explained quickly and with every next word, Ka.ssian’s eyebrows rose higher.

“Her Highness ‘s Secret Palace ?” he repeated.

“How did they..?”

“Apparently, they got written permission from high up to use the name,” Blaine replied before he could even finish, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“The Emperor?” Ka.ssian guessed, but Blaine shook his head.

“The Empress,” he corrected him. “That’s all I found for now. The crown prince asks you to visit the place as well and keep an eye on your brother. It’s too open and too crowded for.. other eyes to go there.”

Ka.ssian bit his lip, tapping on the armrest as he considered what he should do. He couldn’t just go alone and sit in the corner watching his brother. He needed an excuse, he needed... His eyes stopped on the men around the table that seemed to have quieted down and were now openly staring at him and Blaine. A smile formed Ka.ssian’s lips, and he straightened in his seat.

“Gentlemen, I think we have wrecked our brains enough for today and we are just going over the same thing again and again. Let me treat you to a tasty meal and we can resume the discussion tomorrow with clear heads. What do you say?”

“If His Highness suggests it, how can we refuse?” One of the younger men grinned readily, his fatigue from the conversation disappearing in a flash. “Where should we go? The Golden Deer would probably be fully reserved at this time.

“There is a new place I wanted to try, if you don’t mind,” Ka.ssian said before anyone else could speak. “Blaine, go first and make sure they reserve a table for us.” His aide nodded quickly, disappearing through the door. “Well then, shall we go?”

Raena leaned closer to the full-body mirror, running her finger under her eye to clear any motes of makeup that might have fallen there. She turned her head left and right and when she was happy with the way she looked, she stepped back to look at the rest of herself. Her dress was pale blue this time, hugging her chest and waist tightly, then falling freely down her legs. The color of her skirts overflowed from one shade of blue to another every time she moved, almost creating the illusion of running water. The dressmaker across the street was especially proud of that effect and beamed happily as she said she loved it.

"Are you sure you want to wear that?" Zen's voice made her look at him through the reflection in the mirror. He was sitting on one of the sofas in the restaurant's office where he had been polishing his sword for the last half an hour. He wasn't looking at her as he spoke, but when he sensed her eyes on him, he raised his head. "Isn't this way too revealing for a restaurant?"

"Nope, it's perfect for Madam Lydia's image." Raena smiled, eyes locking back on her reflection. Running from her shoulders almost to her waist was a narrow V-shaped streak of transparent fabric that exposed a big part of her breasts and stomach, but without crossing the vulgar line. Her arms and most of her shoulders were bare and so was her neck, apart from a thin necklace with blue gemstones. "I need to keep my face forgettable so I think this dress will do a good job."

"I don't like it," Zen murmured. Raena twirled around, putting her hands on her hips.

"You don't?" she asked innocently, fighting a smile. Zen glanced at her, his gaze stopping on the exposed portion of her chest before he looked back at his sword. She smiled as she noticed his hands tightening around the weapon.

"No, I don't," he said in a strained voice. "I ask, you shouldn't tell a lady you confessed to that you don't like seeing her body!" Raena teased him, turning around and pulling the pin that was holding her hair up. Shaking her head to let her curls settle down her back, she reached for the veil that was hanging from the edge of the mirror. Just as she was picking it up, she sensed a hand wrap around her waist while another one slid over her shoulder just to settle between her collarbones.

"I never said that," Zen whispered in her ear and Raena froze as his little finger hitched the edge of her dress, sliding down to rest between her breasts.

She could feel him press her closer to him, his hands tightening as if to stop her from escaping.

"What's the matter, Miss Raena? You suddenly went really quiet." He chuckled, his lips brushing against her neck. "You know, you really shouldn't tease a man if you're not ready to follow through."

He kissed her lightly just below the ear, then let her go, pulling the veil from her stiff fingers and raising it to her face. He tied it behind her head, adjusting her hair to cover the knot, then looked at her through the mirror, a smirk still dancing on his lips.

“What? No comeback this time?”

“Nope, not this time,” Raena said. “I never knew that you can be such a smooth talker, Zen.” She laughed, adjusting the veil in a more comfortable position. “I wonder what other secrets you’re hiding from me.”

“No secrets here.” He shrugged, raising his hands in surrender. “I say what I mean and I do what I want, simple as that.” Raena scoffed, looking at him over her shoulder.

“We all have secrets we don’t want to share. Only those who have secrets that are really big say they don’t have secrets.” He just smiled, shaking his head. “I’ll be keeping my eye on you from now on. I’m sure I’ll find your secrets sooner or later.

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.” Zen offered and Raena stared at him thoughtfully for a second, wondering what kind of secret he might be talking about. Judging by his confident expression and the previous topic, there was a good chance it was bait for something sh!t. And she really didn’t want to go there right now.

A knock came from the door and she held back a sigh of relief, glad for the interruption. She looked back at Zender, who was still wearing that expectant expression.

“Well, where would be the fun in that?” she chuckled as she opened the door. Jaswyn stared at her with excited eyes, rocking herself on the balls of her feet. When she saw Raena, she grinned. “Is it time?”

“Yes, Madam Lydia!” the hostess nodded. “Are you ready?”

“I be right there. Tell everyone to gather in the hall,” Raena instructed, turning to look back at Zen just as Jaswyn’s receding steps echoed down the corridor. Zen had assumed his position on the sofa, his sword back in his lap. “You can step out a bit later when there are more people, so you don’t stand out so much. Don’t bring the sword with you and if you see anyone who knows you, stay away from them. We can’t have you being recognized.”

“Got it.” He nodded with a serious expression, but she could tell he wasn’t happy. Gone was the smirk and the gleam in his eyes, gone was the relaxed posture and confidently raised chin. He looked like a puppy that had been put in a cage while she had quests over. “I won’t cause problems, don’t worry. Just be careful, Miss Raena.”

“I thought you might have misspoken before, but now I am pretty sure you’re doing this on purpose. Why do you keep calling me ‘miss’ when I’m married?” she asked from the door.

"I'm just looking forward to the future, Miss Raena," he replied with a smile.

"You ought to be careful in front of who you're saying that or we both might get in trouble," Raena murmured, staring at him while he continued to polish his weapon. "I'll see you later, then." She added, stepping out of the office and closing the door. She stood there for a moment, wondering if it was alright to let him raise his expectations so much when she heard laughter and shouts coming from inside the restaurant.

Raena shook off those thoughts, straightening her back. This wasn't the time to think about such things. She had a more important task tonight.

She took a step away from the door, then another, until she found herself in the spotless, empty kitchen. She circled the table in the middle and stepped into the dining area, her eyes stopping on the cooks, the waiters, and the two hostesses that were waiting for her. Everybody quickly formed a line when she stopped in front of them, looking them over.

"This is it, people." She smiled, her eyes pausing on each of them. "Let's do our best. To your stations!"

"Yes, Madam Lydia!" They chanted, moving as one to execute her command. Raena motioned for the two hostesses dressed in shimmering black dresses, and they followed her toward the front door. The men she had hired to keep an eye on the place straightened at their posts along the hall, their eyes following the three women. As they neared the two big double doors, the voices from outside became even louder, their excitement almost palpable in the air.

"Ready?" Raena asked, glancing at each girl as they held the handles of each door. The hostesses nodded as they pulled them open while Raena straightened her back, taking a step forward with her eyes locked on the street outside.

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"Good evening! I'm Madam Lydia and I welcome you to Her Highness's Secret Palace. Raena greeted the crowd, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice as she saw the number of people waiting on the street outside. "Please be patient while our lovely hostesses find you a table"

Raena nodded at the two girls and they stepped forward with bright smiles, urging the first customers to enter. Upon a second look, Raena noticed that there was a certain distinction in the crowd the people on the left were more in numbers and while most were wearing clean, neat clothes, they didn't look nearly as dressed up as the ones on the right. The ones on the right also stood awkwardly in the street, some even frowning and murmuring about how they shouldn't have been made to wait.

Raena stopped Jaswyn as she returned to escort the next batch of customers.

“Those there look like they are nobles. Be extra accommodating,” Raena whispered and the girl nodded, her smile growing even wider as she moved to greet a group of four men that stared at her like she was on the menu.

“This way, gentlemen. Would it be just the four of you?” Jaswyn’s sweet voice rang out, bringing even more eyes to her. Raena continued to watch over, greeting everyone while they were led inside, filling the restaurant with low murmurs, gasps, and laughter.

When the ones still remaining outside started to whisper excitedly and look around, she took calming breath, stepping forward again. A pair of carriages made their way through the street, forcing the people to create a path while craning their necks to see better. The whispers grew so loud even she could hear them from the door.

“Who is that? Is that the Imperial family’s crest? What are the royals doing here? You don’t think they would actually go to that place, do you?”

Raena glanced at the two hostesses that had stopped next to her, staring at the carriage with wide eyes.

“Is the restaurant full?” Raena asked quietly, and the two of them jumped, looking at her.

“There are only a few tables left.” Jaswyn replied.

“Fill them up. I’ll take care of our special guests.”

The girls nodded, moving to escort more of the people inside while Raena locked her eyes on the group of men that had stepped out of the carriages.

Prince Rissen was the last one to appear, looking left and right with a sour expression before moving his attention to her building. His eyes stopped on Raena and he said something to his company, then all of them headed toward the restaurant with him in the lead. The crowd parted to make way, but he barely looked at the people staring at him. As they reached the stairs of the building, Raena curtsied.

“Welcome, Your Highness. We’re honored to have you here!” she said in her sweetest voice, glancing at him. As expected, his eyes shamelessly locked on her cleavage, paying almost no mind to her face. He didn’t even mention the veil.

His friends were all young nobles, some staring at her, some looking at the building behind her. “Please allow me to show you to your table. I have the best floor reserved for you, Your Highness.”

She turned around and headed toward the staircase, moving slowly to give everybody on the first floor the chance to see who was walking behind her. As expected, the hall quieted and stared until they disappeared up the stairs.

Raena pushed the door on the third floor, nodding at the guard standing inside before continuing her way in. The VIP room, as she called it, was a bit smaller than the accommodations below since she had requested to expand the balcony and make the wall separating the balcony from the inside space all glass.

She had used her memories of the descriptions from the book to construct this room so it was supposed to resemble one of the reception rooms in the Imperial Palace on a smaller scale. The floor was covered with marble and the walls were painted dark red and gold, with chairs of dark wood and gilded edges circling the three rectangular tables inside. It was much more sophisticated than the simple rooms below and judging by the stunned on everybody's faces, she had succeeded in achieving the likeness.

"Would you like to sit outside or inside, Your Highness? The weather is very pleasant tonight, so I made both options available."

Rissen looked taken aback as he struggled to hold his disgruntled expression. He glanced at his friends and after a short deliberation, they settled for a table outside.

"Take your time in choosing whatever you like. The waitresses will be here shortly to take your order," Raena announced, bowing her head, then turning to leave. Before she had done a single step, she felt a hand grab her wrist and yank her back.

She lost her footing and flew backward, landing in somebody's lap. As she tried to rise up, a pair of hands wrapped around her waist, squeezing her tightly. She looked at the man holding her, not at all surprised to find Rissen staring at her with a smirk.

"What if we want everything on the menu?" he asked, his fingers running circles over her lower back. "Maybe I want to start with the dessert."

"You can find the desserts on page twelve, Your Highness," Raena replied, trying to keep her voice even. "And feel free to order the rest of the menu as well, since it's your money after all."

"I can't decide if you're stupid or pretending not to know what I mean," he scoffed, his hand raising to lift her veil. Raena grabbed his fingers before he could do it, squeezing with all her might. He stopped, raising his eyebrows in amusement.

"I'm giving you a chance to leave this matter with your dignity intact, Your Highness," Raena replied. "This is a proper establishment and the people working here are not on

the menu. So I'd appreciate it if you keep your hands to yourself while you enjoy the best meal of your life.

"And what if I don't?" Rissen asked daringly.

"Then we'll politely ask you to leave," Raena smiled, trying to get up again. To her surprise, he didn't let go, but instead painfully tightened his grip.

"Do you know who you're speaking to, b!tch?" he scoffed, his eyes flashing in warning. "You think anyone here would be stupid enough to lay their hands on me?"

The table had grown silent, the only sounds coming from the crowd outside still waiting to be given entrance. Raena stared back into his eyes without blinking, her brain searching for the right words. She leaned toward him, lowering her voice so only he could hear her.

"How about another royal, then?" she whispered. "My employer would be extremely unhappy if she learns how you treat her precious proxy. And I don't want to make my employer unhappy. How about you, Your Highness?"

She felt him stiffen underneath her, and his hands squeezed her even harder. She gritted her teeth to stop herself from crying out when he released her, pushing her off his lap. She staggered for a second before regaining her balance, then turned to face everyone at the table.

"Take your time to pick, gentlemen. I'll bring you a round of refreshments on the house in honor of our opening night."

After receiving a round of awkward nods and mumbles in agreement, Raena bowed again and stepped inside, letting out a relieved sigh.

"Are you alright, Madam Lydia?" the guard by the door asked quietly as she was just about to pass by him.

"I'm fine, don't worry," Raena replied with a weak smile that he couldn't see. "Keep an eye on them and let me know if they harass the girls. Do not interfere unless somebody is getting badly hurt or I explicitly tell you to. Got it?"

"Got it." He nodded, moving his eyes back to the table outside.

Raena slipped past him, stomping down the stairs. She stopped on the second floor and peeked inside the hall, eyes examining the tables and the excited customers devouring their food or chatting loudly over their wine and cocktails. The guard by the door glanced at her, but before he could say anything, she continued to the ground floor.

Raena could still see people waiting outside impatiently for a seat to open up, rising to their toes to peek inside. Making her way toward the kitchen, she walked slowly in an attempt to determine the response of the people.

“oh, gods, this is amazing! Try it!”

“How is the meat so tender?”

“What is this? It’s sweet, but also sour! How did they make it both?”

“This place is unbelievable!”

“Did you see the ceiling? Do you think the Imperial Palace looks like this on the inside? Now I get why it’s called Palace!”

Her Highness’s Secret “I can’t believe we almost didn’t come here!”

“Did you see her? The one with the veil? Who is she?”

“Who is she? Why is she wearing a veil?”

“Did you see her dress?”

Raena smiled as she continued onward, ignoring the stares that followed her. She pushed the door toward the kitchen open, quickly moving out of the way as one of the servants prepared to exit with a big tray in her hands.

“Dina, take with you whoever is free at the moment and bring drinks to His Highness on the third floor. Be extremely careful what you say and stay sharp,” Raena said to one of the servant girls that was just leaving a load of dirty dishes in the sinks in the back. The dark-haired girl looked at her nervously, but nodded.

Raena returned to the dining hall, looking around when she noticed Jaswyn hurrying toward her with an uneasy expression. Raena waited impatiently for the hostess to reach her, raising her eyebrows in an unspoken question.

“Madam Lydia, what are we going to do?”

Jaswyn whispered, glancing around. “You said to expect only one special guest for the VIP room.

“That’s right. Why?” Raena frowned.

“It’s the third prince. He is also on his way here.

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Ka.ssian stepped out of the carriage, looking around in surprise. He had often passed by Ruby Street, but it had always been empty and abandoned despite its favorable location. He had heard from Blaine that people avoided it because of his grandfather's assassination, but that made little sense to him.

Now the place looked nothing like the quiet, dark dump hidden beside the central street. The cobblestones were swept off and the trash piling on the streets had been cleared. The fronts of the stores looked polished to a gleam even in the sparse light of the street lamps, which were all throwing off a merry shine.

And the people. There were almost as many people as there had been on the main street. Most of them were crowding around the tallest building that shone even brighter than the others, with light spilling out its windows and cheerful banter and delighted laughter coming from the wide-open doors. Some of the people looked impatient, craning their necks toward the entrance where a pair of heavy-set men stood on each side of the door, looking around with calm, serious expressions.

A short, dark-haired girl in a tight black dress waited next to them, glancing inside from time to time, then returning her attention to the line, all while keeping her smile on. She wasn't overly pretty, but with her long hair down and the dress carefully accentuating her delicate curves, she was quite easy on the eyes – just as one of his companions mentioned.

Ka.ssian's eyes stopped on Blaine, who was standing by the girl, waiting patiently for them. The crowd had already parted after the initial complaints about people cutting in line died down, and all eyes followed them as they made their way to the entrance.

"That's a big crowd for an opening night." The vice-president of the union pointed out. "I wonder who the owner is. I've barely heard of this place until now. I'm definitely curious to know how they got all these people to venture into Ruby Street.

"Yeah, me too." Ka.ssian nodded. What he was even more curious about was how they got his half-brother to come here where even commoners could enter. Considering the name of the restaurant and the special permission from the Empress, Ka.ssian should have known about this place a long time ago. His first job after getting back home would be to get his Shadows to look into this new venture. Blaine could go through the proper channels and investigate the owner and their connection to the Empress and the second prince, but there were some things that could only be found from the shadows.

"Welcome, gentlemen!" The dark-haired girl greeted them the moment they took a step up the stairs. She bowed her head respectfully and kept her eyes down. "Please wait a moment while your table is being prepared."

Ka.ssian looked at Blaine, who glanced at the stairs leading to the upper floors. So that was where his brother was; he hoped they'd give them a table on the same floor as him since asking for that specifically would only make his goal obvious.

"Welcome to Her Highness's Secret Palace gentlemen!" Ka.ssian froze. That voice... he knew that sweet, melodic voice.

His head snapped toward the owner of that voice and his eyes widened. He had been so sure that voice belonged to Raena that when greeted by the woman standing in front of him, he forgot how to speak. She had long blonde hair as well, but unlike Raena's unruly mane, hers was carefully arranged in soft curls and fell over her back, held in place by a big blue flower ornament. She was wearing a veil that covered everything but her eyes, which looked even more striking, embellished by her makeup.

And her dress... that was the most revealing dress he had seen. Even the most promiscuous ladies in court wouldn't dare wear something like that in public. Yet she held her head high, her shoulders straight, and judging by the twinkle in her eyes, she was smiling.

"I apologize, but because of your late notice, we are not able to offer you a choice of table. But we have prepared one for you on the last floor, where we serve our special guests. Please, follow me.

She turned without delay, heading toward the staircase. Picking up a handful of her skirts that resembled a river running from her tiny waist down to the dark wooden floor, she climbed up, glancing back once to make sure they were following.

"Did you see her?" Ramor murmured to somebody behind Ka.ssian. "Who is that?"

"This can't be Raena. There is no way," Ka.ssian thought as he stared at the frail back of the woman. She might have had blue eyes and blonde hair like his wife, but so did many other women. Vega did too. And if it was his wife, her brother should have recognized his own sister right away. Not to mention this woman clearly had nothing childish about her – from the way she dressed to the way she talked, she was the exact opposite of his wife.

Yet their voices sounded so similar, it was unsettling.

Ka.ssian noticed Blaine catching up to him.

"Her name is Madam Lydia, or so the hostess said. She is the manager of this place," he reported, glancing after the woman just as she disappeared through the door on the third floor.

“Does she look to you like...?”

“Yes.” Blaine nodded, pausing at the threshold so Ka.ssian could go in first. “But that’s... improbable.”

As he stepped into the room, Ka.ssian froze, looking around in confusion. For a moment he thought he was in the Imperial Palace, but the proportions and the lighting were all wrong. When he noticed Madam Lydia standing by a big rectangular table and waiting for them, the illusion broke. This decent imitation could have only been done by somebody who had attended a social gathering in the Imperial Palace. As far as he knew, Raena had never done that due to her condition.

But what of the owner of this place? Who were they?

“I want you to find who owns this place,” Ka.ssian whispered to Blaine as they took their seats. The others moved to join them, eyes glued to the woman as she passed on the menus while laughing and having a casual conversation with them as if she had known them for years. “And her. Find out everything about her.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Blaine nodded. “But that’s not important right now. Over there.” Ka.ssian followed his gaze, his eyes stopping on the scene outside the open glass doors leading to the balcony. A group of men were laughing loudly while raising their glasses and talking all over each other in loud voices. His gaze immediately stopped on the loudest of them his brother looked like he was having fun without a care in the world. Ka.ssian checked on Rissen’s companions as well, but he knew all of their faces – they were all young first and second sons from the prominent families that formed his brother’s core support. All of them looked half-drunk already.

“Your Highness?”

Ka.ssian tore his eyes away from the group outside and locked his attention to the woman now standing next to him. She waited as if she had asked him a question, but he hadn’t been paying attention to the conversation. As if realizing the same, she let her eyes fall down to something in her hand and he noticed the black leather menu hanging between them. He took it quickly, opening it on the front page.

“Wait, are those drawings really how the food looks like?” one of the men at the table asked, looking back at the woman. “And what is with the combinations?”

“Food is best appreciated with your mouth, Your Grace, don’t you think? Why not order and test it out? If you don’t like it, you can return the dish and you will not be charged for it,” Madam Lydia replied, her hair bouncing off her shoulders as she tilted her head.

“Confident, are we?” the same man smirked.

"I'm sure you'll like it and ask for more!" she replied with a small bow, her eyes darting toward the door, where a pair of girls in button-up shirts and black skirts reaching the middle of their calves appeared, each carrying a tray with a few bottles on them. "The first round of drinks is on the house, gentlemen. Please enjoy them while you go over the menu. One of our waitresses will be back shortly to take your order."

She bowed respectfully again, then circled the table and headed toward the balcony where another one of the serving girls was trying to set the orders on the table, but with the loud cackling of the group and the hands reaching out for her, the girl seemed reluctant to go near them. When Madam Lydia appeared next to her, they turned almost timid. The two women returned inside a minute later and disappeared past the big, menacing-looking guard by the door.

"There isn't anyone suspicious with him," Ka.ssian said quietly as he took a sip out of the wine Blaine had poured for him. He had used the same bottle that the others shared, waiting for them to test the wine first. When none of them showed any signs of poisoning, Ka.ssian decided to give it a try.

It wasn't the best wine he had drank, but it was still decent enough.

"Maybe he just came to enjoy the food?" Blaine said with a voice that suggested even he didn't believe that. Yet no matter how much they looked, all Rissen and his buddies did was eat, drink, laugh and talk so loudly even Ka.ssian could hear every word from where he sat. Ka.ssian's companions kept throwing the second prince disapproving glances, but just like always, Rissen pretended not to notice anything, even though Ka.ssian was sure he was aware of their presence.

Ka.ssian was still listening to the conversations outside when a muffled moan came from his right, so he turned, almost expecting to see someone foaming at the mouth. Blaine sat with his eyes closed and a gratified expression on his face. As if sensing the attention on him, he opened his eyes and stared awkwardly at Ka.ssian, a slight redness creeping over his cheeks.

"I apologize, Your Highness, but this is superb!" he mumbled, returning to his usual controlled expression. "I think this may even be better than the food we tasted in the North Palace. Should I?" he asked, nodding toward Ka.ssian's untouched plate.

He hadn't even noticed when the waitresses had brought the food after they ordered, but it had been damn fast.

"You don't have to. I didn't come here to eat," Ka.ssian replied, but Blaine was already sinking his fork into the edge of the juicy meat that gave such a delicious aroma, despite his words Ka.ssian felt his mouth water. His aide chewed on the bite for a few seconds, then licked his lips and put down his fork.

“If His Highness doesn’t plan to eat that, may I have it? It’s even better than mine.” Blaine said with such a serious expression that Ka.ssian almost laughed. Seeing how his aide looked perfectly fine, despite the greedy look in his eyes, Ka.ssian picked up his fork and sunk it into the meat. He almost didn’t need the knife it just peeled off the bone with the lightest touch. As he finally tried it, he almost bit himself as the taste spread through his mouth.

It wasn’t just the meat- he had eaten meat before, prepared in numerous delicious ways. It was the sauce, the seasoning, even the side dishes. Apart, they were nothing special, but the combination itself was perfectly balanced.

Ka.ssian raised his eyes, surprised by the reigning silence around the table, only to find his companions devouring their own meals like their lives depended on it. All conversations and distractions were temporarily forgotten as they swallowed bite after bite with the same expression Blaine wore.

“How is it, gentlemen?” Madam Lydia’s voice rang in the air and everybody looked up from their empty plates. She was standing by the table and Ka.ssian had to admit that even he didn’t notice when she had appeared.

“This is amazing!” The Prime Minister’s son blurted out with his mouth still half-full.

“I’ve never tasted anything like this!” the vice president of the trade union joined in, wiping his mouth with his napkin. “You... Did you come up with these dishes? Or do you have a cook from some foreign country?”

“It’s a secret,” she winked, her eyes moving to each of them until they stopped on Ka.ssian. She held his gaze for a moment, before switching her attention to the others. “If you’re finished with the main course, how about a little dessert?”

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Raena nodded at the two waitresses as they all reached the third floor. and the three of them headed toward the third prince’s table. Everybody’s attention locked on them and Raena was happy to see that the hungry eyes from before were following the platters instead of the girls themselves.

She moved the small tray she was carrying to her other hand, heading toward where the third prince and his aide sat while the other girls swiftly circled the table, setting down the deserts in front of each customer.

Raena felt the third prince’s eyes on her as expected, he was the only one who didn’t order a dessert. He had already told her – well, his wife – that he didn’t like sweet things. She didn’t expect him to change his mind now, but she couldn’t let a customer leave with that sour expression on his face.

“We didn’t order any desserts,” his aide said as he noticed her stopping next to him.

“Oh, I know, Your Grace,” Raena replied with a smile. “We heard that His Highness doesn’t like sweet food, so it can’t be helped since most of our desserts are sweet.” She started unloading the tray next to them anyway – the pot first, then the jar with milk, the sugar bowl and three of their best ceramic cups. “That is why I have prepared my new drink for you two to test. It is not sweet unless you put sugar or milk in it and what’s even better, it gives you extra energy so you can work harder and stay sharper.”

A few low murmurs rose over the table as she took the pot, pouring from the black liquid in the cups.

“What is that black thing?” Ramor asked from the middle of the table, glancing between her and the pot. When she first saw him step through the restaurant doors, she panicked – no matter how different she looked, she doubted her appearance could fool her own brother if he paid close attention. But as it turned out, Ramor was a bit dense when surrounded by pretty girls and interesting new things, so she was no longer worried he’d see through her disguise. He barely looked her in the eyes.

“It’s called coffee,” Raena explained, pulling one of the cups and adding a bit of sugar and milk to it under everybody’s watchful eyes. “The plant the drink is made from is usually dark brown or black, hence the drink’s color. I had it especially imported from the Nefron region – they are the only ones that are cultivating this plant and enjoying this drink. I hope the capital develops a taste for it as well.”

She could see their eyes shifting back to the drink as she spoke those words, no doubt each of them calculating the profit of one such venture.

Raena smiled, turning to look at the third prince and his aide.

“Would you allow me to drink with you, Your Highness?” she asked, meeting Ka.ssiian’s eyes.

I studied every inch of her exposed face, before glancing down at the cup she had prepared.

“As you wish,” he said nonchalantly.

“Thank you!” she replied with a light bow, glancing at his aide, who hesitantly picked a second cup. “Be careful, it’s hot.”

She raised the cup to her lips, lifting the veil just enough to take a sip. It needed a bit more sugar, she realized as she lowered the cup and locked her eyes on Blaine. He took a deep breath and tried it, frowning.

“It’s bitter,” he said, glancing at her, “and strong.”

“Try it with milk and sugar,” Raena suggested, her eyes moving to the third prince, who was just raising the cup to his lips. He stared at the black liquid, then took a big gulp. His expression barely changed as he lowered the cup, but he didn’t complain, and a few seconds later, he took another sip. She couldn’t ask for more with his stoic expression.

“It really is better with milk and sugar” Blaine murmured after taking another sip. “And you say it gives energy? How so?”

“The coffee beans contain a natural ingredient called caffeine, which stimulates your brain and body. That way, it allows you to stay more alert and prevents you from feeling tired,” Raena explained. “Of course, it isn’t a magical potion, so drinking too much of it can be bad for your health. It’s the same with alcohol, so as long as you drink in moderation, there is nothing to worry about.”

“Can we try some of that too?” Ramor asked, looking at the cup in her hand.

“Of course!” Raena nodded to the waitresses who were waiting by the table, and the two girls disappeared through the door to bring more. Please enjoy. Excuse me.”

She circled the table and headed toward the balcony where she had noticed the second prince’s group looking around impatiently. As she joined them, all eyes locked on her – most of their faces were already deep red from the alcohol and their neat clothes either had buttons open or were lying over the back of their chairs. A cold chill ran down her spine, but she still forced herself to step closer to them.

“Was the food to your liking, gentlemen?” she asked, eyes inspecting the table. Almost all the plates were empty, and so were the numerous bottles of alcohol.

“Food is fine, lady, but this place is boring!” One of them slurred while leaning his head on his hand.

“Don’t you have dancers or... another type of entertainment?” Raena smiled. Hell, this was good, very good.

She could now get rid of them and fulfill her promise to Marden.

“I am afraid we are just a restaurant, Your Grace,” Raena replied, and he rolled his eyes in annoyance. “However...” As the word rolled off her tongue, their attention quickly switched back to her, everyone straightening in anticipation. Even the second prince seemed intrigued, despite the expression of total displeasure he had been wearing since their eyes met. “If you follow me, I can take you to a place where they offer things more entertaining than our food.”

“I thought you said you’re not on the menu?” Prince Rissen scoffed, licking his lips.

“I am not, Your Highness,” she replied quickly.”

I just want my customers to have the best time of their lives once they visit this establishment. So, are you interested?”

Everybody looked at Rissen in expectation and he let out a deep sigh, as if making a big sacrifice.

“Why the hell not? Let’s see what you have to offer.”

“Please, follow me then,” she said, trying to contain her excitement. She turned and walked inside, the sound of excited murmurs and chairs being dragged over the floor following her. The second prince and his entourage caught up just she was passing by Ka.s.sian’s table. Raena didn’t turn or look aside, but she noticed from the corner of her eyes how the third prince tensed in his seat and his expression changed. Raena continued down the stairs with the nobles in tow, but instead of leading them back to the first floor, she took the opposite turn, toward the door leading to the back alley. She pushed the piece of tapestry that hung over the door, stepping outside into the pleasant night. They had set up a few lanterns to light up the alley, but still, it felt awfully dark and dangerous with the steps trailing behind her.

Squeezing her hands into fists, Raena headed toward the back door of the brothel, hoping nobody would stop or talk to her. It was one thing to keep her head high and act confident when there were many people around, but it was much different when she was stuck in this place with the likes of Rissen and his buddies. She just hoped his wariness of her would hold for another few minutes.

Raena pulled the door of the brothel open, waiting for them to catch up. The short corridor leading to the posh reception room was no longer dark – a pair of oil lamps were hanging on each side, giving enough light to see the door and the heavy curtains barring their path.

“For those of you who are shy or don’t want to be recognized, you can use these masks” she said, waving toward the box with identical black masks on a small table just in front of the curtain. Rissen raised an eyebrow but then moved after her, ignoring the masks. The rest of his group followed his example, and soon they were all standing in the waiting room, looking almost as stunned as they did when she led them to the VIP floor.

The place wasn’t empty this time – there was a handsome young man standing behind the bar with only a few straps of leather running over his na*ked c.hest. Two women were sitting at one of the tables playing cards – one was wearing a white airy dress that left her shoulders, back and most of her legs exposed while the other one wore a black one that hugged her body tightly but flowed freely around her legs with more than a few slits splitting the cloth.

The two girls turned around when the group entered, quickly getting to their feet and moving to greet the guests with swaying gaits and welcoming smiles. Raena glanced at the bartender, who gave her a barely noticeable nod, then disappeared through the back door, probably to alert Marden or Arissa. Raena turned toward Prince Rissen and his group.

“Customers referred by me get a ten percent discount, so enjoy yourselves to your heart’s content, gentlemen. I do hope you visit both our establishments again. Goodnight.”

While their attention was still taken by the two beautiful girls, she sneaked past the group and headed toward the back door. Stepping outside, she took a relieved sigh, hoping that by the time she went back, the third prince would have left as well.

He was another type of difficult and one which was even more dangerous, especially if he recognized her.

Why was he even there to begin with? She doubted it was because of the food. He looked reluctant to eat even at his own wife’s house, let alone in a public place.

Preoccupied with her thoughts, she didn’t see the figure walking toward her until she ran straight into them. Raena lost her balance and staggered backward, stepping on the hem of her dress and completely losing her battle with gravity. Just as she was preparing for the pain to come, hoping at least her veil would remain in place, a hand grabbed her by the elbow. She opened her eyes, staring up at the person that had caught her.

Raena almost cursed out loud as she met the third prince’s piercing eyes staring down at her, and no matter how long she waited, his hand remained firmly grasping hers.

“Um, thank you, Your Highness,” she said hesitantly, glancing toward his aide, who stood beside him with a hard expression on his face. “Can I have my arm back?”

“Where did you take him?” Kaessian asked coldly, still not releasing her. Raena bit the inside of her lip, trying to ignore the pain as he tightened his hold. How did she end up in this situation? This should have been a pleasant, easy night. This kind of confrontation was never in the books – the second and third prince barely had any scenes together, why were they both here now?

“He is in the building next door” she said hesitantly, watching him as he glanced behind her.

“What is that place?” his aide asked this time, his eyes watching her attentively.

“A brothel.”

He blinked in surprise, then glanced at the third prince as if waiting for directions.

“Then you wouldn’t mind escorting us there as well, would you?” Ka.ssian said, stepping toward the brothel’s back door and dragging her with him. She stumbled through the threshold, but he held her tightly so she avoided another fall. Both men stepped into the small corridor, looking around uneasily.

Ka.ssian reached out and lifted one of the masks from the box, glancing toward her.

“Those are for the people that want to hide their identity” she explained quickly. Ka.ssian hesitated, then adjusted one on his face, and so did his aide. Raena wanted to tell them that even with that thing, he was hardly inconspicuous in his expensive clothes and tall, imposing figure, but she kept her mouth shut.

“After you,” the third prince said, finally releasing her arm and nudging her toward the heavy curtains. Raena let out a relieved breath, opened the curtains, and stepped inside. They followed close behind, looking around in alert. Half of the second prince’s friends were still in the waiting room, surrounded by women and men, and the atmosphere seemed lively and heavy with lust.

“Welcome, welcome!” a deep, cheerful voice greeted them, and Raena looked up with relief as Marden stepped next to her. He shot her a glance, but she just shrugged helplessly, so he returned his attention back to the two men. “Please enjoy your stay. We have company for every taste. If you tell me what you like, I’d be sure to find the right woman -or a man – for you. Or if you prefer, come in and take a look around to see if anyone catches your eye.”

Ka.ssian and his aide exchanged a glance, and the latter nodded barely noticeably.

“We’ll look around,” the third prince said at the end, moving past Raena.

“Excellent, excellent! Noel, pour these fine men something to drink!” Marden turned toward the guy behind the bar and he quickly got to work. As the prince and his aide moved along, Raena felt herself relax, leaning on the side of the bar. Marden looked back at her.

“Who was that?” he asked, glancing after the two men who had taken a seat at one of the tables in the corner.

“The third prince and his aide.”

Marden’s head snapped toward her, eyes widening.

“You brought both the second and third prince here in one night? How the hell...?”

“Make sure to get the word out,” Raena said and glanced behind her as the curtain opened and a few more people walked in, looking around with awe. Raena nodded at the waitress behind them and the girl disappeared back the way they had come from. “Is everything going well here?”

“Leave it to me.” Marden winked at him. “Go take care of your own house.”

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 35 - Tips

17 minutes read

“Check and mate again, brother.”

Ka.ssian gritted his teeth, looking up at Yulien, who smiled at him like someone who had beaten him four times in a row. It wasn't a condescending smile, but it clearly said, 'Are you a masochist?' loud and clear, considering Ka.ssian had been the one to ask for all of those rematches. And while Yulien was the one who mainly talked throughout the game, his moves were always bold and decisive, like seeing through Ka.ssian's plays and traps was no big deal. “One more?”

“I don't think my pride can handle another game,” Ka.ssian sighed, leaning back in his chair and running his hands through his hair. The council meeting had finished sooner than expected since the Emperor didn't attend due to his declining health, so Yulien had baited him with a promise of food and drinks. What really sold it for Ka.ssian was the fact that as long as he stayed in the Imperial Palace, he didn't have to go back to the pile of documents waiting for him at home.

“How about a walk, then? You must go back soon or Blaine will show up at my door and drag you away.” Yulien grinned, pushing his chair and getting to his feet. Ka.ssian grimaced.

“Next time, we're just drinking!” Ka.ssian said as they left Yulien's quarters. Yulien's two personal guards that were waiting outside the door silently fell behind them. Ka.ssian had grown used to their constant presence – at first, he was annoyed, but then it occurred to him that Yulien wasn't nearly as adept at fighting as he was. The crown prince knew how to use a sword and got a passing mark in archery, but a professional assassin could probably dispatch him before he could even scream for help.

So those two guards were his brother's shield, so having them there meant Yulien would be safe.

“Leave,” Yulien said suddenly, glancing at his guards. They looked surprised for a second, then concern crossed their faces. “I'll be safe with him, don't you think?” Yulien smiled, nodding toward Ka.ssian. The guards hesitated, glancing at the sword hanging from Ka.ssian's waist. “Right, brother?”

Ka.ssian held back a sigh as the men stared at him almost pleadingly.

“Just follow us from a distance,” Ka.ssian said and they perked up. Yulien grimaced, turning around and striding down the corridor. Ka.ssian caught up with a few heavy strides, falling in step with him.

“You know, I could have used a moment to breathe without them watching me,” Yulien murmured. “It’s so rare to be able to slip them – they even stay outside of my bedroom when I am being entertained by one of my ladies.”

“Stop complaining, they are doing their job,” Ka.ssian scolded him. “You’d probably be dead ten times over if it weren’t for them. Loyal people are hard to find.”

“True” Yulien nodded, clasping his hands behind his back. “Just the other day, one of my servants tried to stab me while he was helping me change. I dodged him by pure luck, but thanks to them, he was, let’s say, apprehended, before he could do anything else. And now I am stuck with one of them watching me even while I change, bathe and work. If they insist on watching me have se.x, I am demanding their participation.”

Ka.ssian shook his head. He wasn’t aware there had been another attack on Yulien’s life and his brother had mentioned it so casually, like it was an everyday occurrence. Ka.ssian was getting sick of sleeping with one eye open and suspecting his own people. Most days, he regretted being born into this complicated family. While he could just throw everything away and leave – the emperor probably wouldn’t care if he was there or not anyway – he couldn’t leave Yulien to fend off all those hungry monsters by himself.

A group of maids appeared around the corner, whispering excitedly. When they saw them, they moved out of the way, bowing down, and once the two brothers passed them, the girls hurried away, returning to their conversation. Ka.ssian managed to catch the words ‘Ruby Street’, ‘restaurant’ and madam’ before they were out of reach and his frown deepened.

Five days had passed since his visit to Highness’s Secret Palace and Blaine was still digging into the past of that woman that seemed to appear out of nowhere and force her way into every conversation. It turned out the documents for the building and the restaurant seemed to have been misplaced by the bureau, so his aide was stuck at her their office looking for more information and the missing papers. Ka.ssian’s Shadows had run into a dead end too – they reported that Madam Lydia rarely left the restaurant building and when she did, it was just to meet with suppliers and vendors.

Apart from the mysterious aura and the fact that nobody knew anything about her, she had done nothing suspicious so far.

"I got the information you requested on that brothel," Yulien said out of a sudden. "It seems that Rissen did go there solely for pleasure, but it's still worth looking into since he had been frequenting the place. Maybe his next meeting will be held there as well."

"What did you find?" Kassian asked, glancing around to make sure there was no one close by.

Yulien's guards were far enough, so it was impossible for them to hear a word.

"The owner is one Marden Robick, a count. Or rather, a count's bastard," Yulien said. "He inherited his father's title six years ago, after the old man died from alcohol poisoning. The old count used to have two other legitimate sons, but they died even before the father – one in a street brawl, the other one from breaking his neck after falling from a horse. So he was forced to recognize his bastard child and pass down the title and all of his gambling debt."

"So this Marden is a fallen noble?" Kassian asked.

"Yes, he has nothing but a title." Yulien nodded.

"His estate is in ruins, he has an old butler and a maid, who are probably staying there since they have nowhere else to go rather than out of loyalty.

The only thing he owns that he hasn't sold to cover the debts is that brothel."

"That makes things even more suspicious." Kassian frowned. "The brothel I saw didn't look like a place that's owned by somebody in debt. Maybe he is being sponsored, but if that's the case, who is sponsoring him? You don't think.

"Let's not jump to conclusions just yet." Yulien smiled, but there was no amusement in his eyes." For now, let's keep an eye on him and see what his next move will be. With you and Rissen visiting his place, you just gave him the biggest advertisement he could ask for. I bet every noble who likes those places is going to go there to see what the fuss is all about."

"Like I care!" Kassian sighed. "I only went there to see what Rissen was up to."

"This reminds me... how's your wife? The new one." Yulien grinned, turning to look at him. Kassian tried to keep his face straight as he met his brother's eyes.

"How does the talk about brothels remind you of my wife exactly?" he asked and Yulien chuckled.

"Oh, come on. Are you still avoiding her?"

"Why would I be avoiding her? I just have nothing to say to her!" Kassian snapped.

The two of them took another turn and Ka.ssian realized Yulien was leading him toward the building, but taking the long way there. They were crossing one of the overhead bridges in the garden when he heard voices coming from below. A couple of servants were kneeling in the flower beds, pulling the weeds, and talking quietly.

“Yes, my brother said he went during the opening day. They even let commoners dine there!

There is a floor for commoners, for nobles and even a special room for important guests. He said he saw the second and third princes there!” one of the girls said excitedly, wiping her sweaty forehead.

“I want to go too! I heard from a friend that the food was amazing and it was even affordable! I don’t have to sell my body for just a bite like in most other restaurants!” the second girl murmured, sitting back on her calves and looking at the sky with a dreamy expression. “When is your next day off? Let’s go together!”

“Was it that amazing?” Yulien suddenly asked, bringing Ka.ssian’s attention back to himself. “That place, I mean. Everyone keeps talking about it.”

“It was... unique,” Ka.ssian said after some deliberation. “Clean, tidy and expensive looking. The third floor where we sat looked like the summer hall here in the Imperial Palace which makes me think the owner might be a noble that has visited the Palace.” Yulien raised an eyebrow in surprise. “And the food was... better than the food here.”

“That’s a high praise coming from you.” Yulien laughed, then made a sad face. “I wish I could go too.

“Just order some of it to be delivered here.” Ka.ssian shrugged. Considering his brother’s position and the dangers waiting for him even where he was supposed to be safe, there was no way he could go out in an unfamiliar place, even with his bodyguards. He wasn’t that stupid.

“I’ve tried!” Yulien groaned. “I’ve sent a messenger, and do you know what I was told? Regrettably, they are unable to comply since they do not deliver food or cook outside of the restaurant for anyone else but the Empress.”

“I really don’t like the sound of that.” Ka.ssian bristled. “First, they appear out of nowhere. They pick Ruby Street of all places, their food is strange and their manager hides her face with a veil! I can’t decide if they are trying too hard to be interesting or if they are hiding something big.”

“Patience, brother. We can’t afford to rush into things.” Yulien smiled, patting him on the back.

They had already left the Palace behind and were now walking toward the stable where he had left his horse earlier. "For now, let's just observe. It might turn out they are just lucky people trying to make a living. There is nothing wrong with that."

"Let's hope that's all they are," Kassian muttered. "If they are not, they won't live long enough to regret it. We're taking Rissen and his viper of a mother down, even if it kills me."