

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 51 - Tips

0 9 minutes read

"This subject greets His Imperial Majesty. This subject greets Her Imperial Majesty, and wishes her a happy birthday. May you both live long and rule wisely our great Empire!" Raena said as calmly as she could after Ka.ssian spoke his greetings first.

For a moment, there was no reply, then the Emperor's laugh made her relax a little.

"What a well-spoken girl!" he said in a weak, hoarse voice that sounded like it belonged to a person smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. "Rise, both of you."

Raena got to her feet, politely avoiding his eyes. The Emperor and Empress sat on a platform in two beautifully crafted chairs with gilded backs and armrests featuring the Empire's colors – black, red, and golden. The Emperor's seat was slightly larger, but in his case, it only served to show how much smaller he was next to the Empress. While Ta.ssia looked robust and healthy, he was almost only skin and bones, with a taut, angular face that had a grayish tint. His hair was still dark brown, but gray had taken over his temples and his short, well-groomed beard, while his eyes sunk into his skull like he was slowly imploding.

Yulien perched by the Emperor's side dressed in black, with his golden sash making him stand out even more. His hair was combed back and tied low with a ribbon, revealing his handsome face fully. He smiled at Raena as their eyes met, and she hurriedly looked away. Rissen was standing by his mother's chair with hands playing with his red sash, his chin raised almost arrogantly while a pleased smile danced on his lips. The Empress was as stunning as ever, her skin positively glowing in her flattering red dress. A beautifully inlaid tail rested on her head, even though the Emperor himself didn't wear a crown.

"Ka.ssian, I haven't seen you around lately. Is your new wife keeping you that busy?" the Emperor asked with a cold smile. Ka.ssian returned the look, his back visibly tensing. Raena watched their awkward interaction with the corner of her eyes, trying to remember why they weren't on the best of terms. She was pretty sure it had something to do with Ka.ssian's mother, but the details were escaping her.

"In more ways than one. Thank you for your interest, Your Majesty" Ka.ssian finally said in a perfectly polite tone. "How is your health?"

"I'm still alive, aren't I?" the Emperor snorted with a hint of bitterness in his voice. His eyes shifted to Raena, and she gingerly looked down to avoid his gaze. She couldn't allow a mistake right now, not in front of the entire Imperial family. She had given her greetings, she just had to get out of there as soon as possible. Her goal was to make connections with the nobles who could be of use to her. She didn't need to put herself in such dangerous situations. Especially when they were all gathered, and their fake

courtesy was making her skin itch. "Bring your second wife next time. I would like to see what kind of woman can keep you that busy."

"As you wish, Your Majesty" Kassian replied with resignation and Raena felt those piercing eyes on her again. She waited impatiently for the Emperor to say something- to dismiss her already but the silence dragged and dragged while the music and the laughter of the quests carried in the background.

"So this is the woman everyone has been talking about these days," the Emperor spoke.

"Raise your eyes, child." Raena did as she was told, staring back at him. There was curiosity in the way he studied her, mixed with something else that made her uneasy. "What was your name again?"

"Please call me Lydia, Your Majesty" she replied quietly.

"Your Majesty, this is the woman I was telling you about. Her cooks are the ones that prepared the delicious food for tonight," the Empress spoke in a sweet voice, turning her body toward the Emperor's chair. "She is a genius when it comes to food. We met for the first time today face to face, but she was kind enough to fulfill all of my wishes for the evening. I would like to reward her, if you would allow it."

"Very well." He nodded, leaning back in his seat. "What would you like to reward her?"

"I would want to give her the title of Special Chef and have her and her crew prepare the food for all of our future celebrations." The Empress smiled, showing her brilliantly white teeth. "If His Majesty does not oppose it."

"Is she that good?" the Emperor asked, raising an eyebrow. Raena's eyes kept switching between the two as she wondered what was going on. The Empress was actually praising her and nothing she had said so far put her as Madam Lydia in a bad light. Was it possible that Raena was overthinking everything and the Empress was actually abiding by their agreement?

"Yes, she is." The Empress nodded, motioning with her hand. One of the attendants rushed to her side with a tray in hand. The attendant fell on one knee in front of the Imperial couple, raising the hand that held the tray. Raena locked her eyes on the food on it- this one had finger food appetizers with different assortments of meat, vegetables, and fish on them, some adorned with sauces and some with sesame or other seeds. She knew that those were delicious, but if the Emperor was allergic to even one of those things, he could die and she could be blamed for his death and executed for treason. Was that the Empress's plan?

The Emperor raised his hand and a short, plump man stepped forward, taking one of the bites and eating it. He took another, different kind, and also ate it. He waited, looking down at the tray, before nodding at the Emperor. The Emperor rolled the sleeves of his robe and picked up one of the appetizers.

Raena stared at him with her stomach tied in a knot, her eyes darting between the rest of his family, who silently watched. As the Emperor chewed loudly on the food, his eyes didn't bulge and his face didn't start swelling, so Raena let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"Very good," the Emperor said even though his expression barely changed. "I approve of your decision. You shall receive the title of a Special Chef, Lydia," he said, turning to Raena.

"You honor me, Your Majesty!" she bowed her head, her anxiety lingering.

He dusted his hands from the crumbs and adjusted in his seat.

"I am curious, though. Why are you hiding your face?"

Raena swallowed. What answer could she give that could justify hiding her face in front of the Emperor? If she said she was ugly or disfigured and her face was uncovered, she would have lied to the Emperor and could be severely punished. If she said she didn't want her identity known, that would make her look suspicious. Saying it was a fashion statement was going to sound disrespectful. She hadn't expected to meet with the actual Emperor today, barely any of the nobles got to meet him personally even on the grandest of occasions.

"Madam Lydia is just the secretive type, Your Majesty." The Empress laughed. "I've heard she never takes off her veil, so out of respect for the great job she has done, I allowed her to wear it. I'm sure she has a good reason to keep her identity a secret"

The Emperor's face changed in an instant, his previous smile and amused look vanishing. Raena got startled by the sudden shift, so she glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed it. The first prince had pursed his lips together, looking down in exasperation. The third prince shot her a warning glance, as if trying to tell her something.

Finally, she looked back at the Empress and her son, both of whom were staring at her with smiles which, for a normal person, would have passed for friendly. Yet they made Raena's blood boil.

"Secrets can be deadly" the Emperor finally said, narrowing his eyes. "Are you a loyal subject to the Empire, girl?" he continued, his tone almost threatening.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Raena replied at once, lowering her eyes obediently.

“Then take off your veil.”

So that was what that viper was after. She acted all sweet and in favor of Madam Lydia, praising her and even awarding her a special title, and pushing the Emperor’s buttons to have him ask her to reveal her face. No wonder she stressed so much about her identity being a secret.

“Why are you hesitating?” the Emperor asked, his frown deepening. “Do you have something to hide from the Emperor himself?”

“Of course not!” Raena said quickly, licking his lips. “My apologies for my tardiness.”

She raised her hands to her head, searching for the ties of her veil hidden in her hairdo. Her eyes flashed to the Empress, then to the crown prince, and finally to Kaessian.

This was not how it was supposed to go. This was the worst possible way to reveal her identity not only was it suspicious, considering that everybody knew about Raena’s condition, but by doing it in public, she’d humiliate Kaessian, showing everybody that he had been fooled by his own wife.

There was no way he would be able to hide his surprise. There was also the option of being accused of working with him in secret to gain access to the Emperor through the food she’d prepare in the future and harm him. No doubt the Empress could twist her words in every way she wanted.

Raena found the strands and unfastened them, taking a deep breath.

She was just about to let the veil fall when a loud, terrifying scream echoed through the hall, followed by panicked voices and whispers. The guards on duty around the Emperor and Empress reacted immediately, moving in formation around them and placing themselves between Raena, Kaessian, and the throne. Raena stepped back, holding the veil against her face, and turned to face the hall.

“What is going on?” the Emperor’s voice shouted from behind the wall of tall, muscled bodies in full armor. “What was that scream?”

Raena glanced at Kaessian, who was just taking a step toward where everyone had gathered when a familiar face separated from the crowd, flustered and pale and with tilted glasses which he fixed in a hurry. Blaine hesitated whether he should bow or speak, and at the end did both.

“Please forgive my intrusion!” he said, rising quickly and locking his eyes on Kaessian. “Please come with me, Your Highness. Your wife has collapsed, and she isn’t breathing.”

Kassian's face lost its color in an instant and he cursed under his breath, bolting in the direction Blaine had come from. Blaine followed after him.

Raena glanced at the wall of soldiers that was still blocking her from the Emperor's sight and decided this was her only chance of slipping out.

Still holding the veil to her face, she mixed with the crowd. Her eyes darted to where Kassian was kneeling next to a body, then Raena turned her back on them and went to find Marden. He was standing where she left him, nursing a glass of wine while craning his neck in mild curiosity, trying to see what was going on.

He didn't even notice her until she grabbed his arm and pulled him toward one of the hall's exits.

He tried to snatch his hand back, but then recognized her and quickened his pace to match hers, glancing nervously over his shoulder.

"Why are we running? What did you do?" he hissed just loud enough for her to hear.

"Nothing! But if we stay, my identity might be compromised and that is not something I can currently afford," she replied, pressing the veil harder against her face. It was hard to breathe, especially with the speed they were moving, but anyone could see her face if she let the stupid veil fall. Even showing it to Marden was too big of a risk, considering his hate for nobles. The last thing she needed was him turning on her. "Can we leave?"

"Oh, yes! I hate this place!" He nodded, his expression turning serious.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, slowing down just enough so they wouldn't look suspicious. Nobody tried to stop them as they exited the palace or climbed into their carriage, and once they put that place behind them, Raena let out a loud sigh of relief. Marden glanced at her while she adjusted the veil on her face.

"Are you alright? Did anyone do something to you?" he asked with a frown, his eyes looking her up and down as if searching for traces of a fight. "I've never seen you this shaken up."

"I'm fine," Raena mumbled, glancing impatiently out of the window. Marden didn't press, but instead, he started talking about the nobles he was forced to converse with while cursing and making disgusted faces. Surprisingly, his nonsense banter helped her calm down. By the time they reached the rendezvous point where another carriage was waiting, Raena's racing heart settled and her head cleared.

"I'll see you soon," she said, waving at him as she stepped out of the carriage. She felt Marden's eyes on her back, but she strode to the other carriage without turning. The door opened even before she touched the handle, and Zen stared at her for a second before helping her in. Raena dropped into the empty seat, yanking her veil off.

“We need to go back quickly. The third prince’s residence is going to fall in turmoil and we shouldn’t be caught sneaking in,” she said. Zen stared at her with a frown, but then nodded and banged on the wooden panel behind him three times, signaling for the driver to get moving.

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 52 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

Ta.ssa growled in annoyance as she barged inside her bedroom, ignoring the bowing servants who quickly stepped out of her way. She snatched the tiara off her head and threw it at the wall, but felt no relief as she watched the priceless stones scatter while the beautiful golden ornament clanked pitifully on the floor.

She took a deep, calming breath, trying to rein in her anger. She had been so close. So damn close! A few more seconds and that damn b.rat would have lost her credibility, and with it – all chances of sneaking into the good graces of her husband in case she got scared of her own allies.

Was she born under a lucky star or something?

What was with that perfect timing?

“Your Majesty.” Miriam’s voice came from the door and Ta.ssa turned, locking her eyes on the short, dark-haired woman. She had sent Miriam to find out what had happened with Madam Lydia after she disappeared in the commotion, wondering if she had the balls to stay in the ballroom or if she would flee like the little coward she was. Ta.ssa still couldn’t swallow the humiliation of having that pathetic little girl threaten her in her own house.

“Everybody out!” Ta.ssa snapped, and the servants moved as one, stepping into a line and exiting the room. When the last one closed the door, Miriam raised her head and looked at her. “So?”

“She left the Imperial Palace with her escort, Count Marden Robick, right after the third prince’s wife collapsed. This is the man I mentioned before the one that owns the brothel next to the restaurant,” she paused, checking for a reaction, and when Ta.ssa said nothing, she continued. “I sent guards to follow them, but they’re yet to return. I also enquired about princess Sarea’s condition – apparently, they managed to resuscitate her so she isn’t dead yet. They moved her into a quest room here in the Imperial Palace and she will stay the night under heavy guard so the Imperial doctor could monitor her condition. The third prince left for his residence – a servant overheard him telling his aide to stay here and keep an eye on Sarea while he goes back and checks on his second wife”

“Idiot” she sighed, shaking her head.

“She doesn’t have much time left. At this point, they’ll just try to keep her comfortable,” Miriam said readily. “The symptoms are lack of appetite, loss of hair and brittle nails and teeth as well as coughing out blood, “

“It was about time!” the Empress sighed, rubbing her forehead. “When she dies and we get rid of the other one, Ka.ssian would be in an extremely unfavorable position. Without Sarea’s father and the Prime Minister’s support and with the mistrust and resentment the Emperor is treating him, he will be easy to deal with, because nobody would dare stand beside him – war hero or no war hero. Once we get him out of the way, Yulien will be next”

A knock came on the door and the two women turned. Ta.ssia nodded, and Miriam rushed to open it, letting Rissen in. He stomped past Miriam, glaring at his mother.

“Why didn’t you send someone after her? She was literally holding her veil to her face!” he snarled in frustration, stopping in front of Ta.ssia. “One second, that’s all it was going to take! One second and she’d be exposed in front of all nobles. It was going to be such a big scandal, she would have become a pariah in an instant! And that idiot Ka.ssian would have been humiliated as a bonus.”

“We can’t show any hostility toward her yet,” Ta.ssia said, trying to hold back her sigh. She loved Rissen with all her heart, but sometimes she really regretted going through eighteen hours of labor for him. Why did he have to inherit his father’s impatience and short-sightedness? “We need to appear to be supporting her, that we were completely fooled by her lies and deceit. If we show hostility and she slanders us, people would start questioning if there is some reason for her actions. But if we had been nothing but good to her, they would see her act as a desperate way to try and drag her benefactors down. Don’t worry too much, son, it seems we won’t have to wait long until we get rid of her.”

“You’ve said that before!” Rissen grumbled.

“Ka.ssian’s first wife will be dead soon. We will use this opportunity to kill a few birds with one stone. No more accidents. We take her out and her accomplices. From the information we received from one of our friends, her closest people are the brothel owner and her personal maid.” Ta.ssia looked at Miriam and her lady-in-waiting nodded.

“I had the count followed, and I have prepared a report on his usual routine. “I’ll bring you both a copy tomorrow,” Miriam said. “As for the maid, I believe she should be taken care of tonight.”

“So after Raena and her degenerate friend are dead, we are in the clear?” Rissen asked, raising eyebrow. “Are you sure she doesn’t have letters prepared to be sent in case of her death? She does seem like the vindictive type.”

"I have accounted for that." Ta.ssia smiled. "Even if she does have such letters prepared, they will soon become useless. We won't be the ones taking the fall for it." She stepped toward her son, reaching out and caressing his cheek. "You know the saying 'Like mother, like son'? Well, in Ka.sasian's case, that is not a good thing."

"Your Highness?" The we*t nurse gasped in surprise. She glanced over her shoulder to the room behind her, then opened the door wider. Yulien glanced at his guards and they nodded, moving to the two opposite sides of the corridor and going to check for anyone that shouldn't be there.

The door closed with a soft click and the we*t nurse strode to the opposite side of the room, where a solid rocking chair was tilting back and forth in a slow, steady rhythm. A soft humming was coming from the chair and in a few seconds, Yulien recognized the voice.

He stopped by the empty crib, turning his head to look at the person in the chair. His first wife stared at him with a raised eyebrow, her hands gently cradling the small child that was sleeping in embrace. The boy's face was calm and serene and he was sucking on his finger, his nose wheezing softly. Yulien just stared at them, the edges of his lips curving upward. Arina sighed, then turned her head toward the we*t nurse, nodding.

The older woman stepped toward her, gently taking the child and carrying it to its crib.

Arina rose to her feet, closing her night robe and tying it before nodding for Yulien to follow her.

He glanced back at the crib where the we*t nurse was just covering the sleeping child with a thin blanket, then followed his wife to the opposite side of the room. She stopped by a couch that held a handful of stuffed animals but didn't sit down.

"To what do I owe this unexpected visit?" she asked in a low voice, crossing her arms. He had forgotten how tiny she was. She had lost most of the baby weight, but her cheeks were still round and rosy, which actually suited her better. Her eyes looked tired and her shoulders heavy. Her hair was so out of order that he wasn't sure her maid even tried to brush it. She seemed so refreshingly different from the perfect woman he married ten years ago. She must have noticed his distraction, because a smirk appeared on her face. "Is His Highness missing me?"

"Of course." Yulien smiled back. "You haven't shared my bed since before the baby was born. A year and a half is a lot of time to ignore your husband."

"We both know you have plenty of people to keep the loneliness at bay."

"Yes, but only one of you."

“Enough with the jesting, I am tired,” she sighed. “Just tell me why you really are here. Elian has been sick for the past four days and I have barely slept. He keeps asking for me and refuses everyone else. I have no patience for your flirting.”

“There is something I needed to talk to you about, but you weren’t in your chambers,” Yulien said, his playful smile dropping.

“And it couldn’t wait until morning?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, because you’ll be leaving in the morning.” he replied, holding her gaze. She frowned, raising her chin in defiance. Yulien glanced at the wet nurse, then put a hand on Arina’s waist, pulling her further away. “I have ordered preparations to be made already. I’m sending you and the child to your family. And before you ask, no, I am not divorcing you.”

So it’s the other thing” she whispered with bitter smile. “I would have preferred for you to get sick of me rather than for me to be on the lookout for my life again. Or Elian’s.”

“You knew that was the life you chose as the future Empress.” Yulien smiled for a moment, caressing her cheek. “I have been corresponding with your father, but I didn’t think it was necessary until now. Considering that our son might become the future Emperor one day, I’d rather not take chances.”

“What changed?” she asked in a serious tone. “Is it the Empress?” Yulien didn’t have to answer the last one. Ariana sighed.

“Sarea is dying and tonight that became public knowledge,” Yulien said quietly, keeping the wet nurse in his field of vision. “I have my suspicions about what the Empress’s next move would be and if she is successful, Kassian is going to be put in danger, and I won’t be able to rely on him. You and the child are a liability, I can’t move freely with you here unless you want to end up dead.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked, biting her lower lip.

“This depends on how my brother handles his own affairs.” Yulien shrugged. “We have run into someone new who might turn into a great asset or formidable foe. She already has my brother running in circles around her.” Yulien smiled for a second, thinking of Kassian’s face every time his new wife was brought up, but then he remembered he wasn’t alone. “Get some rest. I’ll have your maids wake you up in a few hours. You can sleep in the carriage. Take with you only people you trust. I’m sending one of my guards along, just in case.”

“No. You’ll need them more than us,” Arina said stubbornly, her eyebrows knitting together. “If anything, you need four or five more now.”

Don’t think about useless things.” Yulien chuckled.

“What about your other wife?” Arina frowned. Yulien grimaced before he could stop himself.

“I’m sure the Empress instructed her to stick to my side even if I am dead, so there is probably nothing I can do or say to make her leave,” he whispered, scratching his nose. “But I wouldn’t worry about her that much, she is here to watch me and report on me. She doesn’t have the guts to do anything.” He placed his hand on her shoulder, catching her eyes again. “Take care of yourself and our son. Once things are resolved, I’ll send word to your father to bring you back. It might be a while, so don’t spoil the little thing. If you do, you’ll have to give birth to another one to replace him as Emperor.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be nothing like you!” she smirked, but then her smile quickly dropped. “Don’t you dare die, Yulien Etrobia.”

“Not if I can help it” Yulien replied, placing a quick kiss on the top of her head before walking out of the baby’s room.

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 53 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

“Zen, I can’t...”

“Shh. Quiet!” Zen hissed as he jumped off the wall and landed in a crouch in the underbrush. He then swiftly turned around, raising his arms. Even though Raena was sitting on the top of the wall and he was quite tall, it was still a long way down. “I’ll definitely catch you, don’t worry!”

They had abandoned the carriage outside of the third prince’s residence and they had sneaked around until they found the blind spot her guard had mentioned on the way. It was a small part of the thirteen-foot-high wall surrounding the residence, close to the Concubines’ place where the wall entered the forest, next to which the third prince’s home was built. This section was apparently extremely hard to patrol because of the poor visibility, even though they had cleared most of the trees close to the stone barrier.

Zen had climbed it with Raena on his back, who kept whispering that she was never doing this again. She hated heights in her previous life, and it seemed like this one wasn’t going to be any different.

Raena took a deep breath and pushed herself off the wall, falling for a second before, just as he promised, he caught her effortlessly, setting her down on her feet. Without saying a word, he grabbed her hand and started pulling her through the thicket.

They walked in complete silence, staying away from the paths until they had no choice but to near the main one and cross it. Just as they were about to do that, Zen pulled her back, wrapping one hand around her, while pressing the other to her mouth. He

flattened himself against one of the bigger trees, both of them listening in as a group of servants passed by.

Raena's heart was drumming so loudly in her ears, she could barely hear anything else. Focusing on the slow, rhythmic thud-thud-thud of Zen's heart, she gradually relaxed. They had already been caught once; she doubted he'd let that happen again. Especially after that last conversation in her bedroom.

"Yes, I heard she stole it, so that is why she is being punished!" one of the maids said, her voice trembling. Raena thought it was because of excitement at first, but realized that it might as well have been fear, considering they were talking about punishment. "I can't believe they would give such a harsh punishment to a Head Maid! I know she is new, but still.."

Raena shifted, her curiosity spiking. New Head Maid? Could they have been talking about Kara or was there another new Head Maid? What kind of punishment was it, she didn't remember hearing that part.

"Who knows? It's Lady Lara, after all. Nobody can say a word to her or they might get fired. Or worse – beaten along with that poor girl!" another one said in a hushed voice. "I really don't want to go, but they said everyone should witness what happens to thieves."

Raena turned to look at Zen, who remained completely unfazed. She tried to push his hand off, but he just shook his head.

"What do you think the princess will do?" a third voice asked. "I heard she gets easily scared, and she doesn't like to leave her residence out of fear somebody would bully her."

"I heard the Head Maid keeps her there so she could control her."

"There are so many rumors about the North Palace, I don't know what to believe! I am just thankful I am not working there! Everybody knows that Lady Lara has taken it to herself to find faults with everyone in that place..."

"Hush! What if someone overhears? Do you have a death wish? Let's hurry, or she'll be dead before we get there! We are supposed to watch the punishment. I don't want to be beaten!"

Their voices died down, and Zen finally let go of Raena. She stepped away, her knees shaking and her head buzzing with all kinds of emotions flooding all at once.

Kara stealing? That was impossible. Why would she want to in the first place? And even if she did, how was she caught so quickly? She wasn't stupid, so she...

Somebody must have framed her. If Lara was involved, it wasn't hard to guess what was going on.

"We need to find Kara! Now!" she hissed and Zen's face hardened in the dim light.

"You said we shouldn't be caught tonight." He reminded her. "What if it is a trap? We don't even know it was Kara they were talking about." Raena blinked in surprise, a sudden calmness putting down the nerves that were threatening to make her throw up. Ever since she came to this place, Kara had been by her side. She knew her secrets, she knew her crazy plans, and she even listened to stories that probably made no sense to her. She never complained or blamed her or gave her even the slightest hint of falseness in her intentions. If there was one person in this world Raena couldn't just abandon, it was Kara.

"How many Head Maids does the North Palace have, Zen?" Raena asked coldly. "I am going! Come or leave, I don't care! Kara is my friend, and there is a way I am leaving her to suffer!"

"I told you, I'm not leaving your side again," he whispered, his voice turning softer than before. "I'll do as you say. Just make sure not to regret it."

He strode in the direction the maids had disappeared, walking so fast that Raena had to jog to catch up. It took them no more than five minutes to reach the first house of the Concubines' palace and from there on it was easy to find where everyone had gathered. Even before locating the group of servants on one of the small squares where the paths connected, Raena could hear painful cries and the loud, distinctive Slap! Slap! Slap! That echoed through the night.

Raena's pace quickened without her realizing, her mind repeating 'Let me be wrong, let me be wrong!' even though she herself didn't believe it.

She pushed her way through the circle of maids and attendants, a few of them turning around to see who was so eager to get to the front. The ones who recognized her started to whisper, and by the time she found herself on the other side of the circle, everyone was staring at her.

Every thought for them disappeared as she took in the scene in front of her eyes. Lara was standing with her arms crossed and an unabashed expression on her cold, beautiful face as she watched two guards hold down a woman on her knees while her hands were stretched over the surface of a long rectangular table. A third guard was holding a washing paddle in his hands, its wooden surface now almost black from the hilt down.

The paddle fell again, slamming against the hands of the woman, and she let out a hoarse scream, pressing her forehead on the table while her shoulders shook with exhaustion and pain. The guard raised the paddle again.

“What the hell is going on here?” Raena demanded, her voice bringing Lara and the guards’ attention to her. Even the woman getting beaten finally raised her head, looking at Raena with a mix of horror and relief.

All hope of having misunderstood the maids’ conversation vanished as Raena stared at Kara’s face. One of her eyes was swollen shut; her lip was cut and bloody and there were long scratches on her cheek. Her uniform was covered in blood and dirt, and her white shirt sleeves were stained red.

Her hands were the worst – all ten fingers were sticking in odd angles and were dark blue in color, entirely unmoving even as the rest of her body shook. Tears streamed down from Kara’s good eye, and a cry for help had stuck on her parted lips.

“Raena?” Lara said with surprise, but not even a hint of panic or shame. “Oh, my! What are you doing here and at this hour?” Her eyes shot behind Raena, no doubt stopping on Zen. “You were confined to the North Palace by His Highness! Do you even know what the punishment is for not following his orders?”

“I asked you a question,” Raena said just as coldly, taking Lara by surprise. She had no strength, nor the mental capacity to play the fool this time, even if it meant blowing her cover. This night had exhausted all of her pretense, all of her fear and cautiousness. All she wanted right now was to take Kara home. “What do you think you’re doing to my maid?”

Her eyes went back to Kara, who was still being held down, and her blood started to boil. Anger rose inside her, demanding retribution. She had never been a fan of violence or hurting people, but in that instant, she wanted to hurt Lara. She wanted to see her bleed and cry and beg.

Lara let her hands fall by her side, turning so she was fully facing Raena.

“You probably wouldn’t understand the severity of the situation, but let me try to explain,” Lara said with the sweetest smile and such a concerned expression, one would think she was making the greatest sacrifice for Raena’s sake. “Your maid was caught stealing something very precious to me. Despite being a person of such a high position, who should be giving a good example to those underneath her, her greedy nature made her reach out for something that wasn’t hers. If it was something small, I would have turned a blind eye and let her go with a reprimand, but we are talking about a precious necklace His Highness himself gifted me, one that used to belong to his departed mother.”

"I didn't steal it!" Kara croaked from her place by the table. "It was delivered to the North Palace by mistake! I was returning it!" One of the guards holding her pressed her head down to prevent her from talking, and Raena gritted her teeth, her hands balling into fists.

"I have several witnesses that can confirm she entered the residence carrying nothing and left with the bag containing the necklace. My guards stopped her because they found it suspicious and discovered the necklace on her," Lara said with the same sorrowful voice, throwing her hands in the air.

"I would never make up something so serious and take action without proper evidence!"

"Were those 'witnesses' your servants by any chance?" Raena asked with sarcasm dripping from her tone. Lara's face stiffened, but she held onto her smile.

"I tried to return it!" Kara cried out with her face still pressed against the hard wooden surface. "Your servant said it wasn't yours!" Lara sighed with exasperation.

"I don't know how you educate your servants, dear Raena, but my attendants would never dare speak out of turn -let alone talk to me in such a disrespectful manner." Lara's eyes flashed threateningly, and her smile abruptly disappeared. Hit her again."

The guard raised the paddle without hesitation and smashed Kara's hands again, despite the Scream to stop that came from Raena's mouth. The same guard stepped uncomfortably from one leg to the other and looked back at his mistress, who nodded. He prepared to hit again.

"Zen! Stop him!" Raena shouted in panic.

As if waiting for her command, Zen moved forward, his sword flying out of its sheath. Before the guard could hurt Kara again, Zen's blade sliced through the back of his knees, sending blood splattering on the ground. The man's feet buckled and he fell with a surprised cry. Zen caught him from behind, one hand holding his head by the chin while the other pressed the blade to his neck. Zen's eyes turned to Raena as if waiting for further instructions.

Everyone had grown so quiet, Raena wasn't sure they were even breathing as they watched Zen with a mix of awe and fear. Lara's calm mask cracked. Pulling some of Zen's confidence for her own, Raena turned her eyes back to the concubine.

"I don't care if my maid has stolen a leaf, a cookie, or your most prized possession. I am asking you what gives you the right to touch my people without my permission?" Raena asked, taking a step toward the other woman. Despite being a head taller, Lara seemed much smaller at that moment, her eyes wide with shock. "You are just a bed warmer who I can have killed right this very second. And do you know what my husband will do to me then, Lara?" She stopped inches away from the dark-haired woman, holding her

gaze and trying to make her feel all the anger and hate currently raging inside. “Nothing! He will do absolutely nothing! Do you know why? Because I am his wife and because he actually needs me! You. Are. Nothing!”

“Really?” Lara said with a trembling voice, but quickly composed herself. “Are you absolutely sure? Because last time he took my side and you were you are still confined to your pretty dollhouse!” She closed the remaining space between them, leaning down so she could look Raena directly in the eyes. “I will make sure your maid and that pretty boy over there both suffer before they are beaten to death. And you cannot do anything about..

Raena reacted without thinking, her body moving solely on instinct. Her hand balled into a fist, and a second later it connected heavily with Lara’s cheek. Lara let out an ear-splitting shriek as she flew back and tumbled to the ground, but Raena neither heard nor saw that, too busy fighting her own blinding pain that wrapped around her wrist like a shackle. Raena tried to move her hand, but the pain returned with full force, so she just pressed it against her body, moving her eyes to Lara, who stared at her as if she was seeing her for the first time.

“Stealing my husband was fine with me and I honestly have no interest in what you do with the harem,” Raena said, taking a step toward the dark-haired woman. Lara tried to crawl away but stopped when Raena put her foot on the skirts of the concubine’s dress, pinning her in place. “But you hurt someone I care about. So I am going to hurt you back!”

“You’re insane!” Lara whimpered, holding a hand to her face. Her left side had started to swell already, and by the looks of it, Raena had caused some serious damage. Maybe even broke something. The pain in her hand felt just a bit lighter now. “Stay away from me! You...”

Somebody from the crowd squealed, and the servants quickly parted, letting a tall, dark figure pass. Ka.ssian’s face was a mask of cold anger, and his eyes wouldn’t stop darting around as if he was trying to assess the situation. He stopped a few paces away from them, looking down at Lara, then up at Raena. Shock and confusion overtook his face before the anger returned even stronger than before.

“Someone better start explaining this very second or I swear, heads will roll.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 54 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

Ka.ssian’s eyes kept switching between the two women, his brain working hard to come up with an explanation for what he was seeing. He had rushed back from the Imperial Palace to make sure Raena wasn’t in danger after the news broke out, only to be informed by the guards that there was some commotion in the Concubines’ palace

instead. He had decided to pass by quickly on his way to the North Palace when he heard the Screams.

Not even for a second had he thought he'd find Raena there, looking with such a cold and threatening expression at another person – at Lara, of all people. If that wasn't enough, Raena's maid seemed to be receiving punishment for something, while Raena's guard stood with his sword drawn and blood dripping from his blade. Ka.sasian had almost taken out his own weapon when he noticed the silver-haired man stepping closer to Raena.

The rest of the audience had frozen stiff with his arrival, not daring to run away or look directly at him. When his eyes glided over a few of them, he noticed them all flinching, as if expecting some kind of punishment.

Just what was going on here?

"Your Highness, please save me!" Lara's pleading voice made him turn back to the two women just as Lara tried to crawl toward him. She managed a couple of steps when her skirts stretched, and she tried to pull them from underneath Raena's foot. Raena took a step back and Lara crashed onto the ground again, whimpering as she staggered to her shaky feet and turned toward Ka.sasian with a terrified expression.

Her left side was swollen, and by the looks of it, her cheekbone might have been fractured.

He looked toward Raena, who stood unperturbed on her spot. Her face was much paler than usual and despite wearing a cloak over her dress, she seemed to be trembling.

"How long are you going to make me wait?" he hissed, head snapping back to Lara. "Explain!" Lara jumped in surprise, her shoulders slumping as she held the left side of her face with trembling fingers.

"I was just disciplining a thief in accordance with Your Highness's rules! She stole the ruby necklace you gifted me, and my guards caught her with it! Several maids saw her carrying it through the residence!" Lara cried out, tears streaming down her face. Her speech was slurred and a bit incomprehensible because of the injury, but he could make enough of the words to catch the gist.

"Your wife came and attacked us! She hit me!" Lara burst into sobs, dropping to the ground as if her legs had lost the strength to support her.

Ka.sasian gritted his teeth, turning to Raena, who was just letting out a sigh.

"Is that true?" he asked, impatiently waiting for her to look at him.

"No," Raena replied with full confidence. "Not the part about Kara, at least. And I did tell her to stop them before I punched her."

Ka.ssiian closed his eyes, running a hand over his face as he tried to calm himself. Why did it have to be tonight of all nights? He was already tired, worried, and extremely frustrated by the turn of events; he didn't need a fight in his own house as well. Especially between those two.

"Liar!" Lara screamed. "There were multiple witnesses!"

"They are all your servants. They are the ones lying" Raena said without hesitation.

"Then can you prove she didn't steal it?" Ka.ssiian asked this time, and Raena finally looked at him. There was none of the familiar warmth and unadulterated joy on her face, no smile or eyes that shone with amusement; her gaze was cold and full of spite. Ka.ssiian pushed down the unpleasant feeling that stirred in his stomach as those icy blue eyes landed on him.

"I'm telling you she didn't," Raena said, a smile finally appearing on her face. Unlike the other ones, which made something in his chest flutter, this one made him frown instead. "Don't you believe me.. husband"

"It's not about believing you or not," Ka.ssiian replied. "It's about proper punishment being given to those who break the rules. Stealing will not be tolerated in this household!"

"So that's your judgment?" Raena asked, her voice raising an octave. "You'll just believe what you're told because she said so?" Her eyes darted toward Lara with fearsome animosity and Lara hid behind Ka.ssiian, shivering like a leaf.

"No. But there are witnesses and the missing object was found on."

"Kara is the person I trust most in this world." Raena interrupted him, her voice shaking. "I'm telling you, she wouldn't do it! Investigate properly!"

"That's enough!" Ka.ssiian sighed tiredly. His eyes moved to Kara while she stood slumped by the table. Without warning, Sarea's words echoed in his head, You need to have Kara eating from the palm of your hand. And if she refuses, you need to replace her.

This was it, this was his chance. With Sarea's condition worsening even further, he needed to control everything that was happening in the North Palace. This was his chance to bring Kara to his side, although this was not the best way to do it.

She had turned down every other attempt to forge a working relationship. A few nights in the dungeon would surely make her agree to anything he offered, especially if he was generous enough to return her to Raena's side. And if she still stubbornly refused to inform him about her mistress for her own good, he'd have an excuse to replace her. Raena was already mad and scared and she was desperately clinging to the hope that he would pardon her maid just because they were married.

And he probably would have, under any other circumstances. But not tonight. He needed to make sure Raena was protected and he could only do that by putting someone capable next to her.

Sending Shadows to tail her and keep her safe was fine, but he needed someone to protect her during the day too, whenever he was not around. Someone stronger than a young girl who let her mistress get this close to being poisoned. Because he had no doubt that once Sarea died, Raena would find herself to be an even bigger target.

Raena's anger was a small price to pay for her safety. He would figure out how to appease her later.

"She has been accused of a crime and caught red-handed," Kaessian said with a careful, controlled voice. "While my guards investigate and I decide on a judgment, she will stay in the dungeon. You there," he pointed at the guards standing hesitantly behind Kara. They had let go of her shortly after his arrival, kneeling on the ground beside her. "Pick her up carefully and bring her to."

"Zen," Raena said softly and her guard suddenly moved, pushing the man he was holding onto the ground. Zen took a few more steps toward the table, raising his sword and pointing it at the two guards. Raena didn't even look at what he was doing, as if trusting him completely. This made Kaessian even angrier than the fact that she had just defied his direct order in front of so many people.

"You dare raise a sword in my presence?" Kaessian asked in his most threatening voice, his eyes locked on Zen's profile. Raena's guard didn't move, didn't look, didn't even reply. He just stood with his weapon ready, waiting for her orders.

Kaessian looked back at his wife. "And you! Do you want to be punished too?"

"I don't care," Raena said in a much calmer voice than he expected. "Confine me to my house, take away my privileges. It's not like they matter that much here where the only law is the word of a biased man who wouldn't even hear the whole story before passing judgment." She took a step back, then another, without letting him out of her sight as if expecting him to attack her. "But lay a finger on Kara, and I won't stay still. She is coming with me back to the North Palace so she can get the medical attention she needs." Raena stopped by the table and finally looked away from him, crouching by her maid instead. "Can you stand?"

Kara nodded hesitantly and Raena gently wrapped her arms around her, helping her up. With his focus on the two, Kaessian just now noticed the state the maid was in – her hands hung lifeless and shattered in numerous places, her fingers a mess that might even be beyond saving. Just how much did Lara punish her?

Kara's feet buckled and she fell to the ground, dragging Raena with her. A pained whimper came from the maid's lips and Raena whispered something to her, but it was too low to hear.

"Zen, carry her!" Raena said, glancing at her guard. He hesitated for a second, then sheathed his sword and knelt next to them. As he picked up Kara in his arms, Raena turned to look back at Kaessian. "I am utterly disappointed in you. I really thought you were better than that."

She moved to leave, but Kaessian blocked her way. The feeling of being reprimanded, like he was the child between the two, bothered him almost as much as her current expression. Raena stopped before she reached him, looking up to meet his eyes.

"Try to stop me and I'll be filing for divorce tomorrow morning." Kaessian blinked in surprise. Soft whispers rose around him, reminding him yet again that they were not alone. The eyes of so many strangers felt like sharp needles all over his body. But most of all, it was her words that bothered him.

"You..." he started, but she tried to go around him again. He reached out by instinct, catching her wrist. Her face changed in an instant, pain and panic erasing everything else, and a small squirm left her lips. She looked back at him with wide eyes filled with tears.

"Let go!" she hissed, her voice breaking.

Kaessian released her immediately, glancing toward her hand, which she hugged tightly against her chest. Tears slipped from her eyes and she flinched as if just realizing she was crying, then almost ran past him, stopping some distance away and waiting for her guard to catch up.

"Your Highness!" Lara's sorrowful voice made him flinch. "Your Highness, I'm sorry! I was only doing what the rules..."

"I can't deal with you right now." Kaessian snapped, turning his back to her and facing his terrified servants for a second. "What are you still doing here? Do you want to get fired? Dismissed!"

He didn't have to repeat it twice. In a blink of an eye, everyone was gone.

"Your Highness, please don't be mad at me!" Lara whimpered.

Ka.sasian closed his eyes, trying to ignore her annoying voice that was currently bringing him the worst headache of his life. He walked away, ignoring her voice calling for him again, heading back to where he had left his horse on his way there.

He had made a mistake; he had gone too far.

He knew Raena's maid was important to her, but he didn't think a mere servant would be that important.

She was ready to defy the Imperial family and ask for divorce for that? Maybe he should have played it safe and taken her side. He had been too focused on the maid. If it was Yulien in his place, he would have realized all of this in an instant and turned it to his advantage.

Still, the way she was acting tonight... he had been too caught up in the moment to pay proper attention, but now that he looked back at her words, her reactions... that was not the same girl that he first saw running in the garden playing with flowers.

Just exactly what was going on in that place? Was she really pretending all this time? Why was she going out of her way to act like that? Was she plotting something behind his back just like everyone else?

His head hurt. Not of this made sense. He had to speak with his brother, but it was long past midnight. He probably had his own problems to deal with.

No. Ka.sasian could handle his own wife. He was going to confront her tomorrow and get to the bottom of it.

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 55 - Tips

17 minutes read

Raena jumped at the sound of the door opening, looking over her shoulder at the newcomer. When she recognized Elene and Nola walking in quietly, she let herself relax back into the cushions, returning her eyes to the woman sleeping soundly in the bed.

The medicine Kara had drunk that morning had knocked her out almost instantly and she hadn't moved an inch the whole time. If it wasn't for her slow, subtle breathing, Raena would have thought she was dead.

Elene and Nola neared the bed, throwing Raena concerned glances before getting to work. Judging by the time of the day and the things they carried, it was probably time to change Kara's bandages.

Raena looked at her own hand that had been so firmly wrapped from her palm to her elbow that she could barely move it. The tight bandage helped avoid the pain, but also

prevented her from doing simple things like eating by herself. When she was still studying at the university, she tried training her left hand so she could draw with both but gave up at some point since it was too difficult and time-consuming.

Raena locked her eyes on Kara's hands as Elene and Nola swiftly unfurled the bandages, revealing the blue, swollen skin underneath. There had been so many fractures on them that the healer started sweating profusely as he set her bones in place one by one. He had advised Raena to leave since the sight wasn't going to be pretty, but she refused and stayed by Kara's side even as her friend passed out from the pain.

The healer had said there was a good chance of Kara using her hands again, but he awkwardly explained that they wouldn't be the same as before and she should give up on the idea of sewing or writing. He recommended plenty of rest, gentle care, and a lot of patience, which Raena assured him she'd get.

That was three days ago, and since then she had left Kara's side only to bathe and do her personal business. She had settled Kara into one of the guest rooms on the second floor and practically moved in with her, despite everyone's protests.

She couldn't exactly explain it to them, but the quilt was eating at her while her anger at Lara and Ka.ssan was threatening to make her do something stupid. So sitting next to Kara's quietly resting body helped her calm down and think things through.

It was safe to say that her pretending was at its end. At best, Ka.ssan probably thought she was bipolar or insane. At worse, he had realized she had been purposely deceiving him all this time. The question was what kind of reaction he'd have when she finally decided to meet him.

"His Highness came today again," Elene said as if reading her mind. Raena moved her eyes to her but didn't say anything. Elene started putting on the smelly ointment the healer had given them for the swelling, her attention seemingly taken by the task.

"I told him you are still unwell and not accepting visitors. Just like you asked." Raena nodded even though Elene couldn't see her with her back to her.

"He said he'll be back."

Raena scoffed. He should go back to his bed warmer and nurse her face. Hopefully, she'd turn ugly now and stop appearing where one least expect her.

Raena still couldn't believe he actually took her side. It was true that Lara had been with him for years, but Raena didn't think he actually had any romantic feelings toward her. He was supposed to be in love with Raena – or was it just her arrogance that made her reach that conclusion? No, she wasn't wrong. His expression when she mentioned divorce wasn't one of anger – it was of panic and regret.

Divorce. That was it. This was the perfect opportunity. She had almost forgotten about her threat with everything going on.

Raena got to her feet so quickly that both Nola and Elene jumped

“Nola, from this moment onward, you can consider yourself Kara’s personal maid. Continue what you were doing and stay by her side. I’ll let the others know to cover your chores. Elene, is Zen in the North Palace?”

“I think he’s in his room,” the blonde woman replied with a confused frown.

“Great. Bring him to my office.” Raena instructed her on her way to the door. She hesitated at the threshold, looking down at the crumpled skirts of the dress she had been wearing since yesterday, but then shook her head dismissively and walked into the corridor.

The house was quieter than usual. After word spread about what had happened and all the versions of the event circulated around, the maids and attendants had turned even more fearful. A few even quit with some lousy excuses, but Raena let them go without even listening to their explanations. With the ones Kara dismissed and the ones that left, there had been barely enough people to keep the place running. Nobody had complained though – not to her face, at least.

It didn’t matter anymore. Soon she’d be out of there.

Raena pushed the door of her office open, stepping inside the sunny room. The curtains weren’t drawn, so the desk and the big, comfortable chair she had spent so many hours in were basking in the sunlight. Kara always pulled at least one layer of curtains closed so that Raena wouldn’t get sunburned from sitting under the hot rays for too long.

‘Would she be able to pull a curtain with those hands again?’ Raena wondered as she strode next to the window and unfastened the ribbon that held the curtains together. She grabbed a handful of the fabric and pulled and pulled until finally, the thin yellow cloth was obscuring her view of the inner yard of the North Palace.

Raena sat behind her desk and took out a stack of empty paper, struggling for a minute to open a bottle of ink. She took one of the papers and a quill and dipped the latter in the ink before pressing its tip to the paper. With a little practice, she should be able to compose the letter well enough and send it.

A knock came on the door and Raena called for them to enter. She heard the door close and then barely audible footsteps neared her desk. When she noticed a shadow falling over her, she raised her head, meeting Zen’s eyes just as he was leaning over her chair.

"What the... Zen, what are you doing?" She frowned, pulling back in surprise. He straightened up with a frown on his face.

"You don't look like you're sleeping well. You should return to your room and rest properly," he said matter-of-factly, circling the desk. Leaning on the side of the sofa so his body was facing the desk, he crossed his arms. "Elene said you wanted to see me. What is it?"

Raena stared at his face, trying to figure out why she was getting an off feeling. Was he mad at her? Concerned? Annoyed? Was it because she had been avoiding him after that night in her room? She really didn't want to shake that hornet's nest right now. Maybe later when she resolved the current predicament.

"Can you sneak us out of the North Palace unnoticed?" She asked.

"No," he replied without hesitation. "There are too many eyes on you." He paused, licking his lips.

"And with your husband coming here every day, none of the guards dare slack even for a second since he might show up at any moment. But..." Raena raised her eyes as she heard the last word, waiting for him to continue, "I might be able to sneak out alone after dark. Do you need to send a message or something?"

"Yes!" She nodded, looking down at the last version of the letter she wrote. It still looked sloppy and uneven, but it was as close as she could get to Raena's handwriting in this state. The ink had already dried, so she folded the paper in two and sealed it in an envelope with her brother's name on it. "Here. Can you make sure this is delivered to the hands of my brother?"

"You want me to sneak into the Prime Minister's mansion?" Zen asked, raising an eyebrow as he took the envelope.

"Why is sneaking in the first thing that comes to your mind?" she scoffed. "Just tell the guards at the entrance to pass the message to my brother that you have a letter from his sister. He'll come running."

"Alright," Zen said, sliding the letter into his inside pocket. Raena stared at him, barely suppressing her smile as she watched him struggle to keep his mouth closed. His curiosity was more than evident. He gave up on the struggle. "What is in."

"I'm asking my brother to help me file for divorce," she replied before he could finish. "Well, technically, I'm asking him to come to support me tomorrow when I file it."

Zen's eyes widened with shock; he even forgot to smile.

"You're serious?" he eventually asked flatly, pushing himself up from the side of the couch.

"You're divorcing him? Now?"

"Woah, easy on the enthusiasm Raena said with a heavy dose of sarcasm. "This is the perfect moment. Using the recent attacks on me, the unfair trial the other night, and the fact that I even got hurt by a concubine, I can plead that I have been neglected, disrespected and abused. Even the Prime Minister wouldn't be able to sit still. As long as the divorce request reaches the Emperor, I will Win."

Zen smiled- a huge, pleased smile that smoothed his features and turned his gray eyes warm and shiny, like silver gleaming under the caress of the sun. Before she knew it, he had circled the desk and was cupping her face. His fingers caressed her cheeks, lifting her chin up so he could press his lips against hers. Raena expected it. She knew that telling him about her decision would trigger him to do something. But this time, she had no qualms about it. Kaasian had made his choice and shown her just how little his affections lasted, so she was free to do whatever she wanted. She felt a bit bad for using Zen to scratch that annoying itch, but he looked more than willing, so her heart quickly settled down.

"This is excellent news," Zen whispered against her lips, leaning his forehead on hers. "I'll make sure your brother gets the letter."

He let go of her, preparing to leave.

"Wait!" She stopped him just as he reached the couch. He turned on his heel, looking at her with his eyebrows raised. "There is another thing I need you to do for me."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 56 - Tips

07 minutes read

Marden puffed a cloud of smoke before putting out his cigar and leaning back in his chair with a tired sigh. For years he had hoped his business would take off and bring him some money to pay off his share of a father's debts, but now he kind of missed the times when he could laze about all day and fool around with the girls that had nothing to do. Still, this felt nice. Being successful tasted almost as good as Madam Lydia's food.

That reminded him.. where was she? Was she even aware of what was happening in her own auran? What had happened to him? He got reply to any of his messages and every time he approached one of the managers, they said she was fine and that they would let her know he wanted to speak with her.

He hadn't seen her since the Empress's birthday and she didn't look too well as she left his carriage in a hurry. He never got an explanation about what had caused her

distress, but judging by the fact that her veil was unfastened and she was pressing it against her face, somebody must have uncovered her identity – or came close to. But why was she so scared of that? Was she really someone important? Was she a criminal? A noble? An enemy spy? Whatever she was, she seemed to have almost as many secrets as the Imperial family itself.

Still, she wasn't like them; she wasn't like any of the nobles he had met – arrogant, conceited, looking down on anyone with just a little less wealth or power than them. Not to mention she had pulled him out of the hole he had been in for years in more ways than one. He had decided that even if she turned out to be a noble, he wouldn't resent her for it. If she ever decided to reveal her identity, of course.

While his pride as a man didn't want to admit it, he could tell that the wall she had been putting between them was never going to crumble. Be that because of that dark-haired creep or someone else, she had clearly drawn a line and she was firmly staying on her side. Maybe it was for the better. He doubted he could give a woman like her more than mind-blowing sex, and she didn't look like a person who would be satisfied with just that.

"Too much pressure," Marden mumbled, taking out another cigar. His eyes stopped on the candle on the desk that had been burning minutes prior, only to realize it had gone out. He sighed, looking at the few others flickering on the shelf on the opposite side of the room. He was just about to get up when a knock came on the door. He sat back down, spitting the cigar from his mouth and calling for them to enter.

The door opened and Arissa stepped over the threshold, staring at him with a tense expression.

He was just about to ask what was going on when she moved aside to show she wasn't alone.

Marden frowned as he met Raena's guard's eyes, but then nodded to Arissa and she swiftly left them alone. She had mentioned more than once that she didn't like the dark-haired guy even though she had never talked to him, since he looked like the customers who talk all sweet and nice, but liked to play too rough in bed.

"Do you plan to stay there the whole night?" Marden asked when Zen didn't move from his spot, as if waiting to be invited. Marden's words seem to be enough of an invitation because he stepped inside and closed the door. Marden's eyes darted toward the sword hanging from the younger man's waist, but he quickly looked back to his face. "So... to what do I owe the pleasure? It's not every day we get to have a little chat, just the two of us. Which reminds me, where is your mistress? Have you kidnapped her and locked her up somewhere?"

"She is fine," Zen said dryly. Marden scoffed, leaning back in his chair and biting on his cigar again.

"So she is not kidnapped and locked up?"

"Not to my knowledge," Zen replied in the same low, uninterested tone. "I'm here on her behalf. She wants me to bring in the report."

Marden froze, forcing himself to meet the other man's eyes. How did he know about the report? The only ones that knew about their little arrangement were Marden and her. They had agreed to keep it small, forbidding even his workers to discuss it between themselves.

'Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing' sort of thing, that was what she had said. He had agreed since this minimized the chances of anyone finding out about those secrets and exploiting them for themselves. At first, it was just petty little details about this noble or that which Marden couldn't even use for mock-blackmail.

But lately, there had been more rumors and chatter about things that could get a person killed in a dark alley if he wasn't careful enough. It had to be why he was attacked that night, wasn't it? What else could prompt someone to want to kill him? Nobody would win anything from his death – he had no money or property to pass on. If he died, the mansion would be used as collateral for the debt, but that place was so old and shabby, it was barely worth anything. Even if he was gone, the brothel was going to keep running – he had made a will to pass it over to Arissa in case anything happened to him. This would keep her and the others settled for a long time.

Those secrets were the things that must have put a target on his back. But which one? Was it the reports of Craidal agents hiding in the capital? Or the one where they worked with some high-up nobles to dethrone the Imperial family? Or maybe the fact that the Emperor had fallen ill again – that had to be a secret worth keeping.

There were even more lately: about people sneaking over the roofs at night, about some new drug being passed around the capital, about people disappearing without a trace or acting strange all of a sudden. Separately, while disturbing, that news was not all that interesting. But looking at the bigger picture...

"The report. Is it ready?" Zen insisted.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Marden shrugged. "Can you pass me one of those candles?"

Zen stared at him for a second, then stepped toward the cupboard and picked the holder of one of them. He carried it to the table, still not saying anything. Marden nodded in thanks, leaning forward and putting the edge of his cigar over the flame. He puffed a few times to get it started when the dark-haired guy spoke again.

“Don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,” he said, a small smile appearing on his lips as Marden choked onto the smoke that he was supposed to exhale. When he was done coughing, he raised his teary eyes to look at the other guy. “This is your secret message, right? She said to use it, otherwise, you’ll pretend not to know what I’m talking about.”

Marden studied him carefully before sighing.

“You could have started with that, b.rat!” Marden murmured, picking up the papers scattered over his desk and going over them quickly to find the one he was scribbling on earlier. He still couldn’t believe she would involve somebody else in this, but if she gave him this message, she must have trusted this guy enough. Or was she testing him instead? That damn woman, why was she so hard to understand?

Marden pulled up an empty sheet and started writing the latest findings on it. He had a copy in his hidden drawer department, which he usually gave her, but he didn’t feel comfortable revealing the existence of the secret place or the full report to this guy. She could trust him all she wanted, but Marden’s trust supplies were limited.

Marden blew on the paper until he was sure the ink was dry, then folded it in half, put it in an envelope, and sealed it. He held the envelope for a moment, then handed it to Zen. The dark-haired guy pushed himself off the wall, taking the message and heading for the door without another word.

“Wait” Marden called after him. Zen stopped, turning over his shoulder with an annoyed expression. “Does she know about the restaurant?”

“Know what about it?”

“About what happened three nights ago,” Marden replied, frowning. Zen slowly turned to face him, his eyebrows raising.

“I was just about to head there. What happened?”

“Well. you’ll see, I guess, but just to give you heads up. Somebody broke in three nights ago and caused some damage to the place even attacked some of the guards staying in there to watch over it. Nobody died, but I’ve noticed a big decrease visitors in just three days. She might want to do something about that.”

“I didn’t notice a decrease in customers here when I walked in.” Zen pointed out coldly.

“Well, the people who usually come here don’t care much for appearances,” Marden smirked. “But the people who go to a public restaurant with such a fancy name, do. That attack was never addressed and the rumors circulating are that Madam Lydia has been dealing with some shady people, so some of them turned on her. Nobody wants to get in the middle of that.”

"I see," Zen said. "I'll let her know."

Marden stared at his back as he left the room, closing the door with a soft click. He looked back at the papers at the edge of his desk, then at the cigar that had burned out. He threw it in the ashtray and got up, hurrying outside. The corridor was empty, but there were voices and laughter coming from the two reception rooms mixed with the smell of alcohol and that incense stuff he had procured to relax his guests.

Marden headed toward the back room where the guards went to smoke or have a bite and found only one of them there. He was dozing off in the corner with his feet propped on another chair.

"Wake up!" Marden called from the door and the tall, muscular man jumped to his feet, looking around with alarm. When he noticed it was just Marden with him, he let out a sigh of relief.

"What do you need, boss?" the guard asked in a hoarse voice.

"Do you know the black-haired guy that follows Madam Lydia around?" Marden asked, receiving an affirmative nod in return. "Good. I want you to follow him."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 57 - Tips

09 minutes read

Zen jumped over the wall, landing soundlessly in the low grass. He waited for a moment, holding his sword close to his body to avoid hitting it on anything and causing unnecessary noise. When he was sure there was nobody nearby, he got up to his feet and picked his usual route, following the wall.

He walked for a couple of minutes in a straight line, avoiding bundles of fallen leaves and big bushes, and stepping on protruding roots and green grass instead. These quiet, dark places had become so familiar in the past few months that he could navigate them with his eyes closed.

Zender stopped, pressing himself to the nearest tree just a few seconds before the two guards appeared in his view. 'Right on time,' he thought, waiting patiently as they moved with slow, unhurried steps. Once they were far enough, he stepped from his hiding place and continued on his way.

The night was clear and quiet, so he could see and hear better than usual. It was so easy to sneak in now; he could literally stride into the Main Palace and nobody would even notice him. Well, maybe there was somebody.

Realizing Ka.ssian had a separate unit of agents that operated from the shadows hadn't taken long.

Once the first one started following them, it was easy to turn the chase around and find out where they went to report. Knowing they existed, Zen could avoid them. He had spent his lifetime avoiding assassins, so evading the ones that didn't even dare make contact was child's play. Still, shaking them off with Raena as deadweight was another story.

She was so naive and careless, it was almost laughable. Or was it that she trusted him wholeheartedly that he would make sure they were not followed and keep her safe? Having her complete trust was a good – a great thing! He didn't think it was going to be that easy to obtain it, but with her being so desperate for allies, she probably didn't have much of a choice. And he had made sure he never gave her a single reason to doubt him – he had been quiet, obedient, protective. He didn't care that he had to bow and kneel and speak respectfully to people of no consequence. As long as he got what he wanted, he was ready to crawl through the mud and speak any lie.

Survival was the only way to win. The last person standing was the winner, not the ones with the most power or money or strength. He was going to win and build the future his mother envisioned for him. He had been patiently waiting for almost two decades for the perfect opportunity and even though it wasn't going exactly as he expected, he wasn't going to let this chance pass.

Zen stopped again, flattening himself against one of the walls surrounding the North Palace while waiting for the patrolling guards to pass. One of them dropped the handkerchief he was blowing his nose with and stopped to pick it up. Zen held his breath as the other one turned to look at his partner. The shadows falling over the wall and the nearby tree hid him, but the moon was bright and the sky was full of stars, so if any of the guards were to look carefully around, they could probably spot him hiding.

"She turned him away again?" the one standing up asked, looking around as if scared someone might overhear.

"That's right," the one crouching replied, getting to his feet after dusting his handkerchief. "His Highness left no more than five minutes after he came. He didn't look happy, I'm telling you."

"Well, with what I've heard happened in the Concubine's palace... The two of them continued on their way, their voices fading into the night. Zen turned around and headed for the small wooded door at the back of the mansion, which Kara had shown him some time ago. He had returned the key to her as instructed, but not before making a copy for himself. Going through a door was much easier than climbing walls or disguising himself. He had even oiled the hinges to make the old thing move more smoothly without piercing the night with its woeful screeches.

Zen turned his key in the keyhole, slipping inside. He checked the windows on his side of the mansion for light or moving shadows, and when he found none, he sprinted to the servant's entrance.

He hid his wig in one of his pockets next to the letter that bastard had given him.

Making his way to the second floor, Zen barely hesitated as he headed for Raena's room. He stopped in front of the door, knocking. She was probably asleep at this time, but on the off chance she was not, he wanted to see her. He hadn't been in her bedroom since that night, and he thought it might be the perfect time to take the next step.

No answer came from inside. He hesitated for a moment, but then let himself in. The room was dark and quiet, with no traces on the bed that anyone had gone to sleep there.

He stepped back into the corridor before somebody could see him, heading toward Kara's room. Raena had promised to sleep in her own bed from now on, but it seemed she had crawled back to her maid's side. What was so important about Kara, anyway? The two seemed friends regardless of the difference in their status, but apart from Kara's imprudent behavior as a servant, he never saw them act like friends. From what he had heard when they talked, it was usually about documents or the restaurant, or some other business. He had seen women talk to women who they called their friends, and it was usually about gossip, clothes, books, politics, or other mundane things. Not work.

Not chores. Was he missing something? He knocked on Kara's door and waited. The door finally opened and a small, chubby face appeared in the gap, blinking sleepily at him.

"Nola?" He frowned as the little girl finally opened her eyes. "Is Ra.. the Mistress in there?"

"No," the girl mumbled, letting the hand that was rubbing her eyes fall to her side. "She is in her room, isn't she?"

"Alright. Go back to sleep." Zen forced a smile on his face and she immediately blushed, closing the door abruptly. He let his smile drop and headed toward the end of the corridor where Raena's office was. He stopped in front of the big double doors, preparing to knock for the third time. He changed his mind before his knuckles brushed against the wood and just let himself in.

At first, he didn't see her, but as he moved closer to the lone candle on the desk, he noticed the small form slouching in the chair by the desk. Zen frowned as he moved closer until he was standing by her side. She was wearing her nightdress already, but she had wrapped a heavy shawl over her shoulders. Her bandaged arm was resting next to her head. Her face looked pale and tired under the dim light, but she slept soundly as if she didn't have a single worry on her mind.

Zen crouched next to her, pushing a strand of hair out of her face. She let out a quiet sigh, but didn't wake.

"So pretty." he whispered, running a finger over her temple, then her cheek until its journey finished to her mouth. Her lower lip was bruised again, probably from biting it too much as she stressed over this thing or the other. He had told her not to and when she didn't listen, he had wanted to bite those lips himself and show her there were much better ways for her to get hurt if she wanted. She probably would have gotten scared and pulled away again. For a woman who boasted about being free and eager to enjoy life's pleasures, she really tended to overthink things. He sometimes wondered if that confident act disappeared in bed.

He wouldn't mind being the one giving orders for a change.

He leaned his head on the desk, staring at her relaxed face.

She was probably the prettiest woman he had ever met, but what was behind that gorgeous face was much more interesting. When she bought him that night, he thought he'd just follow her home and fool around for a bit until he found someone more suitable for his plan. But as they reached the giant mansion and he overheard the guards mentioning the third prince's name, he realized luck was finally smiling on them.

Watching her play for fools royals, nobles, and servants alike, watching her raise a business from the ground up, watching her scheme and plan and risk and dare with frightening confidence, it wasn't long before he started longing for her. Despite her fragile appearance, she possessed astute intelligence rivaling only his late mother's.

She was perfect for him.

Zen gently gathered her in his arms, her golden hair spilling around her face and filling the air with the scent of flowers and soap. It was an odd mix of smells, but he had quickly grown to love it since if he could smell it so clearly, that meant he was close enough to touch her. Developing feelings for her wasn't part of his plan, but they had enough wiggle room to accommodate this new development.

Making her fall for him worked great for filling the time when he had nothing to do.

As he closed the door of her room, he strode to her bed and gently placed her on it. She muttered something in her sleep, her hands lying by her sides while her chest rose and fell in slow, even breaths.

Zen sat next to her, unfastening the shawl around her shoulders. He slid it off, tossing it at the foot of the bed before turning back to look at her.

No wonder the third prince started playing a different tune the moment he laid his eyes on her. If it wasn't for her silly charade, that murdering bastard would probably be all over her in this instant. But it was too late now, because...

"..you're mine." Zen finished out loud, caressing her smooth cheek. He let his finger run over her lips for a moment before pulling his hand away. She might have not accepted him yet, but it didn't matter. Soon none of it would matter – her marriage, her title, her restaurant, even this place.

Once he reached his goal, he was going to take her away from this place. It was going to be better if she accepted him by then, but it wasn't entirely necessary. He didn't mind taking his time with her.

She'd have no one else to turn to but him anyway.

Zen pulled the sheets to cover her and got up. He was just about to leave when he heard her whispering something. He turned, half-expecting to see her awake and startled by his presence, but she was just talking in her sleep. Zen tensed to hear what she was saying since she seemed to be repeating it again and again.

"He is going to die if I don't do something. He is going to die..."

Zen frowned, staring at her distraught face, trying to figure out whose death got her so upset. A few seconds later, her face relaxed and she stopped mumbling, turning sideways in bed and hugging her pillow. As much as he wanted to stay and watch her some more, it would be bad if somebody caught him doing that.

Closing the door as quietly as possible, he took a step back, preparing to head to his room when he felt somebody's eyes on him. He instinctively reached for his weapon, but his hand froze above the hilt when he recognized the person leaning casually against the nearby wall.

"You're back later than expected," Elene said with a scowl. "Any problems?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Zen replied, looking up and down the corridor.

"Where is my brother? I thought he was coming back with you," she asked, pushing herself off the wall and letting her hands fall by her sides.

"He needed to stay behind at the restaurant" Zen replied with a hint of annoyance.

"Move." He stared at her, waiting for her to move out of his way, and eventually, she did, her expression growing even darker. "He's fine, stop glaring at me like that."

"You should take a bath," she said suddenly, moving past him. "You reek of blood." She didn't wait for an answer as she disappeared around her corner, her steps quickly

fading away. Zen looked down at his hands and clothes but didn't see any signs of blood – he had been very careful not to get any on him and discarded anything that did.

Sighing, he headed for his room. He needed to do something else before taking that bath.

As he stepped inside the accommodation that was given to him, he locked the door and moved toward the small table in the corner, quickly lighting up the candle on top of it. As the flame grew bigger, he took the letter from his pocket and carefully slid his knife underneath the seal, opening it without damaging the paper itself. He unfolded the paper and let his eyes slide over the three short paragraphs.

The first two were some stupid gossip about the second prince and some other noble that got somebody else's wife pregnant. The third paragraph made Zen smile coldly.

"Oh, Marden, Marden," Zen murmured, moving the fake report over the flame and watching it as it slowly caught on fire. "You should have kept your suspicions to yourself. You are forcing a hand".

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 58 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

"It's safe," the middle-aged woman who had been tasting Raena's food for the last few weeks announced, stepping away from the table and wiping her mouth with a napkin. Raena nodded in gratitude. It still felt strange to have someone taste everything she drank or ate, and every time she watched her taster chew on the food or sip on a drink, Raena held her breath, expecting her to start foaming at the mouth. Every time she didn't, Raena sighed in relief, telling herself she was a coward.

Why would her life be more important than that woman's?

"That's all. You may go," Raena said and the woman quickly left Raena's office. Raena had decided to have her breakfast in there, too nervous to pretend to be sweet and cheerful in front of the maids as they served her. Raena glanced at Elene standing by her desk, then lowered her eyes to the papers resting by her plate. "You can sit down,"

Raena said, using her left hand to pick one of the papers she was reading through for the hundredth time while her right grabbed the fork. She didn't have much of an appetite, but after receiving a firm scolding from Kara once she finally woke up for more than ten minutes, she had decided to get back to her normal eating schedule, if only for appearances' sake.

Elene slid onto one of the sofas, keeping her eyes on the door as if expecting somebody to barge in and scold her for sitting in her mistress's presence. The door remained firmly shut and silence reigned the room, broken only by the sound of cutlery hitting porcelain and the paper rustling as Raena turned the next page.

It was all in order- all the documents for the divorce were present, clearly written and signed.

She knew that since she had read them a hundred times, but she still felt uneasy. Ever since she came to this world, her 'marriage' was a formality, a background setting that didn't really matter, while Ka.sasian was a husband in name only – like a coworker you constantly share shifts with, but don't even know the last name of. Yet lately it felt surprisingly real. Once those documents reached the Emperor, she would be out of here, out of the North Palace, out of the third prince's residence.

The game would be over. That had been the plan from the start, so why was she feeling slightly disappointed?

What should have been more concerning was that once the divorce was official, she'd probably have to move into her room in the restaurant and hire more guards. She didn't plan to stay long in the capital, only until Kara was better and the deeds for the restaurant were handled. Without Ka.sasian's protection and after invoking his wrath, because there was no way he was going to take this lying down, she'd be vulnerable. It wouldn't take long for the Empress to send someone after her.

A knock came on the door and Raena looked up from the papers. Sighing, she folded them carefully, putting them away. It was barely seven in the morning and she had told the servants not to disturb her, so who could bother her now? She sincerely hoped it wasn't Ka.sasian coming again.

She was sure he was going to storm into the North Palace soon enough, but she hadn't even submitted the documents yet.

"Yes?" she said loud enough for them to hear her and a moment later, Zen slipped inside, closing the door with a soft click. His eyes moved from her to Elene and back to her before he strode to the desk.

"Good morning!" he said, taking a seat at the armrest of the sofa across the desk, just like he usually did. Raena leaned back in her chair, picking up her cup and bringing it to her lips. She had tried waiting for his report last night but must have dozed off because she woke up in her own bed when she clearly remembered falling asleep at her desk. It must have been Zen who moved her. "You look better today. Did you have a good sleep?"

"No. I had a nightmare and I got up at the break of dawn," she sighed, putting the cup down. She couldn't really remember her dream, but the feeling of regret and sadness stuck with her long after she woke up. And knowing that today would be full of drama didn't really help to cheer her up. "Did you do what I asked?"

"Yes." Zen nodded, his face turning serious. "I delivered the letter to your brother personally. He was very eager to open it and even made me wait until he read it. I think he planned to give me a reply, but then he told me to just tell you he'll be here in the morning." Raena nodded, staring at her half-empty plate. "I also met with Marden and he gave me the report when I told him the secret message.'

"Did he?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. She could imagine Marden's expression when Zen asked him for it. They had agreed not to share the information he acquired with anyone else apart from the two of them, so it must have been a shock to hear Zen repeat their secret message. Raena wished she could have warned him beforehand, but with her current predicament, she had no choice but to put him on the spot. With everything moving so quickly and her time of getting out of this mess nearing, she needed to confirm a few things. Most importantly, she needed to confirm who she could really trust.

"Yes. But there was a situation." Zen nodded, looking up to meet her eyes. "I was on my way home when someone attacked me."

Raena's eyes widened, studying his face with surprise. This was the first time he admitted to being spotted when sneaking in or out. Even with her, they always managed to shake off their tail.

"And?" Raena nudged.

"I'm sorry, but I had to destroy the report," Zen said, staring into her eyes without blinking. "I wasn't sure if they wouldn't corner me this time, so I didn't want to risk it. I know it must have been important since you sent me out to get it for you, but I figured it was more important for it not to fall into somebody else's hands."

"Do you know what was inside?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"No. I didn't think you'd want me to open it," Zen replied without hesitation, his stormy gray eyes watching her curiously. "Did I do something wrong? Should I have read it before destroying it?"

"No, no, it's fine!" Raena bit her lip. Was it possible that they were after the report itself? Or maybe Marden found out something big and they wanted to make sure it didn't get out? Or was it because...

She looked back at Zen, who raised an eyebrow in question. He could have read what was in the report and burned it. He could have made up this supposed attacker, so he could have an excuse. Or he could be telling the truth and someone might have figured she and Marden had a lot of valuable information on their hands.

"There is something else you should know about" Zen spoke, taking her out of her thoughts.

She nodded for him to continue, shifting nervously in her seat. "Four nights ago, somebody broke into the restaurant. They went directly to your office. Davin was sleeping there on the couch, so he saw them snooping around in search of something."

"Is he alright?" Raena frowned. "He is not dead, is he? I can't handle any more deaths at this point."

"No, no, he is fine!" Zen said, raising his hands in a gesture to calm her down. "He ran out of the room before they spotted him and alerted the guards you keep on the premises. They went after the intruders and got into a fight, but apart from minor injuries and light damage on the place, nobody was badly hurt. The intruders got away, though."

'Damn it!' Raena thought, closing her eyes. This was too much of a coincidence. Four nights ago was the Queen's birthday. The same night, Kara was punished.

"Has Marden faced any trouble four nights ago?" she asked, her mind trying to quiet down the questions that were swirling inside her head.

"He didn't mention anything like that." Zen shook his head. "But he did say that the restaurant's number of visitors is rapidly dropping after the break-in since everybody thinks you're involved in some shady business."

"Damn it!" Raena sighed. "Why do bad things always come in bundles?" She leaned her elbows on the table, rubbing her temples. She had to take care of the divorce documents first and deal with the backlash. Once that was solved, she needed to get to the restaurant and figure out a way to bring people back in.

A knock came on the door and Elene got up from her seat, striding to it. She exchanged a few words with the person outside, then returned to Raena's side.

"Your brother is here," she announced. "I told them to escort him to the garden as you instructed."

Raena nodded, slowly getting to her feet. With Kara resting and her not being able to leave the North Palace, it was difficult to control everything.

The restaurant had to wait for now, but that didn't mean there was nothing she could do.

"Zen, I need you to run an errand for me," she said, moving her attention to the silver-haired man who was still sitting on the same spot, tapping with his finger on his thigh. "Go to my room and you'll find a bundle of sketches under my pillow. Bring them to Marden and tell him to find a painter who can work fast and has no issue with nudity." Zen gave her a puzzled look as he got to his feet. "Don't ask, just do it. Also, tell Marden to arrange a meeting with all the shop owners on Ruby Street a week from now. I'll make sure to attend."

Raena raised her hands and rubbed her eyes as hard as she could while Elene opened the door for her. She wasn't in the mood for crying today, but to gain her brother's sympathy and unwavering support, she might need to shed a tear or two. Elene was watching her with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"What?" Raena frowned.

"Nothing," Elene mumbled, falling a step behind her. "Just.. don't let your guard down."

"What do you..." Raena started, turning to look at Elene in confusion when they reached the back door leading toward the garden. An attendant was standing there already and quickly opened it for them.

Raena took a deep breath to prepare herself, making a distraught expression as Ramor finally spotted her. He looked worried and angry, but when he noticed her quivering lip and teary eyes, his expression changed. Giving her a look full of pity, he opened his arms and Raena threw herself into his embrace, burying her face in his chest.

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 59 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

Kassian swung with his sword, switching from one position to another, keeping his blade and his body perfectly balanced. Moving through the familiar motions and focusing on the strain in his muscles made his mind relax more than anything.

Still, even that wasn't working for the past four days. No matter how much he practiced with the sword, the usual calm and clarity wouldn't come.

Instead, his anger resurfaced and his frustration made him clumsy. Even his soldiers kept away as he increased the speed of his slashes and the strength of each hit aimed at the dummy.

"Your Highness! Your Highness!"

Kassian let the sword fall by his side, panting as he glared at the target one more time. Turning to face the person shouting for him, he watched as Blaine stopped a few steps away from the dummy, fidgeting on his spot. His cheeks were red and his breathing was sharp, eyes gleaming with worry behind his glasses.

"What is it?" Kassian sighed, wondering what else could go wrong at this point. Sarea was getting worse by the day and the doctors all said she didn't have much time left. His brother was swarmed with work, covering the duties of the Emperor since their father had taken ill. Raena was refusing to even see him, so he could neither make amends nor find out what exactly the change in her behavior meant.

So what was it now? Was Craidal rebelling in the middle of the capital? Or maybe all provinces were rioting and wanting to take the Empire down?

At this point, nothing would surprise him.

“It’s Her Highness Raena.” Blaine said, licking his lips. “I was just processing documents and.” he paused again, glancing toward Kassian hesitantly. Despite expecting to hear something bad already, Kassian still felt his chest fill with dread. “...she requested the annulment of your marriage. Documents have been submitted to the Main Palace as well as the Imperial Palace.”

Kassian stared at him with a dumbfounded expression, trying to remember how to talk.

Annulment? He knew she wasn’t happy after what happened to her maid, but he didn’t really expect her to go through with her threat. He hadn’t tried to stop her that night, so why would she do that?

“Also, her brother is with her now. He might try to take “

“Let’s go!” Kassian snarled, sheathing his sword. He hesitated for a moment, but then tossed the weapon to Blaine, who gave him a confused look. “It’s better if I don’t hold a weapon right now. Try to keep up!”

Grabbing his shirt from the fence where he had left it earlier, he sprinted up the stairs, cursing his legs for being too slow. He slid his hands into the sleeves and locked his eyes on the path ahead as he continued to run. He passed a few maids who didn’t even have the time to give him a greeting before he was gone; he was pretty sure he saw Vega with one of her attendants strolling through the garden, but he didn’t slow down to check if it was really her.

If someone had told him a few months ago that he’d be running at top speed toward a woman’s residence just because of something she had done, he would have laughed himself silly. Yet here was, doing yet another thing out of character because of that woman. Without even realizing when or how it happened, now every time her name was mentioned or something was happening to her, his body’s first reaction was to go to her. Even if there was no news of her, he would often find himself thinking about her and running over the million questions surrounding her.

Especially in the past four days. Realizing that her condition might have been all a front and she could actually be much smarter and cunning than she led on had made him angry and excited at the same time. He wanted to know why she had to pretend all this time. He wanted to know why she had to lie to him and put them such an awkward position. If she hadn’t lied.

Was she a witch or something? Did she put some kind of spell on him that made him stupid? Or was this what others called 'blind love? Whatever it was, it was slowly driving him insane. She was driving him insane! Kassian slowed down as he noticed the long, old walls surrounding the North Palace, and started buttoning his shirt. By the time he reached the gates, he had even tucked it in his breeches. The guards opened the gate without a word, exchanging silent glances when they thought he wasn't looking.

He strode inside and headed for the mansion, ignoring everyone on his path. Once he was in the anteroom, he eventually stopped, wondering where he should search for them. She probably received her brother in her reception room or the garden or...

He spotted a woman in servant attire walking out of one of the rooms and called for her without thinking. She froze, slowly turning to look back at him. It took him a second, but he recognized the long blonde hair and pale skin – he was pretty sure she was the Craidal girl Raena had purchased, although her name escaped him.

"Where is she?" he asked, taking a step toward her.

"In the garden," the young woman replied in a low, cold voice "Do you want me to..?"

"No need," Kassian said, striding past her. He remembered this place from years ago when his mother lived here, but nothing in the walls, the floor, or the decorations reminded him of her anymore.

He still remembered the layout of it, so it took him just a couple of minutes to find one of the back exits leading to the garden.

As he walked outside, the bright sun blinded him, so he shielded his eyes, searching for Raena and her brother. He spotted them almost immediately, seated on a bench under one of the tall trees that threw a pleasant shade all over the garden. Kassian strode toward them without hesitation, hands balling into fists. Ramor was the first to notice him, his frown deepening as he continued to hug his sister and rub her back. Her shoulders shook as if she was crying and when she finally looked up, her eyes were red and teary.

Kassian's step wavered, and his fists unfurled, but he still continued toward them. Ramor got to his feet, stepping in front of his sister as if to protect her.

"Greetings, Your Highness. What brings you here?" Ramor asked in a cold, unfriendly tone.

"Do I need a reason to visit my wife's residence?" Kassian replied sharply, glancing toward Raena, who had just gotten to her feet. She refused to meet his eyes, stepping closer to her brother and hugging his arm. Ramor took a deep breath as if her touch had suddenly fueled him with bravado and foolish defiance.

"I considered you sensible enough not to make a scene, Your Highness," Ramor continued with the same imprudent tone. "Ever since my sister came here, she has been attacked, poisoned, humiliated, and neglected. Thanks to your poor care, she is constantly ill and stressed beyond measure." Raena squeezed her brother's arm, peeking at Ka.ssiian before hiding her face in her brother's arm. Ka.ssiian caught her eye for just a second, but it was enough to tell there was no fear in that look, no distress or hesitation. She was pretending again. He couldn't believe he had fallen for those puppy eyes and smiles before. "And if that is not enough, it seer... His Highness cannot even be bothered to investigate internal matters and give a fair judgment."

Ah, the maid again,' Ka.ssiian thought. Why is everybody so obsessed with that maid?'

"I..." he started, but Ramor interrupted him.

"I've known Kara since she was a child that was assigned to be my sister's playmate. She would never steal something, let alone from a person she barely knows. She might be a bit outspoken at times, but she is an honest and good person and I am positive she was framed."

"I..." Ka.ssiian tried to speak again, but the Prime Minister's son ignored him. Again.

"Moreover, even if she did steal – which she did not! Such a severe punishment without the presence of the master or mistress of the servant is unacceptable! I can't believe.."

"Ramor Magrath, do you want to be charged with disrespecting and meddling in the affairs of the Imperial family?" Ka.ssiian finally cut him off, his voice as cold and threatening as if he was speaking to his biggest enemy. Ramor froze, his face paling in an instant. His confidence wavered, and he licked his lips nervously, but as Raena's grip on his arm tightened, Ramor cleared his throat.

"I would never do that, Your Highness. I am simply here to assist my poor sister with the documents about your divorce," he said in a much milder tone, his voice cracking at the end.

"There will be no divorce!" Ka.ssiian stated, looking at Raena again. "Not now, not ever. So you can be on your way. I would like to have a talk with my wife."

"Forgive me, Your Highness, but that decision is not yours to make. The petition has been sent to His Majesty and until he makes his decision, I plan to take my sister home to.."

"Ramor, are you purposely trying to make me angry?" Ka.ssiian asked, raising an eyebrow. His heartbeat was drumming in his ears, his hands itching to hit him in the face to shut him up, but Ka.ssiian put the urge down. He couldn't hit him in front of Raena.

Ramor swallowed with difficulty, clearing his throat again.

“I would never..” he said in a trembling voice.

“Then mind what you’re saying! You’re not taking my wife anywhere!” Ka.ssian stated as clearly as possible.

“Your Highness, be reasonable! My sister can barely be called your wife. Your marriage is a formality, you haven’t even touched her yet. This annulment is...” Ramor trailed off as Ka.ssian raised an eyebrow, turning toward Raena just in time to notice her closing her eyes and leaning her head on her brother’s arm. He wasn’t sure what was going through her head right now, but judging by her expression, she hadn’t expected him to say that.

So that is how they wanted to play it.

Ka.ssian took a deep breath, taking a step toward his brother-in-law. Standing this close seemed to make Raena’s brother lose all capability of speaking nonsense. He just stood, eyes darting everywhere but to Ka.ssian’s face. Ka.ssian knew that his size often intimidated people and until this moment he didn’t care much for it, but right now he was glad for every second spent training his body.

He wanted Ramor shaking. He wanted Raena to feel intimidated too, but she just watched him with a calm expression and those big blue eyes full of calculation.

Ka.ssian leaned toward Ramor, his words low but still loud enough for both of them to hear.

“Is this the line that determines if a marriage is real?” Ka.ssian asked, his eyes moving to Raena.

Standing this close, she couldn’t hide her face from him. “Because I can remedy that this very second.”

Raena’s expression remained the same, but she averted her eyes. Ka.ssian looked at her brother, who was now staring at him with flushed cheeks and wide eyes. “So stop pushing me, dear brother-in-law, and leave. Or you’ll force me to show you something you don’t want to see.”

Ramor opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Instead, Raena spoke.

“You should go, brother,” she said with a quiet, but firm voice. “I’ll be fine.”

Ramor looked at her with disbelief, but she forced a smile that seemed to put him somewhat at ease. Annoyance filled Ka.ssian’s chest as he watched her stare at her stupid brother with so much affection until Ramor finally sighed in defeat.

"I'll come back when I have news," he whispered, kissing her forehead. Raena let go of his arm and he hesitated, glancing between her and Ka.ssian before swiftly bowing and walking away.

Raena stared after him for a few seconds, then the edges of her lips fell down and she turned to look at Ka.ssian, meeting his gaze head-on.

"You're a hard person to meet, wife. Let's talk."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 60 - Tips

0 11 minutes read

Raena stared directly into Ka.ssian's eyes, trying to keep a straight face. She had considered playing dumb again, but the way he looked at her told her that there was no going back now. Her pretending only worked if the other person believed in it, which was why fooling her brother was so easy. He was used to seeing his silly sister act childish or emotional, and just a few tears were enough to make him blind to any inconsistencies in her behavior.

Ka.ssian was seeing her now – the real her – and no amount of smiles and foolish words were going to change that. The look in his eyes was one of the reasons why she had been avoiding him for the past few days.

"I wasn't feeling well," she replied quietly, hugging her right arm. His eyes stopped on the bandages and he opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. "What do you want, Your Highness?"

"Let's sit down," Ka.ssian said, eyeing the decorative table with four chairs just a few steps away. It was added just recently after they had finished decorating the garden and working on her little project hidden at the back of it. Raena never used this place, since this meant being watched from everywhere, and she didn't need to add that kind of pressure to her already busy days.

She made no attempt to move, so Ka.ssian let out an exasperated sigh. He licked his lips, putting his hands on his hips, which made his shirt tighten around his flexing muscles. She hadn't noticed until then, but he looked like he just ran out of sword practice -his hair was damp and disheveled, and his face and neck glistened with sweat. Even his shirt was buttoned askew, as if he had done it in a hurry.

"I'm not retracting the documents," she said firmly when he looked like he was going to speak again.

"It doesn't matter. You're not going to get what you want," he said with such confidence, she wanted to punch him. She didn't expect him to agree outright, but the chances were actually in her favor now, so the certainty with which he spoke made her wonder if he had something up his sleeve.

“Why are you against it? Is it because of my father’s connections?” she asked, and Ka.ssian frowned, his eyes studying her face. “What if I can convince him to keep supporting you even after our divorce?”

“The answer is still no,” he said surprisingly calmly. “There will be no divorce.”

“Why are you being so stubborn? It’s not like we have feelings for each other,” she said with a hint of a smile, watching his face for a reaction. His jaw tightened for a second, and he looked away from her eyes.

Good. He is not going to confess, so that will make things easier,’ she thought.

“Why do you want to leave so badly all of a sudden?” he asked instead of answering. “Is it because your charade is over? What was the point of it anyway? Why did you pretend to be something you’re not? Why are you lying even to your own family? Tell me so I can understand, because right now your actions make you look extremely suspicious!”

Raena stared at him silently, trying to decide what to do. She had realized it some time ago, the fact that she had made a mistake. Coming to this place with all the memories of her world and the story was as much help as it was a hindrance. She had used that knowledge to the best of her abilities, but she had forgotten about one very important factor- every action had consequences. She had hoped that with the story already written, nothing could change the outcome, but the more time she spent around these people, the more she realized that even the tiniest change was affecting them and pushing the storyline off its course.

The real Raena never threatened or blackmailed the Empress. The real Raena never met with the first and second prince. The real Raena never bought the main character of the story. The real Raena never made enemies in the harem. She was just a quiet, obedient shadow that never made any ripples.

The moment the new Raena decided to step away from her designated path, the story had already changed. It was just her arrogance that kept telling her she could control the events just because she knew about them beforehand. That and her greed to use her knowledge to win the things she never had in her world. Now those two things had paved a new path for her, almost as dangerous as the one she would have taken had she chosen to stand behind Ka.ssian instead.

The two paths were not crossing anymore and even if she wanted to step on his, she couldn’t. Not after the choices she had made. Ka.ssian had on the major trigger and that was a betrayal. In the book, Ka.ssian eventually told Elene about how his mother was betrayed by the person she considered her closest friend- Ta.ssia – and was executed on fabricated charges for conspiring against the Empire and plotting to kill the Emperor. Ka.ssian had been only five then and living with his mother at the residence he now called his own. He had watched her get tied up and dragged away while people who bowed to her a day before threw stones and rubbish at her. The Emperor even ordered

Ka.ssian's execution along with hers, but Yulien had convinced him to spare the young prince.

That didn't stop the Emperor from suspecting Ka.ssian of conspiracy and sending him to the most dangerous missions from a very young age, afraid that the boy would turn on him in thirst for revenge for his beloved mother. The Emperor probably hoped that an enemy would do the job for him and kill his youngest son.

Still, Raena had chosen to align herself with the person who caused all the misery in Ka.ssian's life.

The person who was constantly trying to get rid of his brother – his only close family – and put her own child on the throne.

Raena didn't think she'd have to worry about the morality of her choice since in her mind, Ka.ssian was going to die anyway, and it had nothing to do with her. Of course, it was logical to align herself with the most likely winner. That didn't make the taste of regret any less bitter.

So for her sake, for Kara and Marden's sake, even for the Prime Minister's family's sake, she had to stick to her plan. If she told him the truth and she was branded a traitor, she would probably drag them all down with her. Her path now took her away from the third prince's residence, away from Etrobia – with or without divorce. The best she could do for Ka.ssian was to cut him off cleanly and hope she had made enough changes to the storyline so he could find a way to avoid his fate.

"No," she finally said, realizing she had gone silent for a long time. "I don't want to tell you."

"What?" Ka.ssian frowned. "Do you want to be charged with deceiving the Imperial family? You could be put in jail or even executed! Is keeping your secrets that important to you?"

Raena stared at him, trying not to give in to those pleading eyes. A man making that face wouldn't be sending her to her death for not wanting to tell him her secret, at least that much she was sure. He really was terrible at keeping his emotions hidden. She wondered if he was like that with everyone. If that was the case, it wasn't hard to understand why Lara had him wrapped around her finger. Raena probably had to do something about that poisonous snake before leaving. It was going to be her parting gift.

"Do what you want" Raena said at the end. "I'm going back "

She tried to go around him and head for the house when his hand stopped her. His hold around her arm was much more gentle than before or at least it felt so since he wasn't holding her fractured wrist – but what made her stop was the look he gave her. The pleading puppy was gone, and now the man commanding the Empire's army had taken the reins. For the first time since she met him, Raena felt threatened.

“Sit down,” he said in a harsh tone, pointing at the bench with his other hand. Raena hesitated, but eventually obeyed. She could feel him watching her as she settled on the opposite end.” I had the case with your maid investigated.”

Raena crossed her arms, leaning back.

“You were right. The object was sent here by mistake and when your maid went to return it, she was turned away. All people involved were arrested and awaiting punishment.”

“You don't really think they did that because they had nothing better to do, do you?” Raena asked, finally looking at him with a dark expression.

He had to be expecting that reaction because he didn't flinch, nor did he hesitate with his reply.

“She will be punished, too. I forbade her from stepping a foot out of her residence. Her allowance will be cut in half and she will give a written apology to both you and Kara.”

Raena scoffed, rolling her eyes.

“Did you know that Kara's hands were broken in over fifteen places?” Raena asked. “I was there when the doctor had to set the bones in their right places. She may not be able to use her hands properly ever again.” Ka.ssian remained silent. “Lara can eat her apology for all | care.”

“What more do you want me to do? Break her hands to0?” he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Yes,” Raena said without thinking. Shock ruled over his face, his eyes widening. “Break them and I'll consider accepting her apology.”

Ka.ssian continued to stare at her as if seeing her for the first time, then shook his head and leaned forward, trying to catch her eye.

“You really want me to break another person's hands? Are you sure?” he asked in an entirely serious tone. “Once you become the reason for someone else's suffering, there is no going back.”

Raena kept silent, pursing her lips. Thinking of Kara's hands and her pained face as she woke up made her blood boil all over again. "Can you at least look at me when we're talking?"

Raena turned her head slowly, locking eyes with his. He stared patiently as if waiting for a reaction, but she gave him none. In the end, he was the first to look away.

"I think we got off the wrong foot" he said, looking at his hands. His voice sounded strange, almost as if he was forcing the words out of his mouth. "I know half of the fault is probably mine, but I am trying to meet you halfway. I'm sure you had your reasons for pretending and I'd like to hear them -whenever you're ready to tell me. Until then, stop pretending. Stop lying. If there is a problem, speak clearly. If you're unhappy about something, say so. Just tell me what you want."

Raena stared down at her hands, unable to look at that serious, honest face. She was such an idiot. Puffing in exasperation, she turned to face him.

"Anything I want? You'll do it?"

"Yes," he said, his body tensing. She felt bad for him even before she said it.

"Alright then," she said, rising to her feet. His eyes followed her while he waited with a mix of anticipation and excitement battling over his face. "Then stop bothering me and forget I ever existed!"

Raena walked away before she saw the expression on his face, praying not to be stopped again. She didn't hear any steps coming after her and no hands stopped her this time, so as she continued forward, she let out a sigh of relief. She noticed a figure standing close to the building, awkwardly holding a sheathed sword in his hands.

Blaine greeted her with a bow of his head, but she ignored him and continued on her way toward the mansion.

Raena stormed inside, ignoring everyone on her way as she climbed the inner stairs and headed toward her room. Midway she stopped, staring at the end of the corridor, then turned around and headed toward Kara's room instead, knocking gently on the door in case she was sleeping.

A voice invited her to enter and Raena let herself in, her eyes landing on the empty bed. She looked around frantically when she spotted Kara standing by the window and looking outside. Her room faced the garden behind the mansion, so if she had stayed there long enough, she had probably seen what had happened.

"Who doesn't know the meaning of the word rest' now, huh?" Raena said mockingly, striding toward her friend. She hadn't moved from the window, nor had she turned. Raena stopped next to her, peeking outside to see what she was looking at.

Kassian was still sitting on the bench, but Blaine had joined him and the two seemed to be talking. Finally, the third prince got up, saying something to his aide, then striding toward the mansion. He glared at the building and Raena took an involuntary step back, although there was no way he had seen her.

"That was entertaining" Kara said in a quiet, hoarse voice, turning to look at Raena. Her face had regained some of its color, but there were still dark circles under her eyes, and her bruises and cuts were still visible. "You didn't tell him the truth, did you?"

"No. I told him to forget I ever existed. It's for the best," she said, pointing at the bed. Kara gave her a small smile, striding to it as Raena pulled the covers aside so she could sit comfortably.

"If it's for the best, then why do you look so miserable?" Kara asked as she watched Raena adjust the covers over her legs. "It's your decision, but you don't have to be mad at him because of what happened to me. It wasn't his fault. And I heard that he punished everyone involved."

"Yeah, apart from that snake," Raena murmured. "You know, I told him that if he broke her hands, I'll accept her apology. Do you think he'll do it?"

Kara closed her eyes, raising her hand as if to facepalm herself, but stopping midway. She turned to Raena instead, a condescending look on her face.

"What is that going to achieve, apart from giving her more reasons to attack you?" Kara said with a sad smile. "We both knew this could happen. I'll be fine. I'm finally getting the rest I was longing for."

"I thought you'd want payback more than me," Raena murmured, sitting on the bed next to her. "Yet here you are, promoting peace and forgiveness."

"I never said such a thing," Kara said sharply. "But violence is not who you are. You're currently acting on your emotions, not your better judgment, and that never ends well. Put that concubine in her place the right way – just like you've planned. Step two of your plan was to take control, right? Take the control from her."

"That may take time." Raena frowned. "And with the way things are developing, we might need to leave faster than we planned."

"Who knows? Maybe we do, maybe we don't" Kara smiled weakly, leaning her back on the headboard. "Besides, if you keep being mad at the third prince, how is Madam Lydia going to seduce him? Or did you give up on that idea?"

Raena sighed in annoyance, falling back on the bed and staring at the ceiling.

"Maybe," Raena mumbled, closing her eyes and covering her face with her hands. "I am not sure if I can win that one."

