

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 41 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

"Gerrin, how far away are we from the Outpost?" Ka.ssian asked, frowning as he looked around the quiet forest surrounding them from all sides. It had started raining so hard on the second day that it forced them to stop and seek shelter. So now they were half a day late, arriving shortly before midnight instead of midday.

"Ten minutes," his second-in-command replied, eyes darting around just as warily.

"Shouldn't we have seen patrols by now?"

"We should have."

The two of them exchanged a long look and reached for their weapons at the same time. The others in their group followed suit, filling the silent night with the sound of metal ringing.

Ka.ssian's neck turned stiff from the tension, but his eyes continued to study the shadows for any movement or a deadly arrow that could end him on the spot. He should have waited at the inn.

They were already late, a few more hours shouldn't have mattered that much. Yet his eagerness to finally get his hands on some information had him rushing into it without caring about the consequences.

"I see the walls!" one of his men in the front announced, pointing forward. Ka.ssian followed the direction of his finger, and a few seconds later he saw it too. His blood turned to ice as he stared at the wide-open gates of the compound. There were no guards on the twelve-foot-long walls and nothing moved in the two watchtowers.

"Watch your backs!" Ka.ssian whispered, nudging his horse forward as he moved his sword in his right hand. "Gerrin, take the rear. Everybody, move into formation."

He received no reply, but his soldiers took their places with quick, confident movements. The ones in the outside sheathed their weapons, grabbing the shields they carried on their backs instead.

Those in the middle fell in lines of three, keeping the archers in the center as they loaded arrows on their bows.

Ka.ssian's eyes slid over the wall, glancing through the gaping gate to the dark, empty yard.

There were no sounds of scared horses or distraught people coming from inside the Outpost, no cries or weapons clashing. Just silence.

He raised his sword a little higher, his other hand squeezing the reins. His eyes remained on the walls above them as they neared the gate and passed through it, but nobody showed up to greet them neither friend nor foe.

A few steps into the empty yard of the Outpost and Ka.ssian knew where the guards had gone.

Bodies littered the inside of the walls, the stairs, and the ground – lying in their own blood, most of them with arrows sticking from their bodies. It didn't escape his notice that most of the arrows were buried into their backs, which meant that they had been either distracted or.. the attacker was one of their own.

Ka.ssian sniffed the air, but didn't pick up any smell of rot, just blood and sweat. If the bodies hadn't started to smell, that meant all of this happened not long ago.

"Should we go check for survivors?" one of his men asked, lowering his shield slightly.

"No. Don't break form.." Before he could even finish, a familiar whooshing sound tickled his ears and the air around them shimmered. Ka.ssian slashed with his sword, the blade catching the metal tip of the arrow just before it sank into the soldier next to him. The man raised his shield again, and so did everyone else, forming a thick wall of metal around the group as even more arrows rained upon them. Ka.ssian let go of the reins and pulled his shield from his back, raising it to complete the barrier.

For a minute or so, the sound of metal hitting metal and the insistent jabs into their shields were the only sounds to be heard. Ka.ssian gritted his teeth, peeking through the small holes between the shields to count their enemy.

"Five in front of us!" he said loud enough for the rest of the group to hear.

"Seven here!" Gerrin's voice came from the back. "Four-Leaf Clover Formation?"

"Yes." Ka.ssian sighed. "Seriously, you and your stupid names, I swear."

"You heard him, boys!" Gerrin shouted, ignoring his comment. "Let's get those bastards! Try not to kill them all, will ya?"

Ka.ssian nodded to the men on his side and they moved to form the four-man formation they had practiced so much that it felt like second nature now. The formation allowed them to protect each other from archers on all four sides, and as long as they moved together and in unison, there shouldn't have been any gaps to let in a stray arrow.

"On me!" Ka.ssian shouted so they could hear him over the clanking of arrows on shields and the commands on the other units. The other three followed and they headed

toward the wall where two of the archers stood, sending arrow after arrow after them. The formation held until they reached the stairs leading up. They were too narrow for the four of them to move together, so the moment Ka.ssian and the man on his right stepped up, a gap formed between them. One of the archers on the opposite wall must have spotted the opportunity because his arrow disappeared between them in a blink of an eye. The grunt that came from behind Ka.ssian suggested it found its mark too.

“Charge! Don’t let them shoot again!” Ka.ssian sprinted up the stairs, the sound of feet following him indicated the others heard his command. A man blocked his way, swinging his sword toward his head. Ka.ssian ducked, pushing the enemy with his shield and knocking him off balance. While the soldier tried to attack again, Ka.ssian ducked under his arms and sank his sword into his stomach, turning the handle before yanking the blade back. The enemy grunted in pain, dropping to the ground as blood gushed from the gaping wound.

Ka.ssian jumped over him, sprinting toward the two archers that had been their initial target. He raised his shield and lowered himself behind it just as they released their next arrows. One of them ricocheted from the shield, but the other one pierced it, stopping right next to Ka.ssian’s head.

Ka.ssian gritted his teeth, then tossed the shield aside, dashing toward them while they tried to recharge. One of them threw his bow down, drawing the sword hanging from his waist instead.

The other one stepped behind him, fumbling with his arrow as his hands shook with panic.

Ka.ssian kept moving, keeping the sword-wielding man between himself and the archer and attacking him with his full strength. The man almost fell down as his blade met Ka.ssian’s, but he somehow held on, pushing back desperately.

Ka.ssian pulled his sword free, swinging again and again, increasing the speed of his attacks so his opponent was barely able to keep up.

A shout came from behind him and he cursed under his breath. He had no time to disarm them and keep them alive when there were so many enemies. His men were his priority.

Ka.ssian attacked from above again, so his opponent was forced to grab his blade with both hands to counter him. Using the opportunity, he forced him to follow with his weapon in a wide side arch until the guy’s wrist twisted and he dropped his sword. Ka.ssian stepped forward and sank his own weapon into his chest, ignoring the man’s anguished cry. His eyes moved to the second enemy, who was now raising the bow again. Still holding onto the man he had stabbed, Ka.ssian raised the body in front of him, and the arrow sank into his back, forcing another painful cry before his enemy’s eyes rolled back.

Ka.ssian let the body drop and swung his sword, slicing through the bowstring before the archer could even pull it again. The archer tried to attack him with just the arrow, aiming at Ka.ssian's eyes. Ka.ssian caught his wrist before the metal tip could reach him, squeezing so hard that the other guy dropped his weapon with a whimper.

Ka.ssian caught him by the throat, lifting him off his feet while the man struggled desperately.

Throwing a look over his shoulder, Ka.ssian realized with relief that the fighting was over. He spotted Gerrin on the adjoining wall and his cond-in-command gave him a thumbs up before barking something at the men around him.

Ka.ssian returned his attention to the Craidal rebel, just to realize his face was turning bright red.

He let him drop to the ground and the man heaved desperately, taking a few desperate breaths before raising his head.

"Why did you attack the Outpost? Was it that important to silence your own people?" The guy at his feet didn't say anything, just stared at him with pure loathing. "Speak or I will torture you until you beg me to kill you! Most of your comrades are dead or dying! If you tell me what your agenda is, I'll protect you! I'll give you a comfortable life so far away from here, nobody will know where you are from!" Something shifted in the Craidal soldier's eyes, but Ka.ssian wasn't sure how to interpret it.

Still, the man said nothing. "Tell me now! Why are you fighting so hard for a kingdom that is already dead? Your king and his entire family are dead! Even if you succeed, who is going to take the throne and unite you? Or have you picked a new leader already?"

A sudden smile appeared on the man's lips, Ka.ssian felt a chill run down his spine. There was something wild in that guy's eyes, something almost fanatic in the pure gloating that appeared on his face.

"You're wrong, you filthy murderer!" he snarled.

In the next instant, the Craidal soldier reached for something on the ground. Ka.ssian squeezed his sword, but instead of attacking him, the man grabbed the arrow that had fallen by his feet and sunk it deep into his neck. Blood sprayed Ka.ssian's feet as he watched the body slump to the ground, rocked by heavy convulsions. The rebel's eyes remained locked on him as he released his last breath, a hint of triumph in them.

Ka.ssian continued to stare at the twitching body, his mind preoccupied with thoughts about what the soldier had just said, so he didn't hear when Gerrin approached him from behind. When he felt a hand on his shoulder, he raised his sword, ready to sink it into yet another warm body.

“Easy there!” Gerrin murmured, raising his hands in surrender and glancing at the others over his shoulder. He lowered his voice, moving closer to him and the two bodies at his feet. “Are you alright, Ka.ss? You have this scary look on your face..”

“I’m fine. What’s the situation?” Ka.ssian asked instead, glancing at his soldiers that were now gathering the corpses in one place.

“Two of ours are injured, nothing life-threatening. The enemy is... well, all of them are dead. We managed to disarm one, but he dove head-first into the ground, so I am not sure we can ask him any questions with his brain scattered everywhere.” He looked down at the guy with an arrow sticking out of his neck. “This one was alive last time I glanced over here. He killed himself?”

“Yes.” Ka.ssian nodded. “What about inside the outpost?”

“All dead,” Gerrin grumbled. “Both our people and the two captives. They slit their own people’s throats. It was clean though, they died instantly.”

He clicked his tongue, spitting on the ground before looking around.” I looks like we rushed all the way here for nothing.”

“No,” Ka.ssian said, tearing his eyes from the dead man at his feet and looking over the wall of the Outpost, toward the lands that lay beyond – the lands that were once the kingdom of Craidal. “It wasn’t entirely for nothing. I think now I know why they are fighting so hard.”

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“Are you alright?” Davin asked as he turned to look at her. Raena had stopped to catch her breath, and her chest was burning from the relentless pace he had set for them. After leaving the restaurant, they rushed home dressed in their servants’ clothes. Now that they were almost at the North Palace, she could feel her knees shaking just at the thought of resting. She seriously had to reconsider training her body some more.

“I’m fine!” she said in a choked voice. “We’re almost there.”

She pushed herself back up and followed him down the main path that they had used when they were going out to meet the Empress. A few minutes later, Davin led her away from it and toward the uneven ground that marked the border of the North Palace lands. They hadn’t made more than twenty steps when a figure appeared from behind one of the tall trees that were lining the path, making both of them jump. Raena covered her mouth to stop a startled scream, then her shoulders dropped in relief when she recognized Zen’s taut face.

She was just opening her mouth to ask what he was doing there when he put a finger on his lips to tell them to be quiet. He strode to her and grabbed her hand, then gave Davin a sign to follow.

Leaving the main road again, Zen guided them through the labyrinth of narrow paths that led to different parts in and out of the North Palace.

Raena remembered some of them, but most looked so alike that she got disoriented soon enough. Zen held her hand tightly, squeezing it to tell her to stop and move again, his eyes darting left and right.

Davin seemed just as tense and she wasn't sure if it was the thumping of her heart in her ears or her labored breathing, but she couldn't hear his steps either.

Soon, the North Palace came into view, but Zen didn't lead them toward the front entrance. Instead, they found themselves next to a small wooden door, half-hidden by a tall evergreen tree and a blackberry bush. He let go of Raena's hand and took a big rusty key out of his pocket. After unlocking and opening the door, he stepped through and looked around before giving them a sign to follow.

Two big trees and a shed hid them from view on this side, which explained why Raena didn't even know about this door. She stared at Zen with suspicion as he put the key back in his pocket.

Sensing her eyes, he looked at her, then down at his pocket.

"Kara showed me this place and told me to bring you in unnoticed," he whispered. "The North Palace is in uproar. Everybody thinks you were the one that got poisoned and since you are not here to show your face, rumors are spreading that you're dead. If someone recognizes you like this, there will be trouble."

"Alright." Raena nodded. "Sneak us in."

He kept his eyes on her for a moment longer, then offered her his hand. Zen whispered for Davin to get himself back inside from the servant's entrance, then he broke into a run toward the manor, pulling Raena after. They sneaked inside through one of the side entrances and she let him drag her along the way as he avoided whispering maids or panicking servants.

"Put your head down and walk quickly." Zen whispered as they reached the corridor leading to her room. He let go of her hand and strode forward, with Raena in tow. There was no one in the corridor itself, but there were voices coming from some of the rooms they passed, and a few of the doors leading to them were cracked open.

Zen stopped in front of her room and knocked. A few seconds later, the door opened and Raena followed him in. Kara stared at her with a pale face, biting on her lower lip.

The moment the door closed behind her, Raena pulled her itching wig off. She was just about to ask for a report on what exactly had happened when her eyes landed on the body. The blonde girl was lying on her back between the bed and the table, her face gray and covered with bright red blotches that spread to her neck and shoulders and disappeared underneath the dress. Her bloodshot eyes were wide with fear even now, their white almost gone underneath the red veins running over it. There was still some foam around her mouth and deep, red scratches running over her neck as if she had clawed at herself.

Bile rose in Raena's throat. She tried to run for the bathroom, but gave up after just a couple of steps and vomited on the floor. A hand gathered her hair away from her face as she retched helplessly.

She closed her eyes when her insides finally settled, wiping her mouth with her sleeve. Her knees felt even weaker than before, and if it wasn't for Kara keeping a steady hand around her waist, she probably would have slumped to the ground as she got up.

When Davin told her the girl was dead, she felt momentary panic and pity, then her mind quickly jumped to devise a plan for them to deal with this unforeseen development. She didn't even realize the severity of the situation until she saw the body.

In the real world, she had never seen a dead body – if she didn't count the movies she had watched, of course so hearing about it felt just like that. Like something fictional that happened in a movie or a book.

Yet it felt so real now. That girl, she was dead. Really dead. Somebody had died because of her.

What was worse, it should have been Raena that was lying there right now.

If she died here as well, what was going to happen to her? Going back to her own world suddenly felt even scarier than death itself – back to an uneventful life full of work, debt and repeating days, where she had achieved nothing, didn't have any friends, any lovers, any future. Her father was already dead and her relationship with her mother was strained at best. She had been here only a few months, but she had never felt happier.

Still, if she didn't go back, then she would be..

"Do you want to sit?" Kara's voice took her out of her dark thoughts and the maid guided her to one of the chairs while Zen covered the body with the top sheet of the bed. "We didn't want to move her since we were looking for some clues, but apart from finding out

what kind of poison it was, there were no other traces. The maid who brought the tea to the room has been imprisoned, but I don't think she did it. She will be held in the dungeon until His Highness returns and decides what to do with her."

"Alright," Raena said with a weak voice, clearing her throat as she tried to compose herself.

"What.. what are we going to do now?" she asked, looking at Kara. The maid's eyes widened for a second, as if surprised by the question, then her face turned serious.

"We'll wait until dark to take care of the body," she said, glancing at Zen, who nodded. "I'll find something to keep everyone busy, so it would be easier for Zen to get her out. I'll find her family and make sure they are properly compensated."

"Wait, don't we have to show the body to everyone or at least to those who would investigate the poisoning?" Raena frowned. "Everybody knows somebody was poisoned, we can't cover that up."

"If they see her, they will start asking questions, Kara said in a strained voice. "Questions like, why do you have a girl that looks so much like you, staying in your room and wearing your clothes?"

Once they start asking questions, they won't stop.

Raena swallowed the lump in her throat, nodding.

This shouldn't have happened. She knew that she had made some enemies, of course, but it was too early for them to go after her like that. It couldn't have been the Empress she still didn't know all of Raena's cards and she couldn't be sure she wouldn't leak the information even after dying. It couldn't have been the first wife either- apart from her obvious dislike for Raena, she had nothing to gain from her death. or maybe it was Lara? Judging by their last few encounters, she sure held no love for Raena, but she didn't look so stupid to do it so obviously. Besides, she still had Ka.ssian in the palm of her hand, so klling Raena now, right before the prince's birthday party no less, was only going to make him suspicious of his own people. Who knew what he would have done if she had died?

Or maybe it was not about her, but about him? Was someone trying to get to him by getting rid of her? Raena's death would surely put him in a tough sp0t with the Prime Minister and without his support and backing, all of Ka.ssian's business endeavors would likely fail.

"We'll just bury her and let the guards know we did. I doubt they would insist on digging her up," Kara continued. "We'll say that she drank the tea that was brought for you while you were sleeping and got poisoned."

Raena nodded, not sure if she could count on her voice.

“From now on, you drink and eat only things you have made yourself or I have brought for you,” Kara said, crouching in front of her. “if you’re in the restaurant, cook for yourself or have someone else taste it before you. I’ll request a tester from the prince, we should have done that a long time ago, but you didn’t want to increase the number of people watching you.”

“I think you should move her to another room,” Zen suddenly spoke, standing in front of the sheet covering the body as if to hide it from view. “She can’t stay here until I clear the room. Is this your first time seeing a dead body, Miss Raena?” Raena nodded and felt Kara’s hands squeeze hers.

“You should have someone stay with her too,” Zen added.

“I know how to do my job!” Kara snapped at him before pulling Raena to her feet. “We need to change your dress first, then we’ll put you in another room. This way, the servants can see you’re alive and well. Can you stand?” Raena nodded again, getting up only to realize her legs were shaking. “Hey, keep your eyes on me. Let’s go to the bathroom. Zen, bring one of the dresses from the wardrobe.”

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“Welcome back, Your Highness.” The soldiers at the gate saluted him as he and the rest of his group approached with their horses. The sun had set a few hours ago, but the city had come awake with the lighting of the lanterns on the streets, so their journey through it took longer than expected.

He couldn’t wait to take a bath and get a good night’s sleep. They had to hurry back because of the banquet and even when they did stop for a few hours of rest, his mind kept going to what that soldier had said.

They were just making their way toward the stables when he noticed a lone figure rushing to intercept them. As the man drew closer, Ka.ssian recognized Blaine and the look on his face made him tense in the saddle. He lowered himself down as his aide reached them, raising an eyebrow with a question.

“Missed me that much?” He tried to joke, to disperse the tension that tightened around his chest, but the look on the other man’s face wasn’t one of amusement.

“Don’t jest, Your Highness,” he sighed tiredly, glancing behind the prince. “I’m glad you’re back safe and sound, but there has been an incident.”

Ka.ssian continued to stare at him in expectation, but Blaine said nothing, just glanced at the group behind him.

“Go on ahead,” Ka.ssian said to Gerrin, who nodded, shouting for the men to move faster so they could eat and sleep sooner. Once they were out of earshot, he turned back to Blaine, giving him an impatient nod.

“There has been another poisoning,” he said carefully, and Ka.ssian closed his eyes.

“For fvck’s sake, I’ve barely been gone a week!” he sighed, opening his eyes again. “Who?”

“Her Highness Raena is.” Blaine started, and Ka.ssian felt his heart drop. Before he knew it, he was climbing back on his horse and pulling its reins. “Wait, Your..” Ka.ssian dug his heels into the horse’s side and the animal leapt forward.

“Damn it! Damn it!” he cursed as he squeezed the reins to the point his hands started trembling.

How could she get herself killed in such a short time? And in such a stupid way!

Her face emerged in front of him again, smiling from ear to ear while tiny dimples formed in her soft cheeks, her eyes gleaming with joy, while her long eyelashes fluttered excitedly. She couldn’t be dead, damn it!

Ka.ssian pulled the reins of the horse in front of the North Palace’s gate, just then noticing the four guards standing on duty outside. One of them rushed to secure the animal while the others saluted him promptly. He moved past them without slowing down, pushing the heavy gate and heading toward the mansion with an urgent stride.

Somebody was going to pay for this. Whoever did this was going to...

The front door opened even before he reached it. It took his eyes a second to get used to the bright light and to recognize the face of the maid – Raena’s personal maid.

“Your Highness, welcome. What...” the dark-haired girl started, but he just moved past her. He was going to deal with her incompetence later.

Ka.ssian stopped in the middle of the foyer, looking around. The place seemed much different from the last time he came here – the flooring was changed and the walls were properly painted and decorated; the staircase was renovated and polished to a gleam, dark red carpet covering the stairs with thin gilded metal strings holding it in place.

It was quiet. The whole manor was quiet. Ka.ssian headed for the stairs, ignoring the maid that called him again. He heard her following gingerly, but he didn’t stop until he was on the second floor.

“Your Highness, please stop for a moment!” she said breathlessly as she climbed the stairs. “What is His Highness doing h...?”

“Shut up!” Ka.ssian snapped, and she flinched. Where is she?”

The maid hesitated, and he was just going to shout at her when she moved.

“This way, please.” She led him down the corridor, stopping in front of one of the double doors and carefully opening one of its wings. The room was dark and smelled of flowers and one of those calming incense Sarea often used. Ka.ssian pushed past the maid, striding inside. It took him a second to spot the body in the bed, lying on its left side with the covers reaching to her waist. She was wearing a thin nightgown that had slipped over one of her shoulders. Her hair was spread on the pillow around her head and her face was relaxed and calm, almost as if she was sleeping.

She must have died painlessly, at least. But why was she in bed and not changed into proper attire? Even if it all happened today, the proper protocol was to prepare the body and move it to a colder room before the time for the funeral was decided.

Why didn't they..

The body in the bed shifted and Raena turned around, snuggling with one of the many pillows surrounding her. Ka.ssian's eyes widened, and he took a surprised step back. He turned around and stared at the maid with a stunned expression.

“She is not dead?” he asked, his voice coming out quieter than he expected. The maid gave him a confused look.

“Of course not!” she frowned. “Didn't your aide tell you the details? I gave him a full report myself, Your Highness.”

Ka.ssian pinched the bridge of his nose, letting out a heavy sigh. After he composed himself, he glanced over his shoulder to make sure Raena was still sleeping, then motioned for the maid to go out, following her swiftly into the corridor. The maid opened her mouth to speak, but he raised his hand and motioned for her to follow. After they had climbed down the stairs, he finally turned to look at her. She stared at her feet, clenching her hands nervously.

“Tell me what happened,” he ordered and the maid glanced at him before setting her eyes on his shoulder.

“While Her Highness was taking a nap in her room, one of the maids that were attending to her brought in the tea that another maid had delivered.

Since Her Highness was sleeping, the girl must have thought it was fine to have a cup herself and drank from it. The tea appeared to have been poisoned because she died almost instantly.” The maid said quickly. “This woke up Her Highness, and she

screamed when she saw her. I immediately went there to find out what had happened. After confirming it was poison, we moved and buried the body since it had all kinds of liquids coming out of it and I was afraid of an illness spreading. The other maids were terrified as well, so I thought it would be best to take care of it quickly.”

“An illness can’t spread so quickly if she died from poison,” Ka.ssian said, harsher than intended. “Where were you if not by her side?”

“I was managing the estate, Your Highness. She had fallen asleep, so I used the opportunity to take care of all the urgent matters,” she replied politely, but he could sense a note of annoyance in her voice. She remained with her head bowed and her eyes lowered in submission, but he got the feeling that she wasn’t used to doing that often.

Just what was going on in this place? “We apprehended the maid that brought the tea and she is currently locked in the dungeon, awaiting His Highness’s judgment. I have also given your aide the location of the grave in case His Highness wanted to inspect it.”

“What about my wife?” he asked and regretted it a moment later. The maid glanced up before resuming her previous posture.

“What about her, Your Highness?” she asked carefully.

“Is she alright?” Ka.ssian asked. It was already too late to pretend to be uninterested, so he could at least find out what he wanted to know. It wasn’t like showing interest in his wife’s well-being was strange. She was his responsibility, although so far he had been doing a terrifically poor job of taking care of her. She wasn’t Sarea, she couldn’t take care of herself or navigate these dangerous waters.

If he didn’t need her father’s support, he would have never married someone so weak and vulnerable.

“She is unharmed,” the maid finally replied, “but scared and exhausted. She has been sleeping all day after drinking a calming tea, but I am sure with a bit of time she will be fine.”

“The banquet is in two days,” Ka.ssian murmured, then looked up when he realized he had said it out loud. He was just thinking that under the circumstances she couldn’t attend when the maid said.

“She will attend as ordered, Your Highness. We have received the gown and the instructions from Her Highness Sarea.” Ka.ssian opened his mouth to say that wouldn’t be necessary when the front door of the manor flew open and a panting Blaine rushed in, holding his chest with a pained expression. Both Ka.ssian and the maid stared at him with surprise as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“It wasn’t your wife that was poisoned!” he croaked, coughing a few times before straightening up. “I tried to tell you, Your Highness, but you left so quickly!”

“I found out already.” Ka.ssian scowled, then turned to the maid. “I am sending you a tester first thing in the morning. Make sure they taste even the water she drinks, am I clear?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Blaine, we’re leaving!” he announced, moving past his aide. Blaine caught up, his eyes drilling a hole in the back of Ka.ssian’s head. When he finally got to his horse, he turned to face the other man. Go back to my study. I have one more stop to make and I’ll meet you there for a full report.”

He nudged the horse forward before his aide could answer, guiding the animal toward the East Palace. Everybody must have heard of his return because as he rode through the place, he saw more guards and servants rushing around as if turning extremely busy all of a sudden.

When he reached the East Palace, he surrendered the horse to a servant that seemed to be waiting for him outside. He made his way in, ignoring everyone’s curious looks, which only reminded him he was still wearing his armor. At least he had managed to get most of the grime and blood out of it, but he doubted he was a pretty sight.

Sarea’s Head Maid greeted him at the door and for a moment he wondered if all Head Maids had some kind of sixth sense. He didn’t even have to ask when she politely asked him to follow her so she could lead her to her mistress.

He found Sarea sitting alone on the long rectangular table of her dining room, nursing a glass of wine while rubbing her temple. The look she gave him as he walked in suggested she knew very well he wasn’t there for pleasantries.

“Leave,” Sarea said at the same time he did.

The Head Maid raised her hand and the three attending maids followed her out of the room with hurried steps. As the door behind them closed, he turned back toward Sarea. “I’m already looking into it.”

“Oh, you are?” he scoffed, his anger returning. Two times! She almost got killed two times in one month! We haven’t even been married for that long! Is this how you’re managing the harem?”

“What do you expect me to do?” she snapped, her voice raising an octave. “Every servant gets vetted before they are allowed to work here! Their background, their recommendations, their characters. But people can lie and sometimes you can’t tell

before it's too late! We are all under constant threat, not just her! How is it my fault she doesn't have a tester? If anything, it's her fault!"

"Sarea..." Ka.ssian warned, trying to calm down before he poured his anger on her. "She is defenseless and she is under your care! Do you know what will happen if she dies? Do you know what the Prime Minister would do?"

"Is this really the reason?" she asked suddenly, a bitter smile appearing on her lips. "What the Prime Minister would do?" Ka.ssian narrowed his eyes at her, refusing to give in to the provocation.

The Prime Minister would do nothing! He knows what it means to be part of the Imperial family! He knew that by marrying her to you, her life would be in danger because that's just how it is with your family! I would know, I have survived more assassination attempts than her! But have you come here in the middle of the night to check on me and my condition? No! You've sent Blaine! Or a messenger! So don't come marching in here and waving false excuses in my face! I am not stupid, I know exactly why you're so angry!"

"Watch your mouth!" Ka.ssian frowned at her.

"No! I'm sick and tired of being treated like your servant!" Sarea shouted. "I've been supporting you, through my family and my own efforts, for almost ten years! I've done everything you asked, and I have given you everything I can! I am even..." Her tirade stopped abruptly, and she bent over, her body trembling from the vicious cough that shook her from head to toe.

She kept coughing and choking for a few long seconds, then suddenly she fell to one knee. Ka.ssian rushed to her side, reaching to catch her. She slapped his hand before he could touch her. Her gaze burned with rage, but what really got him was the stream of blood smeared at the edge of her mouth. Ka.ssian looked at her hands, his breath catching in his throat as he stared at the red splatter on them.

"What is this?" he asked as he met her eyes again. "What's wrong with you?"

"What do you think, Ka.ssian?" she replied weakly, wiping the blood from her chin with the back of her hand. "I'm paying the price of being your wife."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 44 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

Raena leaned back in her chair, bringing the cup to her lips and inhaling the sweet, calming aroma of the tea. The room was dark and quiet, with the only light coming from the windows by her side. She had drawn the curtains open to stare at the sky as it changed from pale blue to inky black, dotted with stars and the bright waning moon.

Goosebumps covered her legs as the wind from the open terrace made its way into the room and for a moment she regretted asking Kara to make her shorter nightgowns. Her current one reached just below the knees and it was so thin, she almost felt naked. But it was damn comfortable to sleep in now that the weather was getting hotter.

Raena took another long sip from the tea, closing her eyes and stretching her legs on the cushioned chair across from her.

The past few days were difficult. Not counting seeing the dead girl in her dreams, she had to deal with her own maids and servants who stared at her like she was a zombie that had come back from the dead. Kara had also told her that the third prince basically barged into her bedroom while she was sleeping and left just as fast. Not to mention that her every move was now being watched – from every bite she took and every sip she drank, to everywhere she went, she was never alone. Either there would be a maid checking on her to see if she needed anything or Kara would fussing around, pretending to be doing something unnecessary.

She also had to attend the third prince's birthday banquet tomorrow, and she honestly wasn't in the mood for it. The fear and shock had worn off, but she still felt bad for the dead girl. She had also decided that she'd distance herself from Kaasian, but she still hadn't figured out how to act in front of him. With his interest in her growing, especially after the latest events, she was running out of time.

Someone knocked on the door, and she opened her eyes, turning over her shoulder. It was pretty late, so it was probably Kara coming to check in on her before she went to bed.

"Enter," Raena said, bringing the cup back to her lips. Just as she was about to drink, a voice called from behind her.

"Stop!"

She froze by instinct, turning around to look at Zen, who was standing at the door with his hand raised as if to stop her with his mind powers. His expression was one of surprise and panic. Raena slowly took a sip, then lowered the cup.

"It's fine. Elene made it in front of me earlier and even tested it," Raena said, putting the cup back on the table and letting her legs drop to the ground. "What is it, Zen?"

"May I enter?" he asked, still standing at the door. Raena nodded, turning in her chair so she could face him as he closed the door. A moment later, it occurred to her that she was wearing nothing but her nightdress, with most of her legs exposed. She had spent a lot of time alone with Zen, but never this scarcely dressed – at least not when his eyes were open. He looked back at her, but instead of staring at her exposed skin, she found his eyes locked on her face.

He took a few more steps into the room, watching her as if expecting her to start foaming at the mouth. When a minute passed and nothing happened, he let out a relieved sigh, running a hand through his hair.

"You guys seem to be more scared than me!" Raena chuckled, leaning her head on her hand. "So what's the matter? Why are you not sleeping?"

"I have something to say," he announced in a serious tone. Raena raised an eyebrow.

"I'm all ears."

For some time he stayed silent, then suddenly dropped to his knees right in front of her. It was such an unexpected and abrupt movement that it made her jump. Her eyes studied his slumped shoulders, his lowered head, the deep wrinkle running over his forehead.

"Zen, what is go.."

"I know it was my fault we got caught by the concubine and the third prince. I know it was my fault you are locked here and watched so closely and that I am being sent on stupid errands just so I am away from the North Palace. But I won't let that happen anymore. I need to be by your side protect you and make sure what happened the other day never happens again."

"Zen, it's fine! It wasn't really your fault, you did warn me that we can't keep slipping everyone forever." Raena smiled. He raised his head and stared into her eyes, so Raena blinked her lips awkwardly, wondering if she should look away. It felt strange looking at him kneeling with that expression on his face. "As I said, it's fine. We'll figure.."

"I'm sorry, but I have no intention of leaving your side, even if you order me," he stated, his eyes hardening. "Even if you don't let me come with you, I'll follow from a distance to make sure you're safe."

"You can't do that! There are places you can't go in!" Raena sighed. "Alright, let's do this. When I am going out of the North Palace for business, you can come with me. I'll leave the residence alone and we'll meet outside. But when I go to the banquet tomorrow, you can't follow me there. Only servants from the third prince's palace are allowed, even Kara is not coming. Do you understand? You must not sneak in!"

"I don't like the idea of you being alone with him," Zen said, his eyes burning dangerously. "I don't like how he looks at you."

"Who?"

“Don’t play dumb!” Zen snarled through gritted teeth, his voice harsher than usual. “I’m talking about your husband, the one you said you’re planning to divorce!”

“That’s not going to happen right away and I am not going to be alone with him,” Raena said, wondering why she felt compelled to give him an explanation. If anything, he was the one out of line, no matter what kind of relationship they had. Yet those dark gray eyes were holding her firmly in her seat, her body tensing as if expecting an attack. “I don’t like it when you get jealous.”

“Then give me something to shut up that jealous voice in my head!” Zen whispered, leaning forward. Raena’s hand flew toward his chest, pressing against it to stop his advances, but he caught her wrist and brought it to his lips. He put a soft kiss on her palm, then one on her knuckles before raising her hand and letting it drop on his shoulder while he continued to lean closer. “I like you,” he whispered, his lips inches away from hers.

Raena searched for a response, calling on her body to move and do something, but all she could do was stare at the smile that formed on his lips as his warm breath tickled her skin. “I like you, Raena,” he whispered again as his lips brushed against hers. “I like you so much I can barely control myself.” His teeth caught her lower lip, pulling gently to make her open her mouth.

Caught up in the moment and the lust in his eyes, she returned his kiss hesitantly. One of his hands slid behind her neck while the other one wrapped around her waist, pulling her to the edge of the chair. Even on his knees, his height allowed him to look her directly in the eyes and as she opened hers, she noticed he was doing just that.

She felt him smile as he deepened the kiss, stealing her breath away.

He slid even closer, his hard chest rubbing against the thin fabric of her nightgown. He broke the kiss, his mouth leaving a trail of eager kisses over her chin and down her neck. She could feel his hot tongue licking the bristling skin, his teeth biting teasingly. His hands tightened their hold on her as a moan escaped her lips.

The pressure on her back disappeared as his fingers slid over her knee instead, gliding under the edge of her nightgown. He moved his hand slowly, his thumb running circles on the inside of her thigh.

As his touch crept higher on her leg, a flicker of clarity flashed in her mind. Raena opened her eyes.

“Zen, stop. We can’t..” His mouth covered hers and his tongue slipped in, stealing her words and making her dizzy. It had been so long since somebody had touched her like that or stared at her with such desire that even though she knew it was stupid to do it, she didn’t want to stop.

He broke the kiss again as if he knew he had won, his free hand catching her chin. He ran his thumb over her lower lip and as Raena met his burning gaze, he smirked.

“I want you, Raena. I want to make you mine in every way possible. I think I’ve wanted it from the moment our eyes met that night” he whispered, his thumb sliding gently into her mouth just as the hand on her thigh reached its intended destination.

Raena gasped and his smile grew. “I don’t want anyone else to touch you. So be mine, alright? I’ll give you..”

A knock came from the door, breaking the spell of his intense gaze. She looked away from him and her.

A moment later, his fingers gripped her chin, turning her face toward him again.

“Don’t reply,” he ordered, leaning down to kiss

“It’s Kara. She’ll walk in anyway!” Raena said quickly, catching the hand that was still under her nightgown and trying to push it away. Zen didn’t budge. “Zen, stop!”

His eyes darkened with frustration, but he pulled away, getting to his feet. Raena cleared her throat, then called for Kara to enter. Her maid slid inside, freezing at the threshold as her eyes landed on Zen. She shot Raena a glance, then glanced out into the corridor.

“Has something happened?” Kara asked in a low voice.

“No, we’re just talking,” Raena said quickly, smiling at her. Kara gave her a long, thoughtful look before turning her eyes to Zen.

“It’s late. Leave the talking for tomorrow,” she said, opening the door in a silent command for him to leave. Raena glanced at him, but he didn’t even look at her before striding out of the room. “You probably don’t want my advice, but I’ll give it anyway. Not him, alright? I don’t trust him.”

“Is it because he is from Craidal?” Raena sighed. “Not everyone from there is a spy, you know. There are regular people that are just trying to survive.”

“I know. I might be prejudiced here, but I don’t trust him. I don’t trust his siblings either. There is just something off about them,” Kara said, her voice even quieter than before. Raena stared at her wary face, trying to think if Kara was indeed too paranoid or if Raena herself had been too trusting. It was true that apart from Elene, her brothers were not part of the story, so she assumed whatever supporting role they played, it wasn’t that important. But she had been neglecting one important detail – she never finished reading the story.

“Why do you let them stay if you mistrust them so much?” Raena asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Kara frowned. “They already know too much. Besides, if they are here, it’s easier to keep an eye on them.” Kara licked her lips, sleeking the hair that had escaped her braid. “I do hope I’m just overly cautious. I don’t fancy myself a prejudiced person. But just in case, be careful and don’t open your heart to someone unless you’re absolutely sure you can trust them. With all the danger you’re already in, you don’t need to worry about betrayal coming from someone you love.

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 45 - Tips

39 minutes read

“Happy birthday, Your Highness. May you have a long and joyful life!”

“Thank you,” Kassian replied with a reserved smile as yet another noble gave his greeting and moved inside the residence to join the festivities.

He had been receiving those well-wishes for the past half an hour and his face was stiff from smiling. He kept looking at Sarea, who was standing by his side, but she seemed perfectly composed, as always. Almost like she wasn’t dying.

He still couldn’t believe it was happening, that she had hidden it from him. There wasn’t love between them and it could hardly be called friendship, but they had been married for almost eight years and she was one of his people. Her life was important to him, even if she didn’t believe it.

To hear she was dying and there was nothing he could do about it- that wasn’t something he could easily accept.

After their fight, she had gone back to her chambers to recuperate and when she showed up a few hours before the beginning of the banquet, she looked just as unshakable as always. She took control of the preparations and the servants with just a few words and as the guests started arriving, she stepped next to him and held his arm, just like she always did. Kassian wanted to say something, to apologize, but the words remained stuck in his throat as she smiled and conversed with everyone, laughing in all the right places and dabbling into topics even he wasn’t that familiar with. He wasn’t sure there was anything he could say that could fix their relationship or give her comfort.

His mind kept playing scenarios in his head, of him standing in this place for yet another social gathering, but without her unwavering presence by his side. Who was going to keep the conversation going when he had nothing to say? Who was going to remind him of the name of this or that noble, and which faction they were part of? It dawned on him that he had been taking all those things for granted, the way she took care of things, so he didn’t have to bother.

Sarea let out a quiet sigh, shifting from one leg to another as if to find a more comfortable position.

Her dark blue, almost black dress rustled as she adjusted her skirts.

“Do you need to rest?” Ka.ssian asked and she finally looked up at him.

“I’m fine,” she said coldly. “Stop staring at me like that. Look forward, the Prime Minister and his Son are coming. Smile.”

Ka.ssian turned around immediately, plastering a smile on his face as he shook the Prime Minister’s hand. It always struck Ka.ssian how different the Prime Minister was from his children while both Raena and Ramor were blonde, with blue eyes and a fair complexion like their mother, their father was dark-haired, dark-eyed and with skin dotted with wrinkles and age even though he wasn’t that old. His wife didn’t accompany him, as Sarea had predicted, due to an illness that kept her bedridden for months due to her weak disposition.

“Happy birthday, Your Highness,” the Prime Minister said, bowing his head in respect and showing him his receding hairline. “May you live long and bring honor and prosperity to our great Empire. We’ve always had great expectations from you.”

“You praise me too much, Prime Minister,” Ka.ssian replied, reaching out to shake his son’s hand. Ramor returned the gesture but didn’t smile and his greeting was mumbled under his nose. His eyes kept looking around as if searching for, something.

“Is my sister coming? We heard concerning news,” Ramor said, throwing another look around.”

Is it true somebody got poisoned with the tea intended for her?”

“Ramor!” the Prime Minister said in a voice full of warning, his mustache twitching angrily. “That’s enough.”

His son closed his mouth, but looked at Ka.ssian expectantly, his blue eyes – just like his sister’s – glaring with all their might.

“Raena is fine,” Ka.ssian said, trying to control his voice at the sight of the obvious provocation.

Ramor was a few inches shorter than him and much leaner, so if they were on the battlefield, Ka.ssian could have made him eat his teeth by now. But he was Raena’s brother and the Prime Minister’s only son, not to mention a name already known in the trading circles so Ka.ssian had to be careful with him unless he wanted to put himself in an awkward position. “She wasn’t harmed in any way and I have personally taken all

precautions to prevent anything like this from happening again. She should be here any moment.”

“I’m glad to see you’re caring for my daughter, your Highness,” the Prime Minister said with a fixed smile, glancing at his son. “I’m sure situations such as these cannot be avoided, but as a father, I’ll sleep better now that I know you personally took action to protect her.”

Ka.ssian nodded awkwardly while Sarea let out a quiet scoff, masking it as a cough. She took a sip out of her wine, looking away as Ka.ssian glared at her.

“Ah, here she is,” Sarea murmured, nodding in the direction she was staring. Ka.ssian turned to follow her gaze, not seeing anything at first apart from several guests whispering and turning around.

Then he caught a glimpse of shiny blonde hair and something blue before he finally saw her. Her hair was pulled back from her face, held up by a sparkling blue ornament matching her dress. The rest of her hair was falling in waves down her back, a few strands bouncing off her exposed shoulders.

The dress had no sleeves instead, it was held on by the straps crisscrossing over her long, pale neck.

The gown hugged her upper body, then fell loosely to the ground. The tiny sparkling stones all over the dark blue fabric made her look almost as if she was wearing the night sky.

His mind recalled that Raena’s maid had said they had received a gown and instructions from Sarea, so this meant the way she was dressed was all Sarea’s doing. He glanced at his first wife only to find her finishing her glass with a sour expression.

Sarea sensed his eyes and finally looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

“What? She is here for you to show her off, the least we can do is make her presentable” she murmured low enough for the Prime Minister and his son not to hear. Ka.ssian looked back at his second wife just as a bright smile blossomed on her face. Ka.ssian swallowed the lump in his throat as he watched her pick her skirts and rush to their side, but her eyes didn’t go to him even for a second. Instead, he noticed how Ramor circled his father and moved to intercept her, opening his arms invitingly.

“Brother!” Raena giggled, throwing herself into his embrace and letting him pick her up before settling her back down. She continued to stare at her brother with a huge grin while he fought to keep his composed expression, but ended up grinning just as widely.

Both siblings seemed to have forgotten there were people around them, even members of the Imperial family.

Annoyance slipped into Ka.ssian's mind and he fought hard to keep it out of his face. The Prime Minister was the first to get out of his stupor, clearing his throat. Raena graced him with a beautiful smile, although not as happy as the one she gave her brother, and moved to hug him as well.

Her father stiffened as if he didn't know what to do, then patted her on the head before she pulled away.

"Where are your manners, Raena? Aren't you going to greet His Highness?" the Prime Minister said awkwardly, glancing toward Ka.ssian. Raena froze for a second as if just remembering something she had forgotten, then turned to face him and Sarea.

"Happy birthday, Your Highness," she said in even tone and just as he thought she'd finally look at him, her eyes stopped on Sarea and the genuine smile returned to her face. "Your Highness, thank you so much for the dress! I love it!"

"Um, yes, I'm glad," Sarea said with surprise, giving the blonde girl a stiff smile. "It looks good on you."

Raena nodded excitedly, then turned back to her brother and locked hands with him.

"Brother, how is mother? How is everyone? Tell me everything! I miss you all so much!" she said in one breath, pulling her brother away. The Prime Minister stared after them for a second, then turned toward Ka.ssian and bowed before walking after his children.

Ka.ssian stood completely baffled, his mind trying to figure out what he had done to earn such disregard. Was she still mad about being confined to the North Palace? Or was she mad because of the assassination attempt? He couldn't remember what else he could have done to make her dismiss him in such an obvious way.

"Ha! Who would have thought you could make this kind of face?" Sarea scoffed suddenly and Ka.ssian looked at her with confusion. He didn't think he was making any kind of face, but by the way she smirked, he might have been wrong.

"What kind of face" he asked with annoyance, as she chuckled under her breath.

"A jealous one." Sarea replied, and for a second, there was no hostility in that smile. Then, as if remembering she was still angry at him, her smile dropped. "Instead of pining after her like an idiot, just visit your wife's bedchambers. Nobody is going to say a word to you for sleeping with your wife."

"I don't care what other people say," Ka.ssian said in a dark tone. "I'm doing this for her. Look at her." He nodded to where Raena and her family had stopped, talking excitedly while she stared at her brother with wide, innocent eyes and a huge smile.

He said something and she laughed loudly, quickly covering her mouth like a child that had done something they shouldn't have.

"Then cast your eyes elsewhere," Sarea said harshly, her gaze stopping on the guests where he had noticed Lara earlier. Sarea had requested that none of his concubines were to be invited to major social events, but after that night before he left for Craidal, he felt like a jerk, so he allowed Lara to attend after she hinted she wanted to several times.

She looked elegant as always in her black dress, but she seemed a bit tense as she spoke to the group that kept looking at the Prime Minister and his daughter. None of them had seen Raena since the wedding and even then she was wearing the wedding veil, so some of them probably didn't even know who the blonde girl was.

"Ah, some respite!" Sarea murmured, and Ka.ssian focused his attention back on her. He was just going to ask what she was talking about when he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Good evening, brother, sister-in-law. You look lovely as always, Sarea." Ka.ssian turned his head to look at his brother, who smiled happily in his official attire with the crown prince's satchel running over his chest.

Ka.ssian was sure that Arina, his first wife, had forced him to wear it, but he didn't want to ruin his brother's fun with mockery from the start.

"Always a charmer, Yulien." Sarea smiled genuinely at him. "'m leaving him to you. Don't do anything I wouldn't do.'

"That's very limiting, my dear Sarea." Yulien laughed after her, but she just waved with her hand and disappeared. As Yulien looked at Ka.ssian, his smile faltered a little. "You don't look like you're having a lot of fun, brother."

"And you just came here and you're already glowing." Ka.ssian pointed out.

"Well, no escorts inside your palace. I'm free!" he grinned, looking around. His eyes stopped on Raena and her brother, who were now dancing while she kept stepping over her skirts and his feet.

Yulien looked back at Ka.ssian, who found himself staring at them with an annoyed smile. "So, is it true? What Blaine told me?"

Ka.ssiian glanced around before nodding curtly. "That's the only explanation," he said, "but have no idea who they might be. When we took the capital, we executed the king and his entire family as per the Emperor's orders. I don't think anyone managed to escape."

"So it must have been someone who wasn't currently at the castle" Yulien nodded. "I will request a copy of their family tree and we can go over the names to see who was killed that night."

And whoever is left.. we will search for them, before they can stir some real trouble. With the Emperor's health as it is, this would be the perfect time for them to start a massive rebellion and if the spark spreads to other regions as well, we may have a full-out war on our hands."

"If that happens, a certain someone is sure to take advantage of that," Ka.ssiian murmured. His brother just smiled, but there was no joy or amusement in his expression.

"Anyway, that's enough of that for tonight!" Yulien laughed, patting him on the back. "Let's get something to drink. My little brother has a birthday and he deserves to have some fun."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 46 - Tips

09 minutes read

Raena let out a tired sigh as she allowed her smile to drop and locked her eyes on the beautiful garden stretching everywhere around her. More lamps had been brought in for the occasion, and the gardeners had made sure there wasn't even a single leaf or a flower out of place. The weather was nice and warm too, without a single cloud in the sky overhead.

She had snuck out of the party a few minutes ago, tired of playing the fool and laughing without reservation while people gave her compliments or asked her questions about her husband or her father. Her brother had been dragged away by other nobles and forced to socialize, so she could no longer use him as a shield to avoid conversations. She had spotted Lara looking at her, so she thought it prudent to get out of there before that woman tried to talk to her. She wasn't in the mood for her backhanded compliments.

It wasn't that she was afraid of Lara. Even if the concubine was the one behind those assassination attempts, she didn't look stupid enough to do something in the open. It was just that tonight of all nights, Raena didn't think she could handle her innocent smile and mockingly respectful tone.

Raena froze, looking around, only to confirm she was sitting all alone on the bench with the only sounds coming from the party in the distance. On second thought, coming by

herself here didn't sound like such a smart idea. Somebody would probably hear her if she screamed, but if there really was an attack, screaming would be no help since she'd be dead by the time anyone came.

'Don't be stupid. Nobody is going to attack you in the third prince's mansion during his party' she scolded herself. Getting poisoned was one thing, anyone could slip something in the food or drinks and disappear. But getting attacked while there was a grand celebration nearby was close to impossible. The guards checked everyone for anything that could pose as a weapon and the servants were handpicked by the first wife; there were even soldiers patrolling everywhere. She was just still shaken up by what had happened a few days ago and was now seeing danger where there was none.

She was just about to get up and return to the party when she heard steps drawing near. She turned around just as a lone figure appeared from the path between the bushes, walking with an easy gait.

"Oh, I thought this place would be empty," a male voice, distantly familiar, spoke, and a few moments later its owner stepped into the dim light of the nearby lantern. Raena let out a quiet sigh of relief as she recognized the crown prince and hurriedly smiled at him.

"Do you mind if I join you? I am trying to escape talking to people."

"Sure." Raena nodded, scooting to the end of the bench. "Are they boring you too? Everything they talk about is so hard to understand."

"Oh, yes. More than you can imagine." Yulien chuckled as he sat down, stretching his legs. Raena allowed herself a quick look- he didn't seem drunk this time, and his demeanor was much calmer and more collected than before. His long hair was falling over his shoulders and every time the wind picked up, it would send it flying like he was a model in some fancy shampoo commercial. Between him and Ka.ssian, he was probably the prettier of the two, since his lines were softer and his expression was gentler, while Ka.ssian exuded danger and strength just by standing still. The author must have really liked unrealistically handsome men.

"Do I have something on my face?" he suddenly asked, touching his cheeks. Raena flinched- she hadn't realized she was openly staring at him for that long.

"No, Your Highness is just very handsome," she said with a bright smile, and Yulien laughed.

"More handsome than my brother?" he asked with a playful glint in his eyes. Raena hesitated, then nodded.

He laughed again, shaking his head. "Well, that's good to know. But please don't tell him you think that."

“Why?”

“Because he’s probably going to punch my handsome face.” Yulien winced, rubbing his jaw as if he could already imagine the pain of being punched. Raena paused, wondering if there was indeed something that, would make Ka.ssian punch his beloved brother.

“Alright, I’ll keep it a secret,” she said, turning away from him. She had to get back to the party and find an excuse to leave. She didn’t like how sharp Yulien’s eyes were when he watched her, like he was seeing through her pretense. She couldn’t believe she was even thinking it, but right now she preferred the drunk crown prince to the sober, perceptive one.

“Good girl,” he said with a smile, his eyes still locked on her. “Have you been well, dear sister-in-law? I heard a maid of yours got sick not long ago. You’re not sick, are you?”

“Sick? Now that is a nice way to put it,” thought and almost snorted at the thought, but somehow held back her reaction.

Raena

“I’m not. Kara said she sent the maid away to get better,” she replied quickly, still not looking at him.

“Hmm. What a good maid you have,” he murmured and this time Raena glanced at him, only to find him watching her while rubbing his lips with his fingers. His smile grew as their eyes met, and then his gaze switched to her hands. “Do you like alcohol, sister-in-law? Alcohol is not good for you, especially if you’re young and pretty.”

What was it with him calling her ‘sister-in-law’ so much? He obviously knew her name, but he was not using it as if drawing some invisible line between them.

Not that she complained, she had enough attention on herself as it was. Was it because she was Ka.ssian’s wife? That didn’t stop him from going after Elene in the original storyline, but then again, Ka.ssian had already been executed for treason before the crown prince started pursuing her...

Raena looked down at the wineglass she was holding, just now remembering she had grabbed it before coming here. After a short consideration, she decided not to drink it. After what had happened, even drinking water made her heart race.

“Um, no. My brother told me just to hold it,” she said quickly. “Do you want it?” She offered it to him and for the first time, he hesitated. Raena almost laughed. “Oh, right. There might be poison in this.”

She moved the cup aside and slowly poured its content into the grass, watching as the dark liquid soaked into the ground. She looked back at Yulien, who was staring at her with that same piercing gaze as before. For a moment, she thought she had messed up and acted out of character, but when he chuckled, she relaxed a little.

“What a smart girl!” he said with his charming smile, eyes moving to the sky. “Who do you think would do it? Put poison in your drink.”

“I don’t know,” she said after a short pause. “Someone who doesn’t like me.”

“Do you know someone who doesn’t like you?” he asked, still not looking at her. Raena stared at his profile, searching for the right words. For some reason, this conversation felt like a test. After a short deliberation, she concluded that, despite his smile and charming disposition, talking to the crown prince was actually very difficult. At least for someone who knew that behind the goofy exterior hid a razor-sharp mind and a person who wouldn’t hesitate to order one’s traceless disappearance.

She had to think of something. She had to throw him off and get out of there. She...

“Yes,” she said and his eyes moved to her at once.

He held his smile, but his expression was one of keen interest. He waited patiently for her to continue, so she lowered her gaze to her hands, feigning fear.

“It’s alright, you can tell me,” he said gently, touching her shoulder. “I promise I won’t tell anyone and I’ll protect you. Who do you think doesn’t like you?” Raena held another long pause, then sighed loudly.

“Your brother.”

She kept her face down while the silence deepened, fighting the temptation to look up.

“Ka.ssian?” he asked as if to confirm he understood correctly. Raena nodded. “Why do you think so?”

“He locked me up in the North Palace and he was mean to me, even though I had done nothing wrong.” She said, pouting her lips. She grabbed onto her skirts, her fingernail scratching over the fabric.

“I see,” he said, his voice laced with a mix of amusement and disappointment. “I’m sure my brother likes you very much. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have married you, right?” Raena wanted to roll her eyes, but she stopped herself, shrugging instead. “In fact, I think..”

“Oh, my. What a coincidence! I didn’t think there would be anyone here.”

Raena looked up at the same time the first prince turned over his shoulder. A tall, slender woman was standing next to the closest lantern, holding a folded fan in one hand and a half-empty glass in the other. It took Raena a second to recognize Lara in the darkness and this time she failed to hold back her sigh. A gorgeous smile blossomed on the concubine's face as she raised a hand to push a strand of hair that had fallen from her hairdo.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" she said as she curtsied, not moving from her spot. "I apologize for interrupting. I'll go back."

Raena gritted her teeth. If she went back now, who knew what kind of rumors would be circulating by tomorrow. There wasn't a single doubt in Raena's mind that the ones from before were her doing, although she had no actual proof. Raena was just opening her mouth when Yulien spoke first.

"Lady Lara, what a delight to see you! Come join us. It must be tiring conversing with so many people. Rest awhile." His voice was the epitome of charm, Raena had to give it to him. He could easily put her in his pocket with her arsenal of smiles and polite compliments. Lara hesitated, bowing her head in gratitude.

Before she could reach the bench, Raena rose to her.

"I'm actually hungry," she said, forcing a smile on her face. "Now that you have somebody to keep you company, Your Highness, I'll go find my brothe."

Yulien stared at her for a second, but then nodded his dismissal. Raena and Lara passed each other, their eyes meeting for a moment, before Raena continued forward, letting her smile drop. With Lara staying alone with the first prince now, if she decided to open her mouth, she'd be digging her own grave as well. Raena would have hated to resort to spreading rumors, but if that was the game that damn woman wanted to play, she'd play it.

Raena continued down the path as the sound of voices and quiet music grew louder and louder. She didn't look forward to mingling with the guests, but it was much preferred than staying with those two.

She stepped on one of the small decorative bridges that ran over the biggest pond in the garden, too tired to walk around the whole thing. Her heels clicked loudly on the wood, making every other sound fade into the background. A quiet rustle and a loud flop made her stop and look around wearily. She could see no one around, but for some reason, a cold chill ran down her spine.

Another Flop! followed, and this time she was sure it came from the water below. She stepped toward the parapet of the bridge, peeking over it into the dark waters dotted with the bright reflection of the stars. She saw nothing at first, then suddenly the water

surface broke and a small orange fish jumped with a soft swoosh! Into the air, falling back into the pond.

Raena let out a relieved chuckle, feeling her tension drain away. The pond was big and it veered left and right with several more bridges, so of course they would put fish in them. There were probably other animals too, like ducks and swans. She was pretty sure she saw a swan in the garden once as she walked with Kara.

“Stupid,” she murmured, shaking her head. She picked up her skirts again, throwing the dark waters one last look before resuming her walk. She hadn’t made more than two steps when suddenly she was sent sideways, losing her balance and hitting the par.apet.

Before she knew it, she was tipping over it, hands reaching out for something to grab onto, but grasping only empty air instead.

Raena screamed as she flew toward the water, closing her mouth only after it filled with cold water. She tried to kick and swim to the surface, but the skirts of her dress had firmly wrapped around her legs and her hands were quickly getting tired of doing all the work by themselves. She looked down toward the bottom of the pond, expecting to be just a few steps away, but all she could see beneath her was darkness.

Panic gripped her mind as she resumed her struggle, reaching toward the moon and the bright stars, but with each passing second, they grew dimmer and dimmer until her strength completely left her and she felt her body relax, surrendering to its fate.

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 47 - Tips

0 9 minutes read

“..and it’s been a mess out there, with all those uprisings! It’s a good thing His Highness here resolves all of those problems so promptly. If it wasn’t for him, this could have affected more than just the trade of the Empire, but its overall stability as well! Isn’t that right, Your Highness?”

“That’s right.” Ka.ssian nodded, forcing a smile on his face. This was all they wanted to talk about the uprisings. With their easy, boring lives, where the most exciting thing was the latest gossip, none of them could understand the actual danger of those acts of rebellion. It wasn’t even the number of deaths that have been rising, not even the losses more and more merchants incurred. War was a distant notion for them, a problem someone else had to solve so they could keep their comfortable lifestyles.

“And isn’t it...” the same noble started when a distant scream rose above the music, only to be cut off abruptly. Ka.ssian froze, his eyes darting to his companions, who looked around in confusion. Even the musicians stopped playing and were whispering among themselves.

Ka.ssiian looked around, his eyes landing on Sarea, who was frowning as she motioned for a servant to go to her. Prime Minister and his son stood beside her, but no matter how much he looked, he couldn't spot Raena anywhere. He couldn't seem to see his brother either.

Some of the quests had decided to check it out, so he followed, his stride accelerating with each next step. An unpleasant feeling formed in his stomach as he zigzagged between the excited nobles.

Another scream echoed through the garden, louder this time and not as panicked, but just as scared. He recognized it this time, he could recognize Lara's scream anywhere. In a blink of an eye, he was running, pushing his way through the people crowding the path leading to one of the ponds. As he made his way to the front of the group that had gathered, his eyes kept searching for Lara and the source of her distress. He spotted her standing on the bridge along with Yulien, who was struggling to take off his overcoat and sash while she clung to his arm.

"Your Highness, you can't just jump in! It's not safe!" Lara begged, holding onto Yulien's elbow as he finally stripped it and let it drop to the ground.

"What is going on here?" Ka.ssiian shouted, hurrying toward them. Both looked at him with surprise, which made him take a sharp breath.

"Ka.ssiian!" Yulien exclaimed, his dark eyes filled with worry. "Raena, she.." He didn't finish, his eyes drifting to the pond over the bridge.

"She what?" Ka.ssiian frowned, following his gaze. He stared at the dark waters for a second and he was just about to look back at his brother when he noticed the form floating face down in the pond.

Understanding flickered in his mind and his heart skipped a beat. "Sh!t!"

Without thinking, he stepped on the parapet and dove into the water with Lara's shout for him to be careful echoing through the garden. He swam back to the surface next to Raena's body, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her toward the shore.

He shook his head to get rid of the water in his, noticing that Yulien had left the bridge and was making his way through the grass toward him.

A few more nobles had drawn near, but they kept their distance as if afraid to interfere. Lara was standing by the bridge, her hands covering her mouth while her eyes stared at them with horror.

As the water reached his waist, Ka.ssiian picked Raena in his arms, wading through the mud until he felt a hard ground underneath his feet. He gently set her down, trying to

catch his breath as he checked if she was breathing. A cold chill ran through his body and it had nothing to do with the wind that pierced him through his wet clothes.

He glanced up at Yulien, who was biting his lip and running a hand through his hair.

“What is going on here? What were those screams about?” someone asked and Ka.ssian quickly recognized the Prime Minister’s baritone voice. He glanced back at his brother and without a word Yulien turned around, striding toward the older man that was making his way through the spectators.

Ka.ssian returned his attention back to Raena, back to her pale face and unmoving chest. He pushed the panic away, turning her to the side and reaching for the ties on the back of her dress. He tried to loosen them up, but it was difficult and painfully slow. He let out a frustrated growl, wrapping his fingers around them and ripping them off along with the delicate cloth. Her dress finally loosened around her thin frame, but even as he let her lie on her back, she didn’t move. Her chest didn’t rise.

“Come on, don’t do this to me!” he murmured under his breath, checking her pulse again, but finding it eerily quiet. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then put his hands on her chest, giving her half a dozen compressions before leaning over. He pinched her nose and opened her mouth, breathing as much air into it as he could. He returned to the compressions, ignoring Ramor’s shouting that was soon cut off by Yulien’s sharp words.

Ka.ssian lowered himself to press his mouth back to hers for the third time, his patience and calm quickly draining away when her body jerked and she started spitting water. The relief he felt almost made him fall down next to her, but he pulled himself together, turning her to the side so she could spit everything out. When she was done heaving, she continued to lie still, but this time her tiny, frail shoulders moved up and down as she took deep, wheezing breaths.

“Here. Wrap her in this.” Yulien’s voice pulled him out of his reverie and he looked up just as his brother was handing him his overcoat. Ka.ssian took it instinctively, not sure why he would need that, then he realized Raena was shivering, and her dress hung so loose around her body, the cloth around her neck was the only thing keeping it on.

He wrapped her with the jacket, picking her up in his arms and stumbling to his feet. He glanced toward the crowd that had quieted – even the Prime Minister and his son – then back toward Yulien. His brother nodded, giving him an understanding smile. “Go. Sarea and I will take care of everything.”

“Thank you,” Ka.ssian mumbled, adjusting Raena in his arms. Even with her dress soaked and her brother’s jacket on top of her, she was so light he was afraid she might

fly with the wind if he didn't hold tight enough. He strode past Lara and the other guests, keeping his eyes forward and trying to ignore the soft whispers that rose behind him.

As he left everyone behind, he looked down at the girl snuggled against his chest. Her light makeup had washed away and her long blonde hair was a complete mess, but at least the color was returning to her lips and every heaving breath she let out calmed him more and more.

"Why is it that every time there is trouble in my house, it's always you?" he murmured.

Her lids fluttered open and she stared at him with those bright blue eyes. Kassian missed a step and almost fell down, but quickly regained his balance. By the time he looked back at her, her eyes were closed and her breaths had turned even slower. She was not shivering anymore, but he didn't want her staying in those wet clothes any longer than she had to, so he quickened his pace, locking his eyes on the North Palace in the distance. He could have brought her to his place, but considering he never let any of his women there, let alone permit them to spend the night, he thought it might be better to bring her to her own home.

When the guards in front of the gates saw him, they tensed, one of them even reaching for his sword. As soon as they recognized him, they rushed to his side, showering him with questions and searching the shadows as if expecting an attack.

"Open the door and stay on your posts," Kassian said coldly, and they rushed to fulfill his command, staring after him as he strode toward the mansion.

A shadow moved in front of the house, getting up from the chair he was sitting in. It wasn't long before Kassian recognized the silver hair and eyes singularly focused on his wife. Before the silver-haired man could say or do anything, the front door opened, spilling light into the yard.

"Oh, my God!" Raena's maid gasped as she stepped outside, covering her mouth. "Your Highness? What happened? Is she...? Come inside, hurry!"

The silver-haired guy moved to intercept him, reaching out to pick up Raena, but Kassian stopped, locking his eyes on him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Kassian asked, and the other man finally looked up at him, meeting his eyes. "You dare block my way? Move!"

The servant hesitated, but then stepped aside. Kassian pushed past him, the shivers running up his spine intensifying even though he was already inside the warm foyer. A handful of servants appeared from the adjoining rooms, probably drawn by the noise, and all froze as they saw him dripping wet and glaring. Raena's maid shouted a few orders as she climbed up the stairs and the maids rushed to fulfill them while Kassian

followed her to the second floor. She led him into another room this time – bigger and a bit messier, with papers and books scattered on one of the tables.

She pushed the covers of the bed aside and stepped away so he could put Raena down. Three other maids walked into the room carrying towels, clothes, and extra blankets.

“Your Highness, please come with me,” Kara said, and he finally looked away from

“No,” he said without thinking.

“Your Highness, please!” she insisted, pointing at the door. “The maids will have to change her clothes and you need to get out of yours too. You are also drenched. We can’t have you getting sick.”

Ka.ssiian nodded with resignation, following her into the room opposite Raena’s, freshly furnished and decorated, but obviously unused by the looks of it. Two other maids were waiting by the bed, one holding a folded set of clothes while the other one fidgeted, carrying a handful of towels.

“Would you like us to draw you a hot bath?” Kara asked in a polite tone.

“There is no need,” he replied quickly. “You two, put those on the bed and leave. You stay.” He added when Raena’s maid turned to follow them.

Her shoulders stiffened, but she nodded, closing the door and striding back to him. “I don’t need your help.” He stopped her as he slipped his jacket and shirt off and let them fall into a wet pile on the ground. He reached out for the towel and wiped himself with it, enjoying its warmth and soft texture for a moment. “Have there been any more accidents here involving her?”

“No, Your Highness.”

“Any new rumors?”

“No, Your Highness.”

“Anything else I should know about?” he sighed, slipping the shirt they had prepared for him over his head. “This is not the first time she has been hurt, If there is anything I need to know about

“Are you sure this wasn’t just an accident?” she asked and Ka.ssiian froze, slowly turning to look at her. “Your Highness.” She added quickly. “It’s just that this is not the first time she almost drowned. Before your wedding, she almost drowned by falling in the pond in the Prime Minister’s mansion. My mistress can’t swim, you see.”

“So you think it was an accident?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. He pulled the shirt down, adjusting it on his back and focusing on the buttons on the front. The maid remained with her eyes on the floor.

“I dare not say, Your Highness. I’m afraid we’ll have to wait and ask my Mistress once she wakes up.” She stood quietly in her spot as if waiting for more questions. When Kaessian didn’t say anything during the time it took him to change, she shifted impatiently. “Shall I prepare this room for you, Your Highness?”

Kaessian froze with his fingers fumbling with the cufflinks on his sleeves, and hesitated. He wanted to make sure Raena was alright, but things were already unnecessarily complicated and he had to speak with Yulien before he went back. He might have seen what happened, considering how he was the first there. And Lara. She was there too.

“No need. I’m leaving” he said, heading for the door. She stepped away from his path. “I’ll send the doctor to examine her. Find out what happened tonight and report to my aide immediately.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

He stepped outside, his eyes traveling inside Raena’s room, whose door was still wide open.. He could hear the maids talking in hushed voices, confirming everything had been dried and changed and mentioning that her pulse was strong and her body was getting warmer. Kaessian glanced back at Kara, who had just raised her head.

“Stay with her tonight. She might need your care.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 48 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

“You don’t know the meaning of the word ‘rest’, do you?”

Raena raised her head from the sketch she was doing, her eyes stopping on Kara, who had just walked into the room with a tray in hand.

“What?” Raena grimaced, gathering her sketch and pushing them under the covers. “I’m in bed, not straining myself and drinking every nasty medicine you give me. What more do you want from me? It’s not like my legs fell off or my back is broken, is it? If I had it my way, I’d be in the restaurant right now.”

Kara sighed, shaking her head and leaving the tray on the nightstand. Raena gave the small cup that Kara offered her a disgusted look.

“What’s this now? I almost drowned, emphasizing on almost, why do I need to keep drinking those things when I’m clearly fine?” she asked, but drank the medicine in one go anyway. It tasted like soggy socks, soaked in milk that had expired a month ago, but

at least it somehow smelled like strawberries. Raena shuddered, giving her back the empty container and gulping down the water Kara offered her.

“It’s for your weak disposition: You could have caught a cold in that weather, and even colds can be dangerous if left untreated.”

“I haven’t,” Raena murmured.

“Are you a doctor now?” Kara asked in a biting tone. Raena rolled her eyes, slipping out of the bed and stepping toward the balcony. She opened the doors and was just about to walk out when Kara reached out from behind her, closing them in front of her nose.

“Bed. Now. Or I am not letting you go to the Empress’s ball!”

“I can’t miss that!” Raena said darkly. “This is Madam Lydia’s only chance of being introduced into high society. I feel like the Empress is going to make a move soon, so I have to use that opportunity to the fullest. That’s why I have to make as many connections as I can that will help with our future endeavors. I can’t rely solely on Raena’s name, which would soon lose importance, or the Empress, who would no doubt turn on me at the first chance.”

“Wait, make a move? As in, try to kill you?” Kara asked, her brows knitting together.

“No, I don’t think she will go as far as that yet. Not at her own banquet, at least. But she’ll probably try to discredit me somehow so that whatever I say in the future is questioned and taken with suspicion,” Raena replied distractedly, striding to her table by the window and grabbing a few more graphites for her drawings. She hesitated but picked up a few more parchments as well.

“And you’re still going?”

“It’s fine, I’ll figure it out,” Raena smiled reassuringly, then strode to the empty nightstand, leaving her items there before climbing into bed.

“What about those new endeavors?”

“Did you find the current status of all the businesses I mentioned before?” Raena asked instead, grabbing the quill she was using earlier and trying to balance it between her nose and lips. Kara stared at her like she was wondering if she had lost her marbles.

“Well?”

“I did,” her friend slowly replied, still watching her.

They are all currently struggling. A few are starting to pick up after some failed deal with Caen, though.”

“How many did we buy off?” Raena asked, her focus still on the quill. The lack of reply made her suspend her game and look at the other woman.

“About twenty-five out of thirty-one,” Kara finally answered. “By the looks of it, we won’t be getting those investments back. They are barely keeping afloat as it is. Or do you plan to do something that will change that?”

“Nope. We’re not doing anything,” Raena replied.

Kara sighed.

“I’m afraid to ask at this point, but I feel like I have to, she said in a serious tone. “Are you... alright? Are you reverting back to Raena’s... original mental state? You’re acting really strange. In just one month you’ve been attacked or got into accidents I don’t know how many times. I don’t see how you can be in such a good mood all of a sudden?”

Raena chuckled, scratching her cheek.

“Good mood? No, I was in a really bad mood until I had an epiphany of sorts. After almost dying again, I have come to a decision. I am sick and tired of being pushed around like a helpless doll, wondering which hand will tear my head off my body. I’m done!” she said, shrugging. “But it’s not like I can suddenly become invincible, so I am going to resolve all of our biggest problems. Please sit, I don’t want to shout.” Raena glanced toward the door and so did Kara, then her maid took a seat next to Raena.

“So... let’s hear it.” Kara nodded, staring at her with a tense, but curious expression.

“First, we need power. Money is power.” Raena said, raising her hand and unfolding one finger. The restaurant is earning well, but with all the investments we made in it, the brothel and the people we hired, it will take some time before we start earning a lot, and we might not have that time. The businesses I told you to buy, they will make us rich.” Raena hesitated, looking at her fingers before returning her attention back to Kara.

“Second, we need to take control of things here. I know the harem is the first wife’s responsibility, but that might soon change. Right now, everyone considers me a dumb pushover that they can get rid of at any point. We’ll show them this pushover can bite back. So, to begin with, I’d like to submit a request for your status to be changed to Head Maid. As such, you’ll have the authority to dismiss and hire staff as you see fit and control everything in the mansion. Once you do, get rid of anyone new or even slightly suspicious. At this point, I don’t think my dear husband would refuse anything I ask.” Kara opened her mouth, but Raena raised her other hand to stop her from speaking. “I know it’s a lot to ask and making you a Head Maid might make you also a target, so we’ll do it only if you agree. I’ll be making Elene my personal maid, which would justify her being with me all the time and she’ll be my decoy for when I am out of the North

Palace. I think she can handle herself better than some naive girl and I need the freedom to move at least for times like the Empress' ball. As long as she just stays in my room and doesn't leave, no one would be the wiser."

"You trust her?" Kara asked, raising an eyebrow. "To be your maid?"

"No," Raena said after a brief hesitation. "At this point, I don't trust my own shadow." Kara raised an eyebrow. "But I trust your shadow, don't worry." Raena grinned.

"Fine." Kara sighed. "Was that your epiphany?"

"No," Raena said, licking her lips. "There is more.

"Oh"

"Third" she continued, adding another finger, "I need to do something about Kassian. He is falling for me, or maybe he already has." She laughed, scratching her temple. "Which is flattering, but also very bothersome. If he is in love with me, there is no chance he'll divorce me.

And I have already played my cards with that strategy I mind. So.." she hesitated, glancing at Kara and laughing.

"I figured out how I can get him to forget about me. And since he is stubbornly not paying attention to Elene, I have another person that could seduce him."

"Who?" Kara frowned.

"Madam Lydia," Raena said sheepishly. Kara blinked a few times, then closed her eyes. "Before you say anything, think about it. Madam Lydia is already on his radar. She is mysterious, attractive, smart and can give him the things I can't. I think I might be able to pull it off." Kara sighed. "We don't need him to marry her or give her his undying love. We just need him to be interested in pursuing a relationship with her, so when I, Raena request the divorce, he wouldn't resist that much. I'm sure my brother will assist in every way possible the moment I mention I want out of this marriage. The Prime Minister might be a different story, but he will fold."

Kara let out yet another sigh, louder this time.

"I have a crazy idea," she said unexpectedly, and Raena nodded for her to continue. "I know it's risky, but things have already become too complicated and very soon, something is going to go wrong. So..." she paused, looking Raena directly in the eyes. "Why don't you just tell the truth to the third prince? Tell him you've been pretending all this time to protect yourself. Come clean about everything. It is a gamble, but I am positive that there is a bigger chance of him feeling relieved than angry. I mean, I have seen how he looks at you. The only thing stopping him from expressing his feelings is

this charade. And I don't see why he would be mad about you successfully creating a business. If anything, he might want in, seeing how he is trying to establish himself in the trading circles. Having a wife with such a successful business would only benefit him."

"We can't" Raena said darkly.

"If you're worried about me, don't. He knows I am important to you and if he executes me for deceiving him, he'll lose your favor. I'll be fine."

"We can't" Raena repeated, firmer this time.

"Why? You like him! He likes you! This might actually develop in a healthy, loving marriage. Do you know how rare that is among nobles?" Kara continued. "It's much better than tricking him yet again and increasing the chances of being caught. Because he will have a limit of how much he is willing to be made a fool of."

"I understand what you're saying, Kara," Raena said, sliding off the bed and taking a few steps away. "If it was just that, then maybe I would have considered it. But it's not possible anymore, I have already betrayed him in a way he will not forgive."

"Don't tell me you and Zen have..." Kara whispered, horror appearing on her face.

"No, no, no," Raena said quickly, raising her hands defensively. "That's not it."

"Then what?"

"You know how the Empress generously agreed to support the restaurant and use our venue for her social gatherings?" Kara nodded tensely. "Well, it wasn't out of the goodness of her heart. I promised her I'll support Rissen for the throne. And I kind of blackmailed her into supporting me or I would reveal things I know about her and her son that can get her executed for treason."

Kara stared at her with an open mouth, then let her face drop into her hands. She stood like that for a few minutes and Raena was afraid to speak or even move.

When Kara straightened again, she had her usual cold and collected expression, which she used to talk to everyone but Raena.

"So this is why you said it's better if I didn't know," she said in a neutral tone, and Raena winced. She hated it when Kara did that, it was impossible to read her. "Why? Why would you choose to support the second prince? You don't even like him and I am positive you don't think he is capable of running an Empire!"

"Because the first and third prince are going to be dead soon," Raena said with a heavy sigh. Kara's mask cracked, and her eyes widened again. She glanced toward the door

even though Raena's voice had barely been a whisper, and rushed toward it. Raena frowned as her maid yanked the door open, sticking her head out and looking around. A few seconds later, she got back in, striding back to Raena.

"I thought I heard someone," she whispered, swallowing the lump in her throat before locking her worried gaze on Raena. "How do you know that? You didn't arrange...?"

"Of course not!" Raena exclaimed, grimacing. "I would never kill anybody!" Kara continued to stare at her as if trying to find a hint that she was lying, then sighed in relief. "You've noticed I know things, right? Things that have not happened yet, but that always happen just as I say they would?"

"Yes. You keep saying the stars told you," Kara replied. "Which makes no sense, but so far you have not been wrong."

This is one of those things. Ka.ssian will be executed for treason soon and Yulien will be poisoned.

The second prince will survive." With every next word, Kara's face grew paler. "So I had no option but to bet on the horse most likely to win."

"Why not try to prevent it? You.."

"Because there is no guarantee it would work. I don't know when or how exactly it happens. And if we do try, I will no longer know what happens next," Raena said in a serious tone. "Not only that, but we'll be putting me, you and everyone we know in even more danger. These problems with Craidal, they will escalate, and my plan is to be far away from here before that happens. I know that might be selfish, heartless and disappointing, but I am not some hero who can brandish a sword and save everyone with their bravery. I don't want to die a second time or see you get hurt. So I will make sure to save the ones that are closest to me."

"Are you sure about this?" Kara asked with a serious expression. "I know I am always talking about how you'll get me killed, but this is the fate of the Empire we're talking about."

"Kara," Raena interrupted her, putting her hands on her friend's shoulders. Even though it was her plan and it was their best chance of surviving all this ordeal, she couldn't help but feel her heart clench when she thought of the scene in the book where Ka.ssian was executed.

Staring stubbornly forward, with his head raised high, he didn't beg, didn't argue, he didn't show a hint of fear as they tightened the noose around his neck.

Still, the evidence against him had been irrefutable and even the crown prince couldn't find enough to exonerate him. Trying to interfere and help would only drag her down

with him. After his fate was sealed, his entire household was punished, so she had to get divorced from him before that happened.

“Fine,” Kara finally said, her voice quieter than usual.

“But you need to tell me everything. No more secrets. I can’t have your back if I don’t know what’s going on.

“Alright.” Raena nodded, pulling her back toward the bed. “You’ll want to be sitting down for this.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 49 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

Ka.ssian tore his eyes from the lively streets of the capital, glancing at the woman in the seat across from him. The carriage was moving slower than usual to avoid disturbing Sarea with abrupt stops or bothersome rocking, so reaching the palace was taking twice as long as usual. During that whole time, she hadn’t uttered a word, just stood still, staring outside with a thoughtful expression.

After the night of his birthday party, he had barely seen her. Her Head Maid had replied to his inquiries that her mistress was recuperating, but it was probably just Sarea ignoring him. Just like now.

“Are you sure you should be attending?” He broke the long, heavy silence and she finally moved, setting her eyes on him with an uninterested expression. “Are you well enough? Your health is more...”

“Why? Would you have preferred to attend with your other wife?” she smirked, leaning her head on her hand. “Oh, wait. She is on bed rest because she got sick after almost drowning. Poor thing.” Ka.ssian frowned but kept his mouth shut.

There was no point in getting defensive about something that was true. Besides, he didn’t want to rile her up with a quarrel, not after the last time.

They couldn’t afford to reveal her condition in the Imperial Palace.

“She said she fell, right?” Sarea suddenly asked and Ka.ssian focused his eyes on her. He nodded.

“She is lying. The guards found traces of a second person on the bridge and Yulien said he noticed a shadow running away when he went to check out who screamed.”

“Why would she lie?” Ka.ssian frowned. “She almost died! Perhaps she knew who pushed her and she is afraid to reveal their identity?”

"Maybe." Sarea shrugged. "Or maybe she is an idiot and really thought she tripped on her own feet."

"Sarea." Ka.ssian sighed.

"Haaa, you're so stiff sometimes!" she snorted, shaking her head and turning to stare out the window again. "The thing is, all the information we get from that place is second-hand. The people I placed there are not close enough to her to find anything useful. The only people she directly communicates with are her maid, Kara, and those three slaves she bought. She is polite and sweet with everyone, but never has a real conversation with any of them. I can't believe you haven't turned at least one of them to your side. Especially the maid that girl seems to be in the center of everything, especially now that she is Head Maid. She controls Raena, the servants, the decisions of the household, and who knows what else. If you want to know what is happening around Raena, you need to have Kara eating from the palm of your hand. And if she refuses, you need to replace her."

"Don't you think I know that?" Raena is too fond of the maid! If I remove her, who knows what kind of tantrum she might throw!" Ka.ssian sighed, leaning back in his seat. From the corner of his eyes, he noticed Sarea smirking, but he ignored her.

"You don't want to make her mad, do you?" She chuckled. "You..."

"Sarea, stop with the teasing already." Ka.ssian sighed and both went silent for a while, each of them busy with their own thoughts. "Have you ever been in love with someone?"

"Yes. With a younger and prettier version of you when I was just as young and stupid." She scoffed.

"Don't worry, I'm good now. I wish you two all the happiness." Ka.ssian opened his mouth to retort when the carriage stopped and the door opened. Sarea looked at him expectantly and he quickly stepped outside, offering her his hand. His eyes drifted to the second carriage that had stopped just before them. The vehicle didn't bear a family crest and the man that stepped out of it wasn't a face Ka.ssian recognized. His dark hair was diligently combed backward and his attire was new, although not particularly expensive-looking, and he looked uncomfortable in it. The fact that his carriage passed meant that he had to be a noble with an invitation, otherwise he would have never reached this far.

The unfamiliar noble offered his hand to someone inside, helping them climb out of the carriage. Sarea let go of his fingers and he instinctively looked at her as she sleeked her skirts and adjusted the top of her dress. She noticed him staring, but she ignored him, her eyes moving to something behind him.

“Oh, my! How bold,” she murmured, raising an eyebrow. He followed her gaze back to the couple he had been watching earlier, only to find them talking to each other quietly while waiting for the palace attendant to check their invitations. The woman was standing with her back to them while the man faced Ka.ssian, chuckling at something she said. There was something familiar about her, but Ka.ssian couldn't quite put his finger on it. Her blonde hair was lifted in a complicated hairdo on the back of her head and her dress was pitch black, covered with hundreds of shiny stones that made her shimmer as the light from the Palace's open doors reflected on them. Her pale back was fully exposed, with just a thin piece of sparkling thread connecting the straps on her shoulders.

The palace attendant stepped in front of them, greeting them with a bow, then turned to escort them to the party. As if sensing their gazes, the blonde woman looked aside, her eyes locking on them. A black veil hung in front of her face, covering everything but her sparkling blue eyes.

“A veil?” Sarea murmured in a disapproving tone. “Why didn't the attendant ask her to take it off? No one is allowed to enter the Imperial Palace without revealing their face and proving their identity.”

“She probably has permission from the Empress,” Ka.ssian replied automatically, just as the blonde woman and her escort disappeared through the front gates of the Imperial Palace.

“Permission from the Empress?” Sarea frowned. “Do you know her?”

“Welcome, Your Highnesses.” A voice interrupted them and the two turned to look at another palace attendant waiting for them at the base of the steps. He was wearing the official servant attire, which they took out only on grand occasions – black pants and a red jacket with a high collar matching a pair of thin summer gloves.

Gilded buttons and fancy needlework adorned the hem of the jacket while the crest of the imperial family stood proudly on the left side of his chest. It had been a while since they had brought those uniforms out – usually, they wore their regular black ones except for the Emperor's birthday and the anniversary of the Empire's founding.

Ka.ssian felt Sarea squeeze his arm, and he quickly stepped after the attendant, focusing on the present. He had to stay sharp and keep an eye open, who knew what else that viper had prepared for tonight?

They walked in silence the whole way, the only sound coming from Ka.ssian's steps and the rustling of Sarea's dress. When they reached the hall where the function was to be held, the attendant whispered their names to the Royal Master of Ceremonies – an old

gray-haired man with a wrinkled face and sharp nose who had occupied the position even from before Ka.ssian's birth.

Ka.ssian waited as the Master of Ceremonies hit the small gong hanging by the door and announced their names in a loud, clear voice that reverberated through the enormous hall. Sarea took Ka.ssian's hand and the two of them descended the small staircase that led them inside the ballroom.

Only direct descendants of the Emperor and his close blood relatives could enter through that door and only they were announced, so as they moved to join the festivities, everyone turned to give them their greetings.

Ka.ssian tried hard to keep the conversations short and this time, so did Sarea. When everybody's attention finally turned to the second prince's arrival, the two took refuge by one of the walls, letting out a sigh at the same time.

"So," Sarea said, taking a sip out of the tall, champagne glass she had grabbed from one of the passing servants. "This veiled woman -is she the rumored Madam Lydia from that new restaurant that opened recently on Ruby Street?"

"You know about it?" Ka.ssian asked in surprise.

"Come on, Ka.ssian, I am not dead yet." Sarea said. "All of my maids were talking about it once it opened. I heard they don't deliver or cook outside their restaurant." Ka.ssian nodded, remembering what Yulien had told him. "Interesting. I guess the special treatment goes both ways.

"Meaning?" Ka.ssian frowned.

"The food tonight is supposed to be prepared by Madam Lydia's cooks," Sarea replied, looking around – probably in search of the so-called food. "Have you tried it? Is it good?"

"Yes," he replied, his eyes catching a glimpse of Blaine who was just making his way toward them. He was wearing his house colors, black and green, and he had removed his glasses – probably hidden in the inner pocket of his jacket in case of reading emergencies. While he smiled at the other nobles that greeted him, his eyes looked weary and he kept stepping impatiently from one leg to the other every time somebody tried to start a conversation.

When he finally reached Ka.ssian, he bowed his head in respect, greeting both him and Sarea as usual.

"Your Highness, may I steal you for a minute?" Blaine asked and Sarea scoffed, finishing her glass in one go.

"I'll go find my father then," she said, giving them a forced smile before walking away.

Ka.ssian turned back to his aide, raising an eyebrow expectantly.

"I found it" Blaine said, his shoulders stiffening. Ka.ssian frowned and was just about ask what he was referring to when his aide spoke again. "The owner of Her Highness's Secret Palace. I found the name."

Ka.ssian's eyes widened with excitement and he gave him a sign to continue, wondering why he was taking so long to say it.

"The legal owner of the place is your wife, Her Highness Raena." Ka.ssian stared at him with bewilderment, wondering if he had heard him correctly. When Blaine didn't laugh or correct himself, Ka.ssian swallowed his confusion, shutting off a million questions that buzzed around in his head.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I triple-checked and had the clerks in the legal office check as well. She bought the land and the building with her own money, signing the deed herself. All documents are in order," he said in a single breath. "On the other hand, apart from a slip about being hired as a manager, I could not find any paper trail for Madam Lydia. It's like she came into the capital shortly before the restaurant opened and is staying in the restaurant itself. I had people ask around but nobody knows where she lives, if she has any family in the capital or if she has any friends apart from the owner of that brothel. I have a suspicion that Lydia is not her real name."

"She's here tonight," Ka.ssian said, looking around the ballroom. His eyes finally found her on the dance floor with the same man she had arrived with earlier. Despite having other couples on the dance floor, he could tell the crowd was observing them – some with disapproval, some with envy.

Some with greedy, hungry eyes. "What do you know of Count Marden Robick? Is he a supporter of the second prince?"

"No. He is neutral," Blaine said quickly. "He is not on particularly good terms with any nobles. Due to his parentage, most nobles don't want to associate with him. And thanks to his hate for his father, he hates the nobles just as much. Or so I've heard."

"His parentage? Meaning his mother?" Ka.ssian asked without looking away from the swirling couple.

"Yes. His mother was a prostitute in a brothel,"

Blaine replied. "The young count even lived in the brothel until he was old enough to work. He only moved into the count's mansion after his father's death."

'Hating nobles, huh?' Ka.ssian thought tiredly.

"Why can't anything be easy for a change?"

If he hated nobles, then the chances of him speaking to them and revealing information – like the identity of Madam Lydia – was slim. This also meant that woman probably wasn't a noble herself.

"Blaine," Ka.ssian said, turning toward his aide, who had joined him in staring at the dancing couples. "Can you arrange for a meeting with Madam Lydia tonight? A private one."

"I'll do my best, Your Highness."

After being left alone, Ka.ssian turned his attention back to the dance floor. His eyes searched for Madam Lydia, but he quickly realized she no longer there. He found her surrounded by a group of nobles, with Count Robick standing very close to her, his hand resting on her waist. The group talked excitedly for a while, growing in numbers by the minute until they parted to let somebody in. Ka.ssian frowned as he watched Rissen extend his hand toward Madam Lydia. She hesitated for a second, but then accepted it and followed him to the dance floor. They seemed to talk the whole time they danced, but even if Ka.ssian moved closer, there was no way he could hear them over the music.

As the song ended, Ka.ssian watched them bow to each other before each returned to their group.

She received another few invitations to dance, but declined them all since she didn't return to the dance floor again.

Impatience rose in Ka.ssian's chest and he looked around for Blaine, wondering what he was planning to do. When he couldn't find him, he switched his attention to Madam Lydia just as she was talking to a servant and taking something from the tray he was holding. Ka.ssian squinted his eyes and realized she was opening a folded piece of paper. She said something to the servant, who quickly walked away, then she raised the paper to her veil, her eyes searching the room.

When they stopped on him, Ka.ssian tensed.

She stared openly at Ka.ssian, then inclined her head as if in agreement. She said a few words to her escort before walking away by herself.

Ka.ssian looked around for Blaine again and finally spotted him just as he was making his way to where he stood. He looked around before speaking.

“She told the servant she will be there in the next half an hour,” Blaine reported in a low voice. “I suggest not to linger long. Who knows who might be listening.”

“Thank you.” Ka.sasian nodded. “I’m going now. Look after Sarea for me.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 50 - Tips

09 minutes read

Raena took a deep breath and let it out, trying to calm herself. The garden stood quiet and lonely and it reminded her of that night, so she made sure to take only the paths that kept her close to the castle and avoid water, no matter how shallow. To make things worse, she couldn’t get rid of the sense of alarm after that bizarre conversation with Rissen. The very fact that he was all smiles and his words were sweet and endearing as he asked her about the restaurant... it bothered her more than the thought of drowning.

She didn’t like how he held her when they danced, either – too close and too familiar, almost as if they were more than distant acquaintances. Or so people would have thought while watching them. She doubted he, suddenly developed a pleasant personality, so he had to be up to something. Were they trying to make her look like an easy woman? That had no relation to her successful business, so it was of little help to them.

Maybe they found Madam Lydia’s true identity and planned to somehow unmask her? But if the Empress did it herself – or Rissen in her stead – Raena could just spill the beans before her credibility was ruined. So if that was their plan, the Empress wouldn’t go for her openly. She’d have someone else do it.

Still, if that wasn’t her plan, then what was it? Not Knowing made her nervous. She had told Kara she’d figure it out, but that was mostly so that her friend wouldn’t worry. She actually hoped not to meet with the Empress at all tonight.

A soft blow of the evening wind made her shudder, and she pushed away one of the curled strands of hair that was falling in front of her face. Ka.sasian had seen her leave the hall – what was taking him so long?

She wished she had taken Marden with her. Despite everything, having someone to watch her back felt oddly reassuring. Yet she couldn’t. If she did, Ka.sasian would never talk to her openly. She needed to test the waters and see if there was any chance of her stirring his affections. She also needed to find out what made him request a private meeting. Had he found something about her already? She had been very careful, but there was no guarantee no one would talk when a sufficient amount of money was involved.

She heard steps behind her and forced herself to turn slowly. He paused when he realized he had been spotted, raising his hand and pushing away the low branch that blocked his path.

He was wearing a dark blue, almost black set of pants and tunic that fit him perfectly, accentuating all his finest attributes. He looked even taller somehow, and much more dignified, with the Imperial sash showing his rank hanging across his chest. His jaw was firmly clenched as if he was holding back from speaking while the turmoil in his mind, which was now showing on his face, ended.

He stopped a few steps away as if not to scare her, and continued to stare. Raena decided to take the first step and curtsied, raising her head slightly to see his reaction.

“Good evening, Your Highness,” she said, trying to sound as confident as Madam Lydia should be. “You’re as handsome as ever. I was extremely happy to hear you want to meet with me. Privately.” He seemed to notice her stress on the last word because his eyes narrowed.

He took a couple of steps closer and Raena had to admit that she felt intimidated as he stared at her with half a frown. She hadn’t seen him smile or look happy even as he met her as Raena, but being looked at with cold calculation was definitely not pleasant. She decided not to push her luck so early in the game. “What does His Highness need from me?”

“I would like to know what’s your connection to my wife,” he replied after a short pause, eyes still locked on hers. He was close enough to rip the veil off her face. If he had done that, it would have all been over. With her identity exposed, she’d have no choice but to tell him the truth – or at least the parts he might believe – and face the consequences, whatever they might be. For a moment, that didn’t sound that bad at all.

Still, he didn’t move, nor did he try to approach her. He had lowered his voice too, which made her realize he only came this close to make it hard for anyone else to hear.

“You mean Lady Raena?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. So this was what he wanted to talk about. It was a matter of time before they found that, but it was still a few weeks sooner than she thought. Blaine had to be one hell of a hard worker. “I guess the cat is out of the bag if you are asking me that. She is my employer as you probably already know.”

“Is she really?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“She is. I bet you were really surprised.”

“How long have you known each other?” he asked again, eyes flashing with contained excitement. He really was extremely bad at hiding his emotions, so bad that it was refreshing. She remembered his face the first time he came to the North Palace – the wide eyes and slightly parted lips, the way his Adam’s apple bulged as he swallowed with effort and licked his lips before speaking. She wasn’t sure he was even aware of how expressive his face was. “Did you approach her, or did she approach you?”

“Why are you asking me this, Your Highness?” Raena countered. “Why not ask your wife? I am but a humble servant.”

“Answer!” he barked sharply and Raena let out an exasperated sigh, raising her hand to push away a strand of hair that the evening wind had blown in front of her face again. Once she tugged it behind her ear, she returned her attention to the prince.

“We’ve only met recently through a mutual acquaintance. Soon after, she asked me to look after her restaurant and handle its affairs,” Raena replied with the well-practiced explanation she had prepared. “Which I am doing quite well, don’t you think?”

“How did she come up with the idea?” Kaessian asked, ignoring her attempt to change the subject.

“Do you really think your wife could actually come up with a business idea?” Raena raised an eyebrow. “I happened to cook for her one of my special dishes and she liked it so much she said I should cook for everyone.

So I suggested we do that. Her maid seemed to understand the concept and explained it to her with words she could understand. A few days later, they showed up again with the deed of the building and proposition for the restaurant.”

“So what you’re saying is that you took advantage of a naive girl to realize your own goals?” Kaessian frowned, crossing his arms. The muscles under his shirt bugged, stretching the fabric to the brim. Raena stared at them in appreciation, then looked back at his face.

“Not at all,” she said, throwing her hands in the air. “Does it matter who came up with the idea if it was successful? Besides, Lady Raena is the sole proprietor of the restaurant and the biggest part of its earnings go to her. I get but a meager sum to get by in return for renovating the place, teaching the cooks, hiring the staff, and turning the place into a success. If anything, your wife is the one taking advantage of me. I haven’t even seen her face since we opened. A certain handsome someone keeps grounding her so she can’t leave. Are you the jealous type, Your Highness?”

“That is none of your business,” Kaessian replied with a hint of annoyance.

“Ask. Has anyone ever told you, Your Highness, that when you’re dealing with the fairer sex, honey works better than a stick? Unless the lady is into that, but that’s another

conversation.” Ka.ssian stared at her with a stunned expression before relaxing his face and letting out a sigh. He glanced down for a moment, letting his hands fall by his sides, which made him look slightly less threatening.

“I apologize if I came off as rude or threatening,” he said with a much milder tone and even mustered a small smile. Raena almost laughed as she watched him- that stupid man really didn’t know what a powerful weapon his face was. “I just wanted to make sure she was not taken advantage of by someone dangerous. You’re not someone dangerous, are you, Madam Lydia?”

“I am but a feeble woman who likes to wear pretty things and cook!” she chuckled, spreading her arms as if to show just how defenseless she was. She felt one of her straps slide off her shoulder and she was just about to adjust it in place when she noticed Ka.ssian’s eyes dart toward her n.aked shoulder.

“Where are you from, Lydia? Is it alright if I call you Lydia?” he asked suddenly and Raena raised an eyebrow, surprised by his sudden forwardness. His voice sounded deeper and not at all cold this time; even his smile seemed to have turned more confident and genuine. It was almost like he was... fl!rting.

“Sure,” she replied, wondering if she was the one being played with right now. “I’m from the capital – born here, spent my life here. An orphan with no parents or relatives that I know of.”

“How convenient,” he mumbled, barely loud enough for her to hear.

“I bet a lot of orphan children out there would disagree with you,” she retorted, allowing her voice to turn bitter.

“That’s not what I meant.” He laughed awkwardly. “!

“Shall we walk?” she interrupted, touching his arm.

He stared down at her fingers with surprise, then turned around abruptly as a burst of laughter revealed the appearance of a giggling couple. The man pulled his partner lose, then locked her between his body and one of the trees by the path, saying something in her ear which made her giggle. Ka.ssian turned to Raena and nodded.

For a few minutes, none of them said a word, both staring forward as they walked slowly.

“May I ask you a question as well, Your Highness?” Raena finally broke the silence.

“You may.”

“Why do you care what your wife is doing in her free time?” Raena asked, watching him from the corner of her eyes. “The business is legal, she is not in danger or slandering your name or the Imperial honor. I mean, a woman can have a hobby.”

“Are you really going to pretend like you don’t know?” he asked, turning his head to look at her. Raena gave herself a confused expression as she met his eyes.

“Is it by any chance because you love your sweet, pretty wife?” she asked playfully, but when he didn’t reply at once, something in her chest fluttered. Raena hushed down the feeling, focusing on his face instead. This was her chance to poke hard into his guilt.

“You are aware of her condition, right? A girl like her can never give you what you want. And if you decide to take it yourself, who knows what that would do to her fragile mind.”

His jaw tightened, and he looked away from her, toward the empty garden path that zigzagged between trees and flower bushes, ponds, and long stretches of perfectly cut grass that glistened with dew. They had walked a lot further than she realized, almost ending up close to where she had initially started after leaving the ballroom.

“I have one more question,” he said, his tone sounding tense again. Raena turned her head to look at him, but he was still staring ahead. “What is your relationship with the second prince?” Raena licked her lips, pondering over the right words.

“The second prince and ..”

“Your Highness! Madam Lydia! Here you are!” Raena turned, her eyes stopping on the palace attendant that had brought her the note earlier. He bowed down, his chest rising and falling as if he had been running for a while. When he straightened up, he cleared his throat before speaking again.

“Please follow me. Their Majesties will receive your greetings now.” Raena felt her stomach twist, but nodded to the servant, then turned toward Kaasian.

“It was a pleasure speaking to you, Your Highness. Let’s do it again sometime,” she said as sweetly as she could before turning back toward the attendant. “I’m ready, let’s go.”

“My apologies, Madam Lydia,” the attendant said, looking between the two. “I was actually talking to the both of you. Their Majesties will see you together.”