

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 61 - Tips

0 9 minutes read

"So let me get this straight" Yulien said, leaning back in his chair and patting his lips with his forefinger. "My dear brother actually called for his favorite lover and ordered his guards to break her hands just because his wife said so? You saw this with your own eyes?"

"Yes, Your Highness." Blaine nodded awkwardly, sending Ka.ssian an apologetic look.

Ka.ssian remained uncharacteristically quiet in his seat. He hadn't said a word since giving his greeting and he looked even more frustrated than Yulien himself, who had spent the last thirty hours going over the final details of the reform for the new agriculture policy that was supposed to be implemented throughout the Empire two years ago.

"I was able to stop him before it was too late. Her Highness Raena figured he might really do it because she summoned me a few days prior and told me if he ever tries it, to stop him and tell him it's the thought that counts."

Yulien burst out laughing while Ka.ssian closed his eyes and shook his head.

When Yulien had received Raena's petition for divorce four days ago, he thought it had to be a ploy. But when Blaine came to tell him Ka.ssian requested to see him urgently, it wasn't hard to figure out his little brother hadn't been able to patch things up with the daughter of the Prime Minister.

Denying her request was easy, but if she was bold enough to do that in the first place, she wasn't going to just give up when she heard the news.

Especially when she found out who denied it.

"If I knew you had such entertaining stories to share, I would have found a way to see you earlier, Ka.ss." Yulien chuckled. "Gods know that I needed a good laugh." Yulien adjusted in his chair, shifting his shoulders and ignoring his rumbling stomach. If his endless duties weren't bad enough, not having any word from Arina or her father was even worse.

All he needed was a confirmation that they were safe and that he could stop being so cautious. Still, his worries were his own and he didn't want to bother his brother with them. Ka.ssian had to play his role too and to do that, he needed his house and his head in order. "How does it feel to be completely outplayed, brother? She can read you like a book. No wonder she fooled you for so long."

"I'm glad you find my situation so amusing." Ka.ssian sighed, scratching his neck.

“Sorry, sorry!” Yulien chuckled, raising his hands in surrender. “So, I gather you won’t be punishing her for deceiving you all this time?”

“Should I?” Ka.ssian asked, finally meeting his eyes. It wasn’t a rhetorical question, his face said, and Yulien gave him a pitiful look. Sometimes it felt like they had more than just six years of age difference. While he loved his brother’s honesty and straightforwardness, Ka.ssian was going to get himself killed one of those days if Yulien didn’t beat at least a bit of cunning into his head.

“Why are you asking me? She is your wife!” Yulien said, raising his eyebrows.

It was strange but somewhat refreshing, seeing his little brother so worked up. Usually, Ka.ssian was much calmer and Yulien had never seen him spare more than a passing thought about his women. He took care of them, he gave them what they wanted, but he never actually cared what was going on with or around them, let alone show affection outside the bedroom. Sarea’s function was to be the cornerstone of his family and to deal with the internal matters in his stead while his concubines were fleeting fancies or more damsels in distress he couldn’t leave behind.

Yet, it seemed like the pretty new wife with a big smile and even bigger secrets found a way to shake those impenetrable walls and pieces of them were crumbling right in front of Yulien’s eyes.

‘How interesting,’ Yulien thought with a smile, shaking his head as he realized his brother was talking to him.

“What would that win me? More resentment?”

“Well, it’s your wife, so it’s up to you what you do. But keep in mind she will find out I declined her petition and she might send another one once the Emperor gets better. I can’t stop her then and you know our father will give her what she wants. He only allowed that marriage because the Prime Minister requested it” Yulien said in his serious tone, running his hand over his desk. There were stacks of papers on it – both empty ones and others filled to the brim, and to his horror, most hadn’t been processed yet. Just the thought of going back to them gave him a headache. “So figure out a solution before that happens.

“Yes, I will,” Ka.ssian said in a strained voice. Yulien gave him a lopsided smile. “Thank you.”

“What are brothers for if not for stopping their sisters-in-law from running away?” he chuckled.

"It's just frustrating!" Ka.ssian sighed. "She won't answer any of my questions and she won't agree to see me unless it's an order. I can't even have a conversation with her because she would only answer with one-word replies! And the fact that I obviously can't threaten, torture or force her doesn't help!" Yulien grimaced.

"That's why she is not afraid of you." Yulien shrugged, taking his cup of tea from the desk. It had gone cold long ago, but he didn't want to bother with ordering a new one, then calling his tester again and wasting all this time. And these days, he couldn't really risk drinking even water without it being tasted. "So you've seen her after that conversation?"

"Tried to." Ka.ssian scowled.

"Alright, let me give you some relationship advice," Yulien smirked, leaning his elbows on the desk. He never thought he'd be giving Ka.ssian of all people advice about women, but while his little brother probably knew how to woo a woman, he had no experience with actually keeping one. He didn't have the luck Yulien had with Arina – while they weren't madly in love with each other, they both held enough respect and affection to make things work. Even though Arina had made him mad more times than he cared to count with her tantrums and meddling. "Stop trying to see her.

Stop trying to talk to her. She said she wanted you to stop bothering her, right? Do what she wants. For a while, at least. There is no point in knocking on door when you know the person on the other side Won't open it. Let her come out instead."

"I know that. But do I just sit and do nothing?"

"That's not what I am saying," Yulien replied.

"Let Raena calm down. Without divorce, she can't go anywhere, so she'll have to change her strategy. While she figures out what game she'll be playing next, focus on something else – on someone else." Ka.ssian frowned, but Yulien quickly waved his hand. "Not your other concubines. I think you should focus on Madam Lydia."

Ka.ssian gave him a confused look. "Excuse me, what? Where did that come from?"

"I think your wife and Madam Lydia have more in common than we think. They are both sharp, good at dealing with people and they have more secrets than they lead on. They seem to look very alike too, at least from where I stand." Yulien smiled. "So since your wife doesn't want to talk to you, talk to the one who does. You said that during the Empress's birthday party Madam Lydia was being extremely friendly, didn't you? Then go be friendly with her."

Ka.ssian stared at him for a minute, then glanced at Blaine, who just shrugged.

“Are you saying those two are the same...?” Ka.ssian started, but trailed off while studying his brother’s face. Yulien smiled.

“I am not saying anything. I’ve only met both ladies briefly, so to judge now would be foolish. Don’t tell me the thought didn’t cross your mind. Especially with Raena’s connection to that restaurant.”

“Of course it did!” Ka.ssian frowned. “But so far we couldn’t find any proof and.”

“If your wife went through all the trouble of creating a new identity, she probably didn’t leave much proof to find.” Yulien interrupted him. “So go to the only proof we know about – Madam Lydia herself. If she acts cold and angry like someone else you know, you have your answer. If she acts sweet, be sweet and find what’s under that veil, will you? Just imagine that it’s Raena underneath and use the opportunity. If somehow we’re wrong, consider it practice.

“Fine.” Ka.ssian sighed. His expression had changed and despite looking at Yulien, he didn’t seem like he was seeing him.

“Now. While it was truly amusing to listen to your love troubles, that’s not why I called you here today.” Yulien got up from his seat, motioning for Ka.ssian to follow him.

“Blaine, I’m expecting Visitors soon. Please let them in once they are here.”

Ka.ssian’s aide nodded, his eyes following them as Yulien led his brother to the door hiding the backroom where he usually met with his Shadows or advisers. The place was at the very end of the tower, surrounded by nothing but thick walls and open air, so the chances of anyone listening in were minimal.

Yulien stepped next to the big square table in the center of the chamber, looking down at the documents, maps, and letters on it. After staring at a map of the city and the Imperial Palace grounds, he turned to face his brother, who was watching him with a tense expression.

“The Empress is going to make a move soon. The Shadows have brought me numerous reports of her meeting with different noble ladies, all wives or daughters of people in Rissen’s faction or the neutral party. Not to mention she has reactivated her lady-in-waiting recently and the poor woman has been working nonstop, asking all kinds of questions. She barely even attends the Empress these days.”

“Do you think she might try to kill the Emperor while he is sick and blame it on his condition?” Ka.ssian frowned, the worried, hesitant man from before disappearing in an instant. His brother moved closer to the table, eyes darting curiously over the papers.

“She is not that stupid, she already has him wrapped around her finger. Besides, he is constantly attended by at least five people and I have my own spies among them, so there is no way she got them all.” Yulien said thoughtfully. “I think her target will be

someone else.” His eyes stopped on Ka.ssian’s face and his younger brother raised an eyebrow.

“Me?”

“I think she’ll try to take you out first, to weaken me. Then if she succeeds, she’ll come after me. That’s why I’ve sent Arina and the child away. If she takes you off the board, she can kill me in broad daylight and with the Emperor being sick and my connection to the army destroyed, nobody would dare dispute when she labels it ‘an enemy assassination.’”

“Why now?” Ka.ssian asked. “The only new development is Sarea’s condition, but even if she dies, that doesn’t necessarily mean her family will stop standing by my side. And with the Prime Minister’s support still behind my back, it makes even less sense to attack me now. She knows that a handful of assassins won’t be enough to take me down.”

“But what if she goes after Sarea and Raena? If she kills them both, their families might turn on you for failing to protect them,” Yulien whispered more to himself than to Ka.ssian, biting the inside of his lip as different outcomes flashed inside his mind.

“Or there might be some other reason we are not aware of.”

The two of them stared at each other.

“I’ll double the guards at home,” Ka.ssian said, and Yulien nodded in approval. “Will you be fine with just one bodyguard?”

“Oh, yes, don’t worry about me!” Yulien forced a smile. “We are practically sleeping together now, he isn’t leave my side even during the night. Ah, I miss the touch of a woman’s body next to me...” Yulien suppressed his laughter as he saw his brother’s expression.

“You’re still not funny, Yulien,” Ka.ssian sighed, his annoyance turning to worry. “Are you sure you’ll be fine? You look tired and worried.”

“I’ll be fine,” Yulien said, patting him on the shoulder. “Here. I need you to go over those.” Yulien turned around and raked about the papers on the table until he found what he was looking for. He piled them in Ka.ssian’s arms, who shuffled through them.

“It’s the Craidal Royal Family tree, as well as detailed descriptions and some sketches of each member. Go over them and mark which ones are dead for sure so we can narrow the search for the rebels’ so-called leader,” Yulien said quietly, glancing toward the door.

A knock came just as he did that.

“I have another important meeting, so you should be on your way.” Yulien threw a hand around his brother’s shoulder – or tried to, considering Ka.ssian was taller than him and led him to the door while another impatient knock echoed through the room. “Do keep me updated on how things go with Madam Lydia. I feel like this might turn into another amusing story.”

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“Yes, move the table over there, more to the left,” Raena instructed, motioning with her fingers until the furniture was aligned with the rest. The waiters that were tasked with rearranging the furniture in order to hide the holes left from the destroyed tables and chairs sprung into action.

The damage during the attack hadn’t been that great and nobody was badly hurt, which was a relief, but the mess in her office was so big she was still trying to determine if anything was missing.

She had sent Davin home to rest after seeing his black eye, and now she had to deal with ordering and calculating the price for the new furniture. Not to mention the decreasing customers and revenue.

It was fine though, it was a good opportunity to check if everything in the books was in order after Davin had been tending to them in her stead lately.

Recent events had made her realize she had become too reliant on people she barely knew, but even if she wanted to, she couldn’t do everything by herself. Not with Kara out of commission, Lara no doubt thirsting for revenge, Ka.ssian watching her, and all the troubles happening one after the other in the restaurant. Not to mention the Empress, who had been concerningly quiet after that stunt she pulled on her birthday. Raena had expected Madam Lydia to receive a new summon to the Imperial Palace, where she would be forced to reveal her identity to the Emperor, but that never happened.

Later, she learned that the Emperor fell ill and was on bed rest – also, the crown prince had declined her divorce request. She should have seen that coming.

“Madam Lydia, someone is looking for you outside!” one of the bodyguards called from the door. She motioned for the waiters to keep going, then walked through the big double doors of the restaurant.

The street was lively with people walking around or going in or out of the stores with excited expressions. Most used the sidewalk across the street from the restaurant, throwing curious or fearful glances toward the tall, peach-colored building. It felt like it was forever ago when the street was empty and grim, with nothing but the stray dogs passing through to shit or dig into the trash of the struggling shop owners.

The bodyguard- one of the new ones she had hired – nodded toward something and Raena followed his gaze, her eyes stopping on a small group of children that was looking excitedly at her.

A few even waved, huge smiles appearing on their faces as she noticed them. Most of them had gained weight, and their pale, skinny faces looked almost healthy now. Marden had found them some proper clothes and although they weren't the cleanest, all of them now had shoes, pants, and shirts.

Raena descended the stairs, stopping in front of them and smiling.

"Madam Lydia! Madam Lydia! We did our job!"

The little girl that liked to hug people and who Marden kept calling Mary wrapped her thin arms around Raena's legs, smiling from ear to ear. "Do we get to eat cake now? I like the one you gave us last time!"

"Why didn't you go to the back?" Raena asked, looking at Pen, who was towering over the rest of the group. In just a few months, he had grown over five inches and now he was almost able to look her directly in the eyes.

"There are a lot of people carrying things, so we were told to stay away," he replied. "But we came to report since you told us to come right away."

"Right." Raena nodded. She didn't mean it like that, but they looked so excited that she didn't dare to correct him. "So? Report."

Pen cleared his throat, straightening up, lowering his voice at the same time.

"We paid a few vendors and tavern owners with the money you gave us to spread rumors that a competitor attacked your restaurant because they wanted to steal your brand new recipe. Everybody is talking about it now and I personally heard a few people saying they want to come and taste the new recipe once you re-open."

"Great." Raena smiled, patting him on the head. His face flushed.

"W-w-w-we also spread the festival flyers and people looked excited!" he added.

"Good job, everyone." Raena praised them and their smiles grew even wider. "Let's go get you something to eat." Mary raised her hands for Raena to take her and the latter hesitated. She picked her up with her left hand, trying not to put too much pressure on the right one. She had removed the thick layer of bandages since she couldn't afford to walk around with them, but the doctor told her to be extra careful, since it hadn't fully healed yet. It still hurt like a bitch, but the pain reminded her that the next time she wanted to hit someone, she should do it with a bat. Or something else that wasn't her hand.

Raena hadn't made more than two steps when a familiar voice stopped her.

"Well, this isn't a sight I expected to see when coming here." Raena turned slowly, sensing Mary tightening her arms around her neck as they both looked at the tall, handsome man standing a few steps away.

Ka.ssian studied the children one by one before his eyes settled on her.

"What an unexpected surprise, Your Highness. What brings you here?" Raena asked, looking around. He was alone this time, no guards or Blaine, and even though he was wearing indistinctive clothes – dark britches and a simple blue tunic- he was still easily gathering people's attention. It wouldn't be long before somebody recognized him.

"How about a meal?" he asked, looking toward the building next to them. "It has been a while."

"We are closed for the next two days. We are preparing for the festival," she replied, adjusting Mary in her arms since her left hand was turning numb. Her muscles were already protesting against the strain, but the girl was holding her so tightly, it was going to be hard to put her down.

"Even for me?" Ka.ssian asked with a dazzling smile. Raena blinked in surprise, wondering what good thing could have happened to make him smile so brightly. Ever since they got married, she had never seen him smile like that not to her, not to anyone else, not even on his own birthday.

Raena glanced around, only to see even more people watching them. This could be a good thing for the restaurant- if word got out that the third prince came all the way here to eat, it would be a great promotion right before the festival. And it could help her figure out what to do with him as Madam Lydia. He had already told Raena he wouldn't allow divorce under any circumstances, so whether he fell in love with Madam Lydia or not was irrelevant.

"I guess the third floor can be used since it won't be serving guests during the festival." She turned her back on him, looking at Pen. "Take her and go wait at the back. I'll tell the cooks to bring you your food."

Pen nodded, giving Ka.ssian a wary look, and took the unhappy Mary in his hands. The little girl pouted while the group of children walked away.

Raena took a deep breath before turning to face the third prince again.

"Please follow me, Your Highness," she said, picking her skirts and climbing the steps. The bodyguard on duty looked at her with his eyebrows raised, but she just shook her

head. She waved at one of the waitresses that was now putting clean tablecloths on the tables, and the girl sprinted to her, nodding as Raena whispered her instructions.

She waited until Ka.ssiian tied his horse outside, then they headed toward the third floor. As she reached the threshold on the third floor, she stopped and raised her hand to invite him to go first. He made no attempt to move from the last step of the stairs where he was standing.

“Ladies first,” he said, waiting stubbornly until she headed toward the balcony. All the tables inside were tidied up and the weather was nice, so she picked one of the smaller tables under the shade on the balcony. She set the menu in front of the head seat, finally turning to look at Ka.ssiian.

He was staring at the city, his expression suddenly distant and thoughtful. Raena waited a minute before clearing her throat. He flinched, then turned toward her, smiling. Again.

“Please take your time picking whatever you’d like to have,” she said as he strode next to her. Raena held back a sigh as he brushed against her, now fully convinced he had done that on purpose.

“Do you want anything to drink while you’re making your choice, Your Highness?”

“Do you honestly plan to let me dine all alone?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. Raena licked her lips, swallowing the retort.

What was up with him all of a sudden?

“Are you sick, Your Highness?” she asked, receiving a confused look in return. “You’re acting very unusual, so I’m concerned if you have been poisoned or maybe you got hit on the head really hard?”

“And how do you know how I usually act, Lydia?” Ka.ssiian asked, putting the menu down and leaning his chin on his hand.

Raena cursed herself, searching for the right words. Ka.ssiian continued to watch her with those piercing eyes, and before she knew it, her heart was drumming in her ears.

“I’m an excellent judge of character,” she said after another few seconds of silence. He chuckled, pointing at the chair next to him.

“Very well. Please sit down and judge me all you want.” Raena hesitated before taking the seat. He was definitely up to something, but what was it exactly?

Did he figure out her identity already? She had covered all bases, and he didn’t recognize her the last time at the Empress’s birthday party, so it was unlikely he just

realized it. Not to mention, if he knew the truth, with his personality he would probably confront her directly and ask a million questions, not going along with her pretending.

What else then? He couldn't have fallen for her just because of some mild flirting that night. Maybe after his wife rejected and ignored him, he was in the mood for something else.

In any case, where did he pull this strong game from? The smiles, the gestures, even the way he spoke was different. Maybe he was better at pretending than she thought. His face still betrayed him though, so she should be able to tell his goal if she just observed him for a little while. Raena was just getting comfortable in her seat when one of the waitresses came to take their order. Once they were alone again, Raena locked her eyes on the clear sky and the rooftops of the buildings on the opposite side of the restaurant, her fingers unconsciously tapping on the table to fill the awkward silence.

She felt something big and warm cover her fingers and looked down in confusion, only to realize Kaessian's hand was holding hers. Her tapping stopped and her eyes darted toward the prince, who was staring at her with his eyebrows raised.

"This is a very impolite way to show that you're bored with the present company," he said, his eyes gleaming with amusement.

"My apologies if I have offended you, Your Highness," Raena said, pulling her hand away. He let go, gathering his arms in front of him. "I just have a lot to do before the festival, so I was thinking about work."

"It's alright if you speak informally to me when we're alone," he said, still looking at her. Raena wanted to laugh -he really wasn't pulling any punches. As strange as it was to see him acting so differently, it was just as entertaining. "What's this festival you keep bringing up?" Kaessian changed the subject when she didn't reply. Raena just opened her mouth to reply when she heard the sound of steps, and a moment later, the waitress appeared with their order. She set down the prince's meal first, then continued to arrange the kettle with the coffee Raena had ordered.

"There will be a festival on Ruby Street three days from now," Raena replied when the waitress left. She pulled one of the cups in front of her and added milk and sugar, then reached for the other, preparing to offer it to the prince. "It's not going to be big, just.."

Raena froze at the sight of a fork close to her face, the delicious smell of red meat and potatoes covered in spices tickling her nose. Kaessian was leaning his head on his free hand, holding the fork for her as if preparing to feed her. Raena blinked, glancing between him and the fork.

"Would you mind?" he asked, a playful smile appearing on his lips. "I didn't bring my tester with me and my aide was busy."

"I'm sure His Highness can taste his own food for once," Raena said without thinking, her mockery more than evident in her voice. She expected him to frown, but he just scoffed.

"That's how royals end up dead. Getting poisoned once is usually enough," he said, pulling the fork away and looking at it from up close. "In that case, you wouldn't mind if I return the dish, would you?"

Raena sighed, holding his gaze. She didn't like where this was going and even less so the fact that he was winning this time around.

"Fine," she said, picking up the second set of utensils the waitress had brought with the intention of using her own fork to taste it. From the corner of her eyes, she noticed him raising his fork again and bringing it to her face. Raena gave him an "Are you serious?" look, which he either ignored or completely misread because his hand didn't waver even for a second.

Raena hesitated. She could still use her utensils and leave him hanging, but as silly as it was, a small part of her wanted to see where this game was going to go. Besides, she had much more practice than him and she knew how to draw a line as she did with Marden, so it was better to take control of the situation.

Raena raised her hand and lifted her veil slightly, leaning forward and eating the steaming bite that was waiting for her. Ka.ssian's smile grew as he pulled the empty fork back and stabbed another piece. For a second she thought he'd make her eat that one as well, so she tried to chew faster, but he raised it to his own mouth instead, biting into it without hesitation.

Raena held back a scoff. That sly bastard. He never cared about her testing his food, he just wanted to make her do what he wanted.

"So," Ka.ssian pulled her out of her thoughts, eating another bite. "Tell me more about this festival."

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"Not this one either" Ka.ssian murmured to himself, leaning over the table and scratching the last name off the long list. He had been going over the Craidal Royal Family tree for the last few days, reading the descriptions and trying to recall every single face. It was a tiresome and unsettling feeling, trying to remember the people he'd killed, but it was important, so suffering through the memories of those pleading eyes and painful screams was necessary. It didn't matter that he had no choice but to obey the Imperial order and execute those people. He had been the one holding the blade, so the sin weighed on his shoulders.

Those were all of them – people he had killed, people who had died fighting, people who had killed themselves in fear of being captured. Every single member of the Royal family who was written in their official registry. But if they were all dead, then was he mistaken that a descendant of the Royal family was leading the rebels? Could it be a bastard child? All the heirs in the family tree were legitimate children.

“Gah, this is infuriating!” Ka.ssiian leaned back in his chair, covering his face with his hands. How were they supposed to find a bastard- or bastards – who had been hiding all their lives? While Craidal didn’t approve of the harem institution and their king could only have a single wife to rule beside him, the ruler’s reputation was one of a man as lax with his fidelity as he was lax with his duties to his people. Still, to not have a single bastard recognized? That was hard to believe.

That was only if his theory about somebody of that bloodline standing behind the revolts was right. Maybe the rebels’ leader was a soldier that everyone admired or a noble that had gathered the remaining forces and gone underground while preparing to win back their independence.

This was all Yulien’s forte. Just trying to figure out all the ifs and buts was making Ka.ssiian’s head hurt.

A creak came from the other side of the room, making him freeze. He was supposed to be alone in his quarters, with just the attendants and the guards a few rooms away, ready to provide aid or service upon his call. No one was supposed to be here with him and a report from his Shadows wasn’t due until tomorrow evening.

His eyes darted toward his sword propped next to his bed, and he pursed his lips. Too far away.

There was nothing on the table he could use either, apart from papers, ink, and a quill. He had to count on his own hands.

Ka.ssiian squeezed the armrests for a second, then he got up and turned as fast as he could, moving into a defensive position with his hands ready in front of his body. His eyes darted around the room, searching the corners where the candles didn’t reach, but he found no one there. There was no movement, no noise, no presence. He was alone.

Did he imagine it? They couldn’t have escaped that fast and the only ways out of his bedroom were through the window behind him, the door leading to the rest of the quarters and.. the backroom.

Ka.ssiian strode to the bed and grabbed his sword, unsheathing it with that familiar ringing that made his body relax and prepare itself for battle. He grabbed one of the candelabras from the table and strode to the backroom. Its door was open, so he carefully stepped through the threshold, keeping his sword at the level of his chest so he could react and protect his neck and vital organs in case someone attacked him. He

took another step and another, raising the light so it lit up the room. There was no one there either.

Releasing a sigh of relief, he let his sword fall by his side and strode back into his bedroom.

Maybe he was just tense because of all the thoughts about death and murder. He really needed to take a break.

Stopping by the table, he glanced outside. The moon was making its way through the sky, shining brightly as hundreds of stars flickered around it.

The festival must have started by now. He had told Madam Lydia he'd see her there, but now he wasn't sure if he should. The more time he spent with her, the more he realized just how little he knew of Raena herself – not the innocent, childish persona she had fooled him with, but the one that watched him with defiance and anger, the one that manipulated and played his entire household like a master puppeteer. If Raena really was the woman behind the veil, then how many secrets did she hide from him? Why did she go to such lengths to hide herself, to create these fake personalities? Why was that smart, capable woman shrouded in so many lies and deceit? Most importantly, what if some of those secrets were not ones he could just brush aside and ignore? Madam Lydia definitely had a connection to the Empress with all the favors she was getting, but how deep did that connection go?

Those questions plagued him and turned his blood to ice, making him uneasy and afraid to find the answers. And just as quickly as the dread spread, another feeling pushed back. Hearing her laughter ring in his head, seeing her eyes squint as she smiled behind the veil, listening to her talk, all those little things returned the warmth back into his body. He could tell she was indulging his flirting just because it suited her, but trying to draw a clear line between them. Yet, she wasn't uncomfortable, and she wasn't rejecting him like Raena did that day at the North Palace. Which meant if she really was Raena, she didn't hate him. She was pretending. Again.

Why did it have to be so damn complicated? What's with that woman and playing games? All he wanted was for them to sit down, put it all on the table and see where these feelings took them. He wanted to be able to see her, talk to her, touch her, love her, whenever he wanted, without having to wonder about a million things all the time.

Lies and secrets made life miserable. Lies and secrets always led to death.

A knock came from the door and Kassian jumped, cursing under his breath. He turned around, calling for them to enter, and one of his attendants stepped in, bowing.

"My apologies for interrupting you, Your Highness, but you have a visitor."

Ka.ssian frowned, heading to the door. The attendant quickly stepped out, escorting him back to his reception room. It was too late for meetings and he hadn't summoned any of his concubines, so who could it be at this hour? A hopeful thought that Raena might have come for something crossed his mind, but he quickly brushed it away. There was a better chance of the sky falling.

They stepped through the last door and Ka.ssian looked around impatiently, his eyes stopping on the two figures standing nearby and arguing quietly. Both were wearing simple dark cloaks, the type commoners wore, but as expected, the guards had made them take off their hoods to verify their identities. When the taller of the two raised his head, Ka.ssian frowned, recognizing Yulien's heavy-set bodyguard.

The shorter man turned, an amused smile dancing on his lips.

"Are you out of your mind?" Ka.ssian hissed as he strode to his brother. "And what are you wearing?"

"I'm in disguise!" Yulien said, raising his hands to give him a better view of his disguise. He was wearing a pair of brown pants tucked into knee-high boots, the type the city soldiers wore, and a gray shirt with an open neck and a slit running between his collarbones. His hair pulled into a low ponytail, with a few unruly strands falling around his face. "What do you think? Vyn said that I look just like a commoner!"

"No, I didn't." His bodyguard retorted. "I said you can never look like a commoner, Your Highness."

"Close enough." Yulien shrugged. "You're going to that festival, yes? We're coming with you!"

"No! A hundred times no!" Ka.ssian shook his head. "Most importantly, why are you so cheerful? Weren't you complaining that you were dying from overworking just yesterday? Did something happen?"

"I finished with the paperwork and I even got a letter from Arina that they are safe with her father. So starting tomorrow, I'm going to make our dear stepmother's life so bothersome, she might try to kill me with her own hands. For tonight, I need a break, so I remembered this festival thing you've mentioned." Ka.ssian opened his mouth to repeat his answer when his brother's smile dropped abruptly. "I have the two scariest people in the Empire by my side, I think I'll be fine. We're going and that's final."

"Sometimes I wonder who is the older one of us two," Ka.ssian sighed, shaking his head. He turned to Vyn for support, but the bodyguard looked like he had already exhausted all his energy for arguing.

"Don't annoy me. I can still let your wife divorce you," Yulien said with a wicked smile, patting Ka.ssian on the arm. He still had deep circles under his eyes and stains of ink on

his fingers, but there was a new liveliness in his eyes, which Ka.ssian couldn't ignore. It was rare for his brother to be this reckless and even rarer for him to ask something from Ka.ssian. Usually, it was the other way around. Ka.ssian sighed.

"That's really low, brother."

"Go change and let's go. Is Blaine coming?"

"No. I gave him the night off. Wait here," Ka.ssian said, turning his back on them and heading toward his room. He changed into a clean set of commoners' clothes he had prepared for the occasion, grabbed his cloak and his sword, and quickly returned to his guests.

He made Yulien and his bodyguard put on their hoods even before they left the mansion, then they rode in silence with Yulien between the two. Ka.ssian couldn't stop glancing around until they had to slow down or risk trampling over the people still walking the streets.

"Stop fidgeting so much. We have a few extra eyes following us from the shadows," Yulien said, just loud enough for his brother to hear. Ka.ssian's gaze darted around, searching the dark corners and rooftops, but he noticed no one there. Still, knowing they had at least some backup in case of emergencies helped him relax a little. "I'm not as reckless as you think."

The rest of the capital seemed almost deserted in comparison with the loud, merry Ruby Street. A row of shop stands offering bread or pastries, some strange round sandwiches or sweets in tiny boxes made the space feel even more crowded. There were a few performance artists gathering attention and the stream of people never seemed to end.

"I don't know if it's because I haven't seen one of these in more than a decade, but it's impressive what they've achieved!" Yulien said while Vyn went to tie the horses. His bodyguard returned, stepping behind the crown prince almost close enough to hug him. Yulien grimaced as he adjusted the hood to hide more of his face, then turned toward Ka.ssian. "Let's go have some fun, brother. I feel good about tonight."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 64 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

"That's a good turnout!" Kara said from the table in the corner where the two of them were sitting. It was strange to see her out of her maid clothes and wearing a long-sleeved dress, but Raena had to admit that it suited her more than the uniform. The drink in front of her was still half-ful, but she had stubbornly refused to let Raena help her drink. "You said that after the break-in, people were afraid to come here."

"Perception changes easily." Raena smiled, looking around. All the tables were full already, and earlier when they had come, they had noticed that there were people lining

up for the stands she had put up in front of the building. She had advised the other owners to make big flashy signs and special discounts for the occasion, and by the looks of it, it was working since the crowd hadn't thinned even after so many hours.

"Are you sure you want to sell it? You made it what it is," Kara asked, lowering her voice. "And you did promise me a lifelong profession."

"Well, things turned out a little different from what I expected, so we'll just have to be content with money. Besides, if I am not going to be here, why keep it?"

Kara stared at her as if she wanted to say something, then looked aside, her eyes studying the restaurant as if trying to memorize everything in it.

"As for the profession," Raena continued, catching her attention again, "pick anything you want. Seamstress? Designer? Or maybe a musician?"

"Are you purposely listing professions that rely heavily on the use of hands?" Kara scowled, her tone turning sharp.

"Yes," Raena replied without hesitation. "Because I am sure your hands will heal just fine and you'll be able to use them like before." Kara looked away without saying anything, and Raena held back a sigh. It wasn't that she blamed Kara for not being all cheerful after everything that happened, but if things went according to the plan, those were going to be the last memories they had in this place, so she wanted her to have a little fun. "Do you want to go look around? The best part is going to start soon."

Kara hesitated, glancing toward the window by their side. The sound of laughter and excited conversations outside almost muffled the chatter inside the restaurant.

"It's going to be fine. As you said, it's your hands that are hurt, not your legs." Raena smiled.

"You deserve some distraction. We just have to be careful not to bump into someone and hurt you. Stay close to me."

They got up and headed to the front door, ignoring the glances they got from the tables they passed by. Kara shifted uncomfortably while Raena kept her gaze forward, ignoring the whispers as well. People might have turned up as she expected, but they brought their biting words and suspicious looks with them.

Raena was just about to step out when they almost bumped into Marden at the threshold. He stepped back, moving a stair down and grinning.

"If this isn't fate! I was just about to come to find you!" he said, his gaze traveling to Kara by her side. "Oh, hello there! Who might you be?"

“Marden, this is Kara. Kara, Marden.” Raena quickly introduced them, her hand moving between the two as she mentioned their names. Marden narrowed his eyes at Kara, who shifted uncomfortably.

“Wait, I know you! You’re the maid from before!” he exclaimed suddenly, pointing at her. “I wondered where you disappeared off to. Got tired of serving this bossy woman, huh?”

“She didn’t serve me. She is my friend. And her name is Kara, not the maid,” Raena corrected him, arching an eyebrow. Marden raised his hands in apology, then extended one of them toward Kara. Kara frowned a little, looking down at hers she had insisted on wearing gloves despite the warm weather, still uncomfortable about the bandages and the bruised skin, but that made them stand out even more.

When Marden saw her hesitation, he frowned.

“What happened to your hands?”

“People who don’t know their place crossed the line and will soon pay for it,” Raena replied in her instead. Marden laughed awkwardly.

“I can’t see, most of your face, but I am ready to bet my head that your expression is scary!” he said, climbing down from the rest of the stairs and giving them a sign to follow. “Mind if I steal your friend for a minute, Kara?”

“Go ahead,” she replied and Raena threw her a glance before following Marden to the empty space next to the brothel’s building. She looked at him, waiting impatiently for him to speak. Even though she had spent the last three days at the restaurant, they hadn’t seen each other with him running around to find more workers for the festival and searching for an extra painter.

“Where is your guard?” he asked, his expression turning cautious.

“Running an errand. Why?” Raena frowned.

“Did you get the report he was supposed to bring?”

“Why do you ask? Come on, Marden, speak clearly if you have something to say.” she tensed, her eyes narrowing with even more suspicion.

“First, I want to point out that this has nothing to do with jealousy!” he said defensively. Looking at his serious face, she nodded. “I don’t trust him, Lydia. I don’t know what kind of relationship you two have, but I don’t think you should trust him, either. The way he hovers over you, the way he comes and goes without anyone hearing or sensing him, even the creepy, calculating way he looks around screams suspicious. The other night

when he came to get the report, I sent one of my men to follow him. That guy never returned, but a few days later the city guards found in an alley – a body so beat up, it was hard to look at. If it wasn't for the tattoo on his wrist, even his mother wouldn't have recognized him."

"Are you saying Zen did it?"

"I mean... I don't know. But it's one hell of a coincidence, don't you think? How long have you known the guy? Do you think he could kill someone in such a manner?"

"I.." Raena hesitated, licking her lips. "I don't know, Marden. It was late at night and your guy might have run in to someone while trying to follow Zen." Marden pursed his lips as if to disagree, so she hurriedly added. "I'd appreciate it if you don't send people spying on me or my people."

"I didn't..." he said awkwardly, with a grimace that would have made her laugh had she not felt so cold suddenly. She looked around, but everywhere she noticed people smiling or laughing or pointing excitedly at stands or performers. "I was just worried."

"It's fine this time. But please trust me." She forced herself to say, touching his arm. "In turn, I'll be more careful and less trusting. Deal?" She offered him her hand, and he looked at it before sighing.

"Deal." He shook her hand, then threw his arm over her shoulder, leading her back to where Kara was waiting. "Let's not keep your friend waiting. Cheer up, your eyes look worried. She'll see."

They joined Kara by the restaurant's entrance, and he tried to throw his free hand over her shoulder. Kara gave him a warning look, and he grinned, pulling away with an apologetic grin.

"By the way, almost all the books are already sold. I had to bring out the batch for our loyal customers. How do you come up with these things? I really want to know! Have you tried them all?"

"I really am not that flexible," Raena scoffed, thinking how at least she successfully improved her stamina to a point where climbing the stairs to the third floor of the restaurant didn't get her winded. Her little project from the days she was unable to leave her bed was recreating a book she had read in her world and which conveniently related to the type of work the brothel did.

"What book?" Kara frowned, looking between the two.

"Oh, you haven't seen it?" Marden asked excitedly, searching into the inside pocket of his suit.

“You carry one with you?” Raena exclaimed.

“Don’t you dare show it to her!”

“What? Why? She is an adult woman, she should know these things!” Marden grinned, parrying Raena’s attempts to snatch the small book from his hand. As he brushed away her right hand, sending a jolt of pain through the still-healing bones, Raena gave up. She hadn’t told him about the injury and he hadn’t noticed, so she couldn’t really blame him for not being careful, but tell him now was only going to raise more questions.

By the time the pain dissipated, Marden had opened the book somewhere in the middle and was showing Kara the pictures inside. Her eyes had widened so much, they looked like they were ready to pop, and her face had turned so red, Raena was worried she might blow a fuse.

“What is this?” she hissed while Raena took advantage of Marden’s laughter and shut the book closed, taking it away from him. “Did you draw these?”

“Only the first draft!” Raena shrugged, scratching her temple awkwardly. For some reason, this whole situation felt like her mother just discovered that her daughter knew what adult films were. “He found a painter to make them pretty.”

“Don’t say it in such a proud tone!” Kara said, still blushing hard. “Why would you draw something like that?”

“It’s an educational adult picture book,” Raena said, giving the book back to Marden since he looked like he was planning to forcefully take it.

“What’s the educational part?” Kara frowned.

“It teaches you how to give and receive pleasure in all kinds of ways. And I am proud to say, I know most of them!” Marden smirked. The two women glanced at him for a moment while he smiled proudly, then looked at each other. Raena threw her hands in the air.

“I did it when I was.. indisposed, you remember? It’s always good to come up with new, interesting things to keep people excited. Visitors have increased since you started selling them, right?”

“Oh yes, although my workers hate you!” Marden laughed. “But I am giving them a raise for the hard work they are doing, so you should be safe. Come on, it’s about to start.”

Raena threw Kara another amused gaze while her friend looked like she wanted to hide in a hole, then Marden ushered them forward, making a way for them to get to the front of the stage that was set at the end of the street. Some of the street children had taken a seat directly on the ground, waiting impatiently for the play to start. Raena looked

around with a smile, her gaze passing over the excited faces that had gathered in front of the platform. She could say with confidence that the festival was a success, but it still tasted bitter knowing that just when everything was going so well for the business, she'd have to leave it to someone else. She had already started making arrangements for the transfer of property. At first, she thought to transfer the restaurant under Ramor's name and have him sign a contract where a percent of the profit would be sent to her but that was going to be too risky – both for her brother and for her since in order to receive that money she'd have to disclose her location.

So the only option was to sell the place. She already had two buyers bidding secretly, so she didn't worry about the money, but she was going to miss it. She was going to miss Marden and their weird collaboration; she was even going to miss the North Palace. She'd even miss...

"Did you really have to make the princess wear a veil?" Kara's mocking tone pulled her into the present and Raena looked up at the stage where the lead actress of the play stood in a long blue dress and a veil, finally receiving a heartfelt confession from the hero.

"That was actually my idea," Marden said, raising his hand. "I thought that would make people more curious about Madam Lydia and bring them to the restaurant just to see her. Or just talk about her somewhere which would bring up the restaurant's name and so on..."

"My, my. you're finally learning!" Raena laughed.

"Is this why the hero looks so much like you?" Kara said dryly, looking at Marden.

"That's pure coincidence." He laughed a moment before his voice was drowned in cheers and clapping that followed the play's finale. The actors bowed and gathered the flowers that people threw at them, then slowly exited the stage. Kara was just turning to say something when Raena pointed above them and her friend looked up with a frown. A few seconds later, the sky exploded with bright colors, sparks scattering in the air and descending toward the ground like falling stars.

The fireworks continued for a while, giving the people enough time to gawk and gasp, and just as the night grew dark and quiet again, music erupted from the stage where previously the actors played.

Too busy watching up, almost nobody had noticed the musicians that had settled there.

The crowd moved excitedly, trying to make space for dancing.

"We should get going," Kara said in a tense voice, keeping her hands to her body. Marden moved in front of her just before a large man with curly hair staggered backward and almost trampled over her. Marden caught him before he reached Kara,

but Raena wasn't that lucky. As she tried to avoid the pushing people, she tripped on her skirts, her surprised scream drowning in the racket.

Just as she was bracing herself for the fall, two powerful arms wrapped around her and pulled her to safety. Raena tried to calm her racing heart as warm breath tickled her ear, then a familiar voice whispered.

"I've caught you just in time."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 65 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

"Ka... Your Highness?" Her soft blonde hair brushed against his cheek, tickling him until he reluctantly pulled back so he could meet a pair of blue eyes full of surprise and a hint of relief. Her hands rested on top of his while he still held her against him, her fingers tensing and relaxing, as if she was debating whether she should push him off or stay still.

She smelled of delicious food and faint perfume, the exposed skin on her arms and shoulders covered in goosebumps. She turned away from him, looking around as if she was searching for something. The crowd had stopped pushing and was now forming a circle, where a few dancing couples were already swaying and laughing in amusement.

She still hadn't pulled away, Kaessian realized. She stayed still in his embrace as if she didn't mind being there at all. Just as the thought crossed his mind and a pleasant warmth filled his chest, she tapped his hand.

"You can let go now," she said with a hint of a smile in her voice, those big blue eyes holding him so firmly, he almost forgot how to move. It had to be her, everything in his head screamed. He couldn't be feeling the same thing for two different women.

"What if I don't want to?" he heard himself say, feeling absolutely stupid the moment the words left his mouth. One of her eyebrows went up and small wrinkles formed around her eyes as if she was smiling.

"What would your wife say if she knew you were holding another woman so closely?" she chuckled, pushing his hand. Kaessian reluctantly let

"I don't know, what would you..."

"Ah, here you are!" Yulien's voice interrupted him and Kaessian looked away from her, his eyes stopping on his brother who had appeared with Vyn by his side. The bodyguard looked around with a scary expression, his threatening look stopping everyone from moving too close. "You disappeared so quickly, I thought somebody stole your purse!"

Yulien's eyes shifted to where Madam Lydia stood awkwardly, his smile growing. "I don't believe we've officially been introduced, Madam Lydia. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is mine, You.."

"It's Yulien tonight," he interrupted her before she could finish, giving her a sign to stop as she prepared to bow. She stared at him with a calculating gaze, then nodded.

"Nice to meet you... Yulien," she said in a tense voice. "Are you enjoying the festival?"

"oh, yes!" Yulien nodded excitedly. "The food is delicious, I got a new interesting book and the fireworks were marvelous. Well done!"

"It wasn't all my doing." Lydia replied in a polite tone. "But thank you."

"You're very welcome." Yulien beamed. An awkward silence fell between them and he looked between Ka.ssian and her. "Did I interrupt something?"

"Not at all" Lydia replied quickly, glancing over her shoulder at two men standing not far away, laughing and swaying as they tried to stay on their feet. Somebody called her name and then a small figure wiggled her way between the people, stopping in front of Madam Lydia. It took Ka.ssian a few seconds to recognize her, considering she wasn't wearing her maid's uniform this time, but there was no way he would forget the face of someone who indirectly caused him so much trouble. The maid didn't even look at him, her eyes locked on the blonde woman.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Madam Lydia was just saying. "Are you hurt? Where is Marden?"

"There was some problem at his work so he went to..." Kara started replying when she finally looked around, her gaze stopping on Ka.ssian's face. Her eyes widened, and her words trailed off.

As if realizing what she had seen, Madam Lydia turned as well.

"Ah, you must know Kara. After all, she works for your wife," she said, her eyes stopping on Ka.ssian. For a moment she seemed stiff as she waited for their reactions, her hands still holding Kara's shoulders.

"That's right" Ka.ssian spoke first. "How are your hands, Kara?"

"Um, they are fine, Your... sir," she said in a small voice, looking away from him. Her eyes landed on Yulien and she turned even more anxious. It was, strange to see her so unnerved when every time Ka.ssian visited the North Palace, she was perfectly composed and always one step ahead of her mistress's needs. Ka.ssian's eyes moved

to Madam Lydia, who had let go of Kara's shoulders and had wrapped a protective arm around her, as if preparing to drag her away.

"Well, it was a pleasure meeting you tonight, gentlemen, but I have a business to run. Please excuse us!" Madam Lydia said, turning around to leave.

"Wait.." Ka.ssian called at the same time Yulien did. The two exchanged a quick glance before turning to the two women. The song the musicians played ended and people erupted in deafening cheers that died down the moment a new, slower melody started.

"Dance with me," Ka.ssian said, his eyes locking with Lydia's.

"Excuse me, what?" she asked with a stunned expression.

"Would you dance with me?" he repeated, more confidently this time, eyes darting to the place where a few couples were already swirling and smiling at each other. She opened her mouth as if searching for the right words to decline when Yulien clapped with his hands.

"What a great idea! I've always wanted to see that. You two go ahead, I'll make sure to keep Kara company," he said with a bright smile, making a gesture with his hands for them to go. Ka.ssian wanted to tell him to shut up. The situation was more than embarrassing already, and he was just making it more awkward.

Stepping toward Madam Lydia, he offered her his hand. After another long moment of hesitation, she slowly placed hers in his. Her fingers were so thin and fragile, he was afraid he'd break them as he pulled her toward the crowd of enthusiastic dancers. They made their way through the clapping and laughing people until they were just outside the circle of dancers.

Ka.ssian stepped forward when she pulled on his arm. He turned to look at her.

"Are you sure you can dance to this?" she asked, glancing at the swaying couples. It was that the music was much slower and there were no strict set of steps and positions one had to follow, but watching the couples move, he didn't think it was going to be that hard.

"I'm a fast learner." He smiled, pulling her again. She didn't resist this time, and they stepped into the empty space between two couples, facing each other. Ka.ssian raised his hand for her to take, sliding the other one around her waist. She didn't protest, so he pulled her closer.

Her veil moved as if she had sighed, then she placed her hand on his shoulder.

Ka.ssian counted a couple of moments before taking the first step and joining the other couples.

He glanced at the other men to make sure he was doing it right, then he focused on his partner's tense expression. After the third time she stepped on him, he realized that her worry that he couldn't do it must have actually been her last attempt at hiding the fact that she had never danced this before. And that she was really bad at it.

Lydia stepped on his foot again, and Ka.ssian pursed his lips, trying to hold back his laughter. She glared at him for a second before returning her eyes to the other dancers, as if she tried to keep up by watching what they did. Another minute passed – and after a few more steps on his feet- she sighed in defeat.

“Do you want me to pick you up and carry you for the rest of the song?” he chuckled.

“I dare you” Lydia hissed in a threatening voice, stepping on his foot again. “Do it and I’ll ban you from entering my restaurant.”

“Your restaurant?” Ka.ssian asked, raising an eyebrow. She shot him a glance before looking away. “That’s a bold statement coming from a mere manager.”

She held his gaze as she stepped on him again, and something told him this time she had done it on purpose. He looked away, afraid that he might laugh in her face and make her even angrier. He couldn't remember when was the last time he felt so at ease even though he was surrounded by people, each of which could turn out to be an assassin. Yet looking into that burning gaze, at that pale skin and the shining blonde hair flying softly in the air, he could almost forget about them.

Ka.ssian let go of her waist, spinning her again just as the others did, then pulled her back toward him. He let his fingers trail over her lower back, traveling up the ties of her dress until they disappeared in her long hair.

He pressed her closer against his chest, just as she stepped on his foot again.

“What do you think you’re doing, Your Highness?” she asked in a low voice, her eyebrows raised. He had to give it to her, her self-control was impressive. Most women would have either slapped him or turned bright red by now. There was barely any space left between their bodies and he could feel every breath she took, every move of her body, every beat of her racing heart.

Ka.ssian smiled. Self-control or no self-control, some things people just couldn't hide.

“Do I need to spell it out for a smart woman like you?” He let go of her hand, moving it to her face, so he could push away a strand of golden hair that had fallen out of place. He tucked the lock behind one of the hair ornaments hanging on her head, then let his hand

trail to the side of her face before sliding underneath her veil. Her face was hot and soft, making his fingers tingle with excitement.

He hadn't realized it at first, but the music had stopped and so had the dancing. She continued to stare at him with that same unreadable look in her eyes, her chest barely moving as if she had stopped breathing. Kassian's fingers moved under her chin and he gently guided her to raise her head.

She caught his wrist and squeezed, then she pulled his hand away from her face.

"Thank you for the dance," she said in a polite but cold voice. "Please enjoy the rest of the festival. I have to go back."

Using his stupor, she wiggled out of his grip and turned to leave, so he instinctively grabbed her wrist. He heard her hiss in pain, head snapping back to glare at him. He let go immediately, and she pulled her hand, pressing it to her body.

"Please, excuse me!" she muttered, quickly disappearing into the crowd. Kassian stared after her, his breath stuck in his throat when his eyes landed on Yulien watching him with his eyebrows raised. Kassian strode to his brother.

"It's her." he breathed. "Madam Lydia is Raena. I'm sure of it." Yulien smiled at him – one of those almost condescending smiles he often offered the other nobles when they reached the conclusion that he had long figured out. Kassian scanned the crowd for Madam Lydia-no, for Raena – and for a moment he thought he saw shiny blonde hair. He headed after it, distantly hearing his brother calling his name.

He made his way through the crowd, trying his best not to push people, but their slow movements annoyed him and a few elbows later, they were readily jumping out of his way. When he neared the restaurant, he stopped, searching for her. The crowd was still as thick, lining up in front of the food stalls while waiting for more of those small strange sandwiches to be prepared.

He spotted her then, climbing up the stairs of the restaurant with Kara by her side. The two stopped on the top step as a dark-haired man with a long cloak and a sword hanging from his waist halted in front of them. Kassian narrowed his eyes as the man moved closer to Raena, leaning down to say something in her ear. His hand settled on her lower back, staying there as he continued to whisper, their heads almost touching. She nodded and he led her inside, giving the crowd one last look over his shoulder.

Kassian's eyes widened as he recognized his face.

Raena's guard disappeared inside the restaurant along with her, his hand still resting possessively on her waist. Kassian gritted his teeth and took a step toward the building when a hand grabbed his shoulder. He spun around, ready to smash his elbow into the

face of the annoying stranger, when Vyn caught his elbow just before it landed in Yulien's nose. Yulien raised an eyebrow, giving his brother a dark look.

"Was that her guard that used to be a slave?" Yulien asked, glancing over Ka.sasian's shoulder.

Ka.sasian nodded, not sure if he could rely on his voice. Vyn let go of him and stepped back, eyes still wary. "I know you won't like what I am going to say, but you'll have to trust me and do as I tell you."

Yulien looked at him, waiting until Ka.sasian met his eyes. "You're not going to confront her or show her you know her secret. Not tonight, not the days to follow."

"What?" Ka.sasian frowned, indignation rising in his chest. "You pushed me to find out her identity and now you're telling me to do nothing?"

"Yes." Yulien declared with a cold, serious expression, his eyes turning sharper than a knife. "Because I foolishly overlooked one important detail." Ka.sasian stared at him defensively, his body trembling with anger and malcontent. "Your wife is in contact with both the Empress and numerous Craidal citizens. She has money, resources, connections, and questionable loyalties which would make her the perfect enemy collaborator.

Think about it – she lied, deceived, went behind your back, and even created a whole new identity for herself as if she was trying to make Raena Magrath disappear. What if she is working with them and plans to run away the moment they are ready to act? We need to find what she knows about the Empress's plans and Craidal's movements and what role she plays in them."

"She is not collaborating with either of them. She can't be!" Ka.sasian said with all the confidence he could muster. Yulien's face hardened as he stared at his brother.

"I sincerely hope that is the case," Yulien said, stepping closer to him. "But I can only afford to trust facts. So I need my brother to step back and my General to take his place." Ka.sasian froze in his spot, looking at the crown prince with surprise."

You will keep pretending that you don't know her identity. You will keep getting closer to Madam Lydia until you find out everything you can about what she is planning. And you will report every little detail to me because right now, this is the only way you can save your wife from seeing the inside of the dungeons."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 66 - Tips

09 minutes read

Zender wiped his blade in the dark cloak of the man lying at his feet, looking up and down the alley where he had dragged the body. The blood quashing from the man's

open neck was already forming a puddle on the dirty ground, soaking into his black clothes and veiled face. The eyes – the only visible part of him – were forever frozen in a look of surprise.

“Get rid of the body,” he ordered as he rose to his feet. He looked at the two people standing half-hidden in the shadows, one of them nodding quickly. Davin stepped forward, crouching next to the body before throwing it over his shoulder with a grunt. “Strip his clothes and burn them. And mess up his face so it’s not easily recognized. Dump him somewhere far.”

“Yes, brother,” Davin said readily. “I’ve got it.”

“Do you need any help? He looks heavy. You know you can’t be seen.” Elene’s quiet voice stopped her brother just as he was about to leave.

Davin sighed with annoyance, adjusting the corpse on his shoulder.

“I can handle it, E. Just do your part.” Davin grumbled, striding to the end of the alley before disappearing from view. Elene slowly turned to face Zen.

“If you are done coddling him, let’s go. We should be there first,” Zender said coldly, watching her as she pulled at the black cloth wrapped around her head. To minimize anyone spotting them and lower the chances of another of those Shadows attacking them from behind, they had decided to start dressing like them when they were out in the city – black tight-fitting clothes that allowed easier movement, and a dark cloth wrapped tightly around the head, leaving only the eyes visible. It had been hard to breathe at first and definitely stuffy in the weather that kept getting warmer, but ever since they started doing it, their encounters with others decreased.

It seemed most of the Shadows stayed out of each other’s way until their mission was forcing them to work together, so even if they were spotted, the others kept their distance and minded their own business. He had learned their signs and greetings from watching them for a while, so now if someone tried to communicate with him from a distant roof or if they ended up on the same street, he knew how to react. He hadn’t heard any of them speak so far, which was a good thing since he suspected that people like them could catch on to his accent.

“Let’s go,” Elene murmured, adjusting the cloth over her nose.

Zen took the lead, running to one of the nearby houses where there were enough crevices to be used as grips for climbing and the windowsills could support their weight. He hoisted himself up, gripping uneven bricks and running his fingers over the wall to find better hooks. By the time he reached the roof, Elene had climbed to the second floor, so he moved back to make space for her. For all her aloof behavior, she was much better than Davin in everything she did, despite the two of them receiving the same training.

Elene finally landed on the top, swiftly getting to her feet. The two of them tiptoed soundlessly across the rooftop, jumping onto the next one.

Making their way to the restaurant as silently as possible, they had to stop a few times when they noticed a person walking outside or looking out of their window.

When they finally landed on the rooftop of Raena's restaurant, Zen locked his eyes on the building attached to it. It was too late for the restaurant to be open, but there were noises coming from its neighbor – a strange mix of laughter, pleasure, and pain. He stepped onto the brothel's roof, careful with its tiles since the workers hadn't changed them when they renovated the place. Moving to the side facing the back alley, he crouched down and grabbed on the edge. He leaned over to look at the room that was located just below his position, inspecting it for any movement. When he was sure it was empty, he pulled himself back up, turned around, and slid off the roof. Hanging from his hands, he stepped on the windowsill, using his foot to push the window open.

Once the window was open, he swayed back and jumped inside, landing in a crouch. His hand flew to the dagger on his waist as he gave the room another look, but aside from a bed, a double-winged cupboard across from it and a small table with a chair in the corner, there was nothing and no one inside.

A soft thud told him Elene had followed inside and as he turned, she was just getting to her feet.

They barely had time to exchange a look before the sound of voices made them turn toward the door.

They moved together, with him stepping behind the door while she flattened herself against the wall behind the cupboard.

The door opened slightly, letting in some of the light the person outside was carrying.

"I apologize for the delay, Your Highness, but I can assure you Holland will be with you in no time. He is just freshening up!" a woman said in a sweet voice. "Would you like me to keep you company while you wait?"

"No," a deep male voice replied, and the light flickered for a second. "Give me ten minutes to prepare and then you can send him up."

"Of course, Your Highness! Please enjoy your stay and don't hesitate to let me know if there is anything else you'd like to have!" the woman said before walking away.

For a moment, everything was quiet, then the floor creaked as the man stepped inside the room, carrying the light with him. Zen slid his hands over the door, pushing it closed.

The tall newcomer jumped in surprise as the lock clicked in place, turning around and pulling out a dagger. Despite his height and threatening stance, his face was one of a nervous man who wanted to be anywhere but in that room.

Zen took a step forward, crossing into the circle of light and raising his hands to show he was not armed- he had slipped his dagger back into its place the moment he recognized the man. The second prince of the Etrobian Empire stared at him with a tense expression before slowly lowering his weapon.

“What’s with the disguise?” Rissen frowned.

“What’s with the mask?” Zen asked back. Rissen snorted, slipping the black mask off. Zen pulled the cloth covering his mouth and nose, revealing his face. Elene stepped out of her hiding and the prince jumped in surprise again, almost dropping the candle.

“By the gods! Make a noise first, will you!” he hissed at her, receiving a cold, uninterested look in reply. “What was so urgent you had to call for a meeting? It’s very unlike you to take such a risk.”

“I need you to do something for me,” Zen said calmly, ignoring the grimace Rissen made. “It has to happen quickly, before the Anniversary Celebration of the Empire next month.”

“What is it?” Rissen asked, his shoulders tensing in anticipation.

“I need you to kidnap someone and keep them safe before I collect them.”

“Who?” Rissen frowned.

“Raena Magrath.”

Silence filled the room as Rissen’s face switched from confused to thoughtful to angry.

Finally, he raised his chin in defiance, meeting Zen’s eyes.

“That’s impossible!” he said finally. “My mother wants her dead for all the stunts she pulled and I don’t think you can change her mind. Besides, we have already agreed on the terms of our arrangement, so you can’t just go on changing them as you please. Even if we are to agree with it, how do you expect us to get her out of his residence? She has more people watching her than the damn emperor!”

“You seem to be confused,” Zen said with a smile, his eyes stopping on Elene. She nodded, her hand moving behind her back while Zen’s attention returned to the prince.”
This is not a request.

Without me, you don't have the support you have right now. Without me, you don't have anyone to do the dirty work for you. Without me, your brothers will eventually put you in a hole so deep, you won't see sunlight ever again. I vowed to kill all of your cursed family, but because you're a bastard like me and you can be useful, I didn't mind letting you rule this crumbling Empire of yours. Still, that can change in an instant."

Elene stepped behind Rissen, her blade pressing against his throat. He froze in panic, face paling in an instant. Raising his hands in surrender, he glanced down at the blade before looking at Zen again.

"You will get Raena Magrath out of that place, unharmed, or I swear to you that when I step into the Imperial Palace to kill your family, you and your mother will die along with them." Zen stepped toward him, smiling. "Do we have an understanding, Your Highness?"

"Yes! Fine!" Rissen said in a small, trembling voice. "I'll arrange it!"

"That's more like it." Zen smiled wider, patting him hard on the shoulder. Elene pulled her knife away, releasing the prince. Rissen glared at her, rubbing his neck even though there wasn't even a nick left on it. "Is everything ready for the Anniversary Celebration Ball?"

"Yes, almost" Rissen replied, his voice quieter and more reserved than before. "It's going to be... Madam Lydia's restaurant is catering it again, so they will take the fall. Kassian will shortly follow, so even if you don't kill him at the ball, he won't live long enough to enjoy his luck. Just make sure to kill Yulien, he needs to die that night at the hands of the rebels and this will all end there."

"Don't worry, Your Highness, I've been preparing for this for a long time. Just make sure you do your job so we can part ways as friends," Zen said, pulling the cloth over his face. "It's almost time to.."

A hesitant knock came from the door, and all three of them turned to look at it. Someone sighed on the other side, then knocked again.

"Your Highness, are you ready? May I come in?" a soft voice asked.

"One minute!" Rissen replied gingerly, mouthing Get out! Elene moved first, climbing on the windowsill and disappearing into the darkness above while Zen lingered, glancing back at the prince, who was just undressing. Elene was waiting for him on the roof, crouching down so as not to be spotted. Shortly after Zen secured himself on the roof, the room below filled with the voices of the prince and his companion, hushed and excited, only to be replaced with moans and words of affirmation a couple of minutes later.

Zen gave Elene a sign to get going, but she didn't move, her eyes dark and concerned.

"That sounded awfully confident back there," she whispered. "Are you really that sure it's going to work?"

"Everything we have been through since we were children was to take the throne of Craidal from that old raping bastard," Zen said just as quietly.

"Now to do that, we need to bring the Empire down or put it in the hands of someone who can't oppose us. It has to work."

"And Raena?"

"Raena is mine," he said, his voice sharper than intended. "The plan stays the same."

"She won't take it well if you kll them all. She hates violence and even though she says she'll get divorced and leave this place, she doesn't actually look like she wants to. She cares about these people."

Zen pursed his lips, staring at the dark wall of the back alley.

"She'll get over it. She won't have a choice, anyway." He heard steps and turned, noticing that Elene was slowly walking away from him.

"So you plan to turn into the same bastard as your father, huh?" she asked with her back to him. "I bet your mother would be so proud."

Zen gritted his teeth, his hand going for his dagger on instinct. He stopped himself before he did something stupid, trying to calm down. He needed her, he needed her brother. They were the last family he had left, even if they didn't share blood. He couldn't kll them.

"Soon Madam Lydia will be a traitor and her staying here will mean certain death. There will be no one left to protect her," he said instead. "Her fate intertwined with ours that night at the slave market and she will have no choice but to pick our side."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 67 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

Kassian parried the sword flying toward him, changing the angle so he could push his opponent back. Gerrin staggered a few steps, resuming a defensive position as Kassian swooped toward him. He tried to focus on the weight of his sword, the direction of the evening wind, and his opponent's little tale signs that warned him what he was about to do next, but his concentration kept slipping.

Memories from the night of the festival flashed before his eyes – the way her eyes smiled and glared, the way her hair smelled, the way her skin and lips felt under his fingers.

Gerrin ducked under his sword, moving his weapon in his other hand and attacking without hesitation. Ka.ssian had already overreached with the last blow, so he could only partially parry the next attack. His second-in-command pushed their swords up, slamming his shoulder into Ka.ssian's chest and then hitting him with his elbow in the face.

Ka.ssian landed on his ass, his sword falling by his side with a loud clank. He felt his mouth fill with something warm, his lower lip stinging. Turning his head aside, he spat the blood, looking up at Gerrin, who was panting heavily, a deep frown engraved into his face.

"What's with you? Your movements are shit today!" he muttered before looking warily at the other soldiers that threw curious glances at them.

They were all too far to hear since they had started increasing the distance between them the moment they saw their little duel heating up. Gerrin rarely allowed himself to speak to him in such a crude way, especially in front of others, but this only served to show how concerned he was. "If you're not going to pay attention, go and do paperwork! I don't want to lose my head 'cause I damaged your stupid Imperial body!"

Ka.ssian got to his feet with a sigh, picking his sword from the ground. Gerrin tensed as if expecting a surprise attack, but Ka.ssian just turned the sword in his hand a few times.

"I think I am done," he sighed, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. Gerrin was right; he really wasn't in his right mind right now. He was angry at Yulien for forcing him to continue this disgusting game of deception; he was angry at Raena for being such a schemer and a liar; he was angry at himself most of all for being such a j****t. This could all have been easily resolved if he ordered his guards to arrest her and pass her to Yulien to do as he liked. Yet the thought of her being tied up, questioned or tortured made his chest hurt. The worst of all was he couldn't even talk to her about it.

Yulien had told him to stay away from Raena and to seek Madam Lydia instead. The problem that Madam Lydia had been unavailable every time he went to the restaurant, which meant Raena was home.

"I'm worried about you," Gerrin said suddenly, and Ka.ssian looked at him. "I have never seen you so out of it. I think it has been about... what? Six years since the last time I managed to draw blood from you. What's the problem? Do you want me to beat up somebody?"

"You can't help me with my problem this time, Ger," Ka.ssian replied, giving him a tired smile.

"Thanks for the spar. I'll see you for the inspection tomorrow." Ka.ssian strode toward the stairs leading outside the training grounds, his step faltering as he noticed the Grand

Chamberlain waiting for him at the landing above. Ka.ssian resumed his walk, ignoring the glances from his soldiers until he was facing the older man.

“What is it?” Ka.ssian asked before the Grand Chamberlain could speak.

“I apologize for bothering you here, Your Highness,” he said in his usual polite tone. “But Lady Lara has sent a servant three times already to enquire if you would be willing to visit her tonight. I took pity on the poor girl and came to ask what you’d like to do.”

Ka.ssian sighed, rubbing his forehead. He had had his head so full of Raena and Madam Lydia that he had almost forgotten about Lara’s existence.

With her confined to her quarters and stripped of all her privileges, she was probably going crazy. It wouldn’t be long before she did something that would only make things difficult for him. He should probably meet with her and warn her to behave. He couldn’t deal with any more drama at this point.

“Tell her I’ll go,” he said with another heavy sigh. “I’ll take a bath, change, and head over there.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Ill relay the message.” The Grand Chamberlain bowed, staying like that until Ka.ssian headed toward the Main Palace. He took his time to soak in the bath the Head Maid prepared, then changed and dragged his feet toward the Concubines’ palace.

His eyes inspected each and every guard as they saluted him on his way, making sure they were all in top shape, ready to react even to the tiniest threat. He had doubled the security inside the Palace, which had startled some of the staff and the concubines, but after an announcement was made that it was for everybody’s safety, things quickly settled down.

There hadn’t been any movement in the capital or outside of it and that concerned him even more than news of yet another revolt. It had been a while since the last uprising or trouble in one of the territories, which made him believe that their enemy’s focus had already shifted to the capital.

But what were they waiting for? Where were they hiding? A city-wide search would only alert them that the crown knew about their presence.

Increasing the guards was not going to work either since it might cause panic or when tension ran high, people often did stupid things which could lead to unnecessary accidents.

Did Raena really know something about this? Those three slaves she bought – could it be that she had done this on purpose, knowing they were indeed more than just unfortunate refugees who happened to cross the path of slave traders? Were they really spies or not? It was easier to suspect people than to trust them, but right now, the problem was that everybody could be an enemy.

What was worse, his enemies usually weren't content with spreading rumors or trying to weaken his political standing – his enemies went directly for the kill with no fear or hesitation.

Ka.sasian took a deep breath and tried to shake those dark thoughts away. He raised his hand and knocked on the front door of Lara's residence, waiting for someone to open it. A maid soon appeared, leading him inside. Ka.sasian followed silently, looking around—the place looked just the same as he remembered it, but somehow darker and lonelier.

"Please go in, Your Highness. My Mistress is expecting you," the maid said at the door she had opened for him. Ka.sasian glanced at her before stepping in and flinched as the door closed behind him. He looked around, frowning as he realized that there were fewer candles than usual in the room, drowning it in an eerie gloom. Most of them were scattered next to the bed, with a couple staying over the small round table that had been brought in.

Several dishes were already waiting on it, steam rising from a few of them as if they had just been taken out of the fire.

He looked away from the food, ignoring the rumbling of his stomach, and searched for Lara.

She appeared from the door leading to her bathroom, gliding over the floor in a long dress tightly hugged her body. A long slit ran from the top of her thigh all the way to the floor, showing her leg with every step she took. Her pitch-black hair was brushed to her left side and arranged in a way that it was partially covering her face, likely to hide the slowly healing bruises and swelling. The doctor had said that her injury was not life-threatening, so with proper rest and time, it should heal by itself.

Still, the bone had been slightly displaced, so her perfectly proportionate face was not going to be so perfect anymore.

"Your Highness, you're here!" Lara exclaimed with a hint of relief. She dropped into a graceful curtsy and quickly rose up, intertwining her fingers as if to stop them from fidgeting. "I was told you haven't had dinner, so I took the liberty to have some prepared. Please join me."

Ka.sasian glanced at the table again, hesitating.

“Sure” he said and she beamed, waiting for him to sit down first. As they settled, she grabbed the bottle of wine that was prepared, pouring some of it into the two glasses standing in front of each of them. Once she was done, she picked up her fork and looked at him.

“May I?” she asked, pointing toward his plate. He nodded, and she sunk her fork into one of the pieces of meat in the middle, bringing it to her mouth and slowly closing her lips around it. She took her time chewing on it, her face contorted as if she was in pain, then forced a smile.

Kassian picked up his own fork, preparing a bite. She seemed entirely focused on her plate, but he could feel her impatience even without looking at her.

“What is it that you want?” he asked, taking a bite. The meat was a bit overdone and the spices were a tad too much, but he tried to ignore that, forcing himself to take another bite.

“I only wanted to see you, Your Highness. I’ve missed you!” she said readily, as if expecting the question. When Kassian looked up she was watching him, her face turned slightly to the left, so he was only seeing her good side. He wanted to tell her he wasn’t so shallow but decided against it.

Ever since they knew each other, she had always been particular about her looks so no matter how many times he told her he didn’t care what she wore to visit him or how much makeup she put on, she didn’t seem to hear him.

“I’ll ask one more time what you want and then the answer will be ‘no’,” he said tiredly, putting the fork down and leaning back in his chair. She hesitated for a moment, her lips twitching as if she was struggling to keep that beautiful smile up.

“Very well. I do have a request” she said with a soft sigh. “But I do miss you. I know I made a mistake and sincerely repent for my actions, but that hasn’t changed how much I love you! If anything, I am more than willing to set things straight and make amends if it means for you to forgive me.”

“Just say it, Lara,” Kassian warned. She let out a puff of air, pouting her lips.

“Very well. Tomorrow there will be a party at the North Palace and all concubines have received an invitation, me included. However, as per your orders, I am not allowed to leave my residence. I request that you allow me to go out to the North Palace and continue my punishment the day after. Please, Your Highness! As you can see, your wife has forgiven me already, otherwise why would she invite me? This would be a perfect opportunity for me to offer my sincerest apologies both to her and her Head Maid.”

Ka.ssian studied her, his fingers tapping on the table. A party? This was the first time he was hearing of it. It had to be an internal one, otherwise, he would have been notified if outsiders were supposed to enter the residence. And she had invited everyone, including Lara? What was she up to? Was it another one of her schemes? What could she possibly want from the concubines?

One thing was clear – there was no way she had forgiven Lara. While Lara could pretend like she didn't care that he almost had her hands broken and smile at him with the same overflowing affection, she probably hadn't forgotten that it had all happened because Raena wanted it. Could it be that Raena organized the party now on purpose, knowing Lara couldn't attend because of her punishment? That made more sense than forgiving Lara. Unless she planned to do something to her at that gathering.

Either way, it was better to keep them separate. He didn't want to antagonize Raena, and he definitely couldn't take Lara's side if she decided to do something on her own.

"No," he said, getting to his feet. "It wouldn't be a punishment if you got exempted from it whenever you feel like it."

"But Your Highness.." Lara protested, standing up.

"Don't push it" Ka.ssian warned her as she opened her mouth again. "My decision is final. Try to go and suffer the consequences."

He turned his back on her and walked toward the door, painfully aware of her eyes drilling a hole in his back. Just as he was about to touch the handle, her voice stopped him.

"She really got under your skin, didn't she?" she asked in a low, bitter voice that didn't sound anything like the sweet, melodic tone from before me."

You must see how deceptive and cruel she can be, don't you? She is doing all of those things because she can, because she knows you won't do anything to her, but she has no intention of returning your feelings. How can you trust and love someone when you can never be sure if they are lying to you, if they are faithful to you, if they aren't plotting something behind your back? You are everything to me, Ka.ssian, my whole world! I would never betray you! And I'll be right here when she breaks your heart and betrays your trust for the last time. I'll wait for you to realize that in this life no one can love you as I do. I'll wait for you to come back to Ka.ssian gritted his teeth, staring at the door for another second, then walked out without looking back.

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 68 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

“Welcome, ladies!” Raena greeted them with her brightest smile as she stood on the landing of her mansion, looking down at the women at the bottom of the stairs. There were eight of them in front of her, which meant all came apart from Lara.

That was excellent. “Come on, join me in the garden. Today we are going to have some fun!” She waited for them to raise their heads, then walked through the wide-open doors of the mansion. The main hallway seemed even more sparkly than usual and as she instructed, most of the servants who didn’t have an urgent task had lined up by the wall, their uniforms and even hair in impeccable condition.

She had little time to coddle the harem, so she had to win them over in one or two meetings tops.

She couldn’t afford to have them scheming behind her back at the only safe place for her. This gathering was as much for the concubines as for everyone else in the third prince’s residence. With the first wife’s condition worsening by the day, everyone had to be wondering who was going to take control of the harem. She needed them to think she was reaching for all that power, reaffirming her position as the person to replace Sarea when she was gone – this way, nobody would suspect that Raena Magrath was going to disappear from the face of this earth soon.

Lara not being here sure helped a lot. She expected the favorite concubine to try convincing Ka.ssian to let her go, but she either grew some pride or Ka.ssian had said no. Raena hoped it was the latter.

She heard the ladies whisper among themselves as they walked behind her, their words too quiet to hear, but the awe and excitement in their voices were hard to miss. Only the three who had visited her along with Lara seemed to be holding back their praises and looking around cautiously, as if expecting a trap. She wasn’t particularly worried about them – if the information her servants gave her was true, Ka.ssian hadn’t visited or talked to those three in years, so they probably followed Lara because they were out of options. Sarea wasn’t really into socializing with her husband’s lovers and most of the other concubines kept to themselves.

Raena stepped through the back entrance, glancing at the guards stationed in the yard. Even they seemed somehow dapper and more impressive-looking in their uniforms. Kara really went over the top for someone on sick leave.

Raena was the first to reach the table set up under the shade of one of the old trees, so she waited for them to catch up. She allowed them a minute to gawk at the carefully arranged food and exotic drinks on the table, then invited them to sit.

As they all settled down, a few of the servants moved to attend to them, offering the assortment of cocktails she had stayed up until past midnight to create. It had been quite hard to find the right liquor in this place and she almost got herself drunk tasting her own failures.

“We should have done this a long time ago!” Raena said after a few minutes of idle chatter, praises for the food and drinks, and asking for more. “It’s my fault, of course. With all the renovations and the accidents, it was hard to find the time. But I am happy to finally meet you all!”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Your Highness!” one of them said quickly, giving a warm smile. Raena returned the smile, trying to recall the name. Lady Vega – the only other blonde woman in the mix.

She was one of the older ones and while she was still charming and pleasant, she couldn’t hold a candle to the likes of Lara.

“Please call me Raena. This is just a friendly visit.” Raena insisted.

“As you wish, Raena,” she said awkwardly.

“This drink is delicious! Is it alcohol I am tasting? It’s so sweet, you can barely tell!”

“Yes, it is, so be careful. It will hit you hard before you know it.” Raena laughed. They continued to talk about the drinks and the food, bringing Madam Lydia’s name into the mix. When Raena said she knew her personally and most of the food and drinks were from her recipes, the mood changed almost in an instant. Most of the other concubines joined actively as they started discussing the mysterious veiled woman and food they so wanted to taste but couldn’t go. Raena leaned back, letting them do the talking while she joined in only if the question was addressed to her directly.

Kela, Aria, and Myla, if she remembered their names correctly, seemed to relax a bit too, but their voices were quieter and they looked at each other often as if checking if the other one was giving in to the atmosphere.

Raena’s eyes stopped on the girl sitting on her right- the only one she hadn’t heard speak. She didn’t even look like Ka.ssian’s type. She was young, no more than fifteen, with ginger hair and freckles covering most of her face. It wasn’t that she was ugly, but in comparison with the others, she was definitely fading into the background. She was very skinny too and her clothes were not nearly as expensive-looking as those of the other women.

She was also the only one that was drinking just water, looking around awkwardly.

A few drinks later, Raena’s plan was in full swing with most of the concubines laughing and chatting excitedly, like they were friends who hadn’t seen each other in ages. The servants kept refilling the cups until Raena gave them a sign to stop. She wanted them to have a good time, not to puke their guts out. One of the first things she learned at the university was that nothing bonded people quicker than alcohol.

Lady Vega and the red-headed concubine sitting next to her had turned into the center of attention as their conversation grew into a comparison between their first night experiences with Ka.ssian. Raena watched them with amusement behind her glass of a non-alcoholic cocktail, while most of the other ladies blushed heavily or nodded in agreement as Vega described in detail every sensation she felt while in Ka.ssian's embrace.

Raena glanced toward the young girl next to her, only to find her looking at her hands, her face with embarrassment. Nobody had spoken to her the whole time and apart from a few short answers to Raena's questions, she hadn't participated in any of the other conversations.

"So how was your first night with His Highness, Hatti?" Raena asked her and the girl jumped, looking at her with wide eyes.

"It w-w-was good, great!" she replied quickly.

"He was very good!"

"Ha." Raena chuckled. "I haven't slept with him either, don't worry."

"No, I." she said quickly, but in the end just sighed in defeat. When she composed herself, she looked back at Raena with wide eyes. "But you.. you're so beautiful! How can he not...?"

"It's complicated." Raena scoffed. "But women can say no if they don't want to." The girl nodded, looking back at her hands. "Why did he make you his concubine if not to sleep with you?" The girl shifted in her seat, her hands squeezing and releasing the skirts of her dress. "It's alright. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"I..." Hatti said, licking her lips. "He saved me from Craidal insurgents that killed my parents. They were about to rape and kill me, but his unit passed by our village and killed them. I was twelve then and I... I had no one, so he said that if I agree to become his concubine, he'll give me a place to stay. He had never touched me though, I swear!" She added almost desperately.

"Quite the hero, eh?" Raena murmured, taking a sip out of her drink. He could have made her a maid or just given her money, she thought, but he kept her in his residence and kept providing for her. He really was a great guy underneath all that pride and terrible manners, damn him.

"He is. He really is a hero!" Hatti said, her eyes filling with excitement for the first time. "He risks his life for his soldiers and even for others like me that are strangers to him. He is a good and honest man. You must know that already, Your Highness. If I can ever repay his kindness one day, I will! Even if it means dying!"

“Don’t talk about death so eagerly.” Raena grimaced. “Dying is not pleasant, you know.”

“I don’t have a family or friends. His Highness is the closest person I have, even if I only get to watch him from afar” Hatti said quietly, looking at her hands again. “He is like a big brother to me. I want him to be happy and safe. So please, Your Highness, as his wife you have a power I do not.

Make sure he is happy and safe and I promise I’ll serve you until my dying breath!” Raena stared at her with shock, unable to find the right words to reply. She hadn’t expected such a request, nor such an honest confession. The girl’s face was beet red again and she was shaking slightly. Raena was just about to tell her to calm down when somebody cleared their throat.

Raena looked up to find Zen standing beside holding a small wooden box. The table quieted as the Women noticed him.

“A servant brought this with a message. Concubine Lara sends this present as an apology for not being able to attend today.” he said while Raena got to her feet. “She says it’s a bag of the tea His Highness likes, so when he visits you, you can make it for him and make him feel at home.”

“Right,” Raena mumbled, trying not to roll her eyes. “How thoughtful of her.”

“Is this the rumored Amrod tea?” Vega asked excitedly. “I’ve always wanted to try it!”

“What are you saying, Vega?” the red-haired concubine next to her exclaimed. “This tea is so expensive and rare, how can you drink it? It’s for His Highness!”

“Well, he’s not here now, is he?” Raena shrugged, motioning for Elene. “Make tea for everyone.”

Elene gave her a hard look, pursing her lips as if she was about to object. Raena raised an eyebrow, but the other woman just picked up the bag and went to make the tea. A few minutes later, she and another servant returned with a steaming kettle and a cup for everyone. Elene set a cup in front of Raena, who reached out for the sugar. She could still remember how bitter that thing was, but not drinking from it when the others were so eager, it could put them on the fence or make them refuse theirs too. She had just set the right mood, she didn’t want to ruin it.

“Don’t drink it” Elene whispered while she fussed over the table. Raena froze, glancing up at her.

“And why not?” she asked just as quietly.

“Because the Amrod root is poisonous.” Raena dropped the sugar box and it spilled over the table, her eyes moving to the other women who were already happily drinking

it. She opened her mouth to tell them to stop when Elene spoke again. "Don't. They will be fine."

"How can they be fine if this tea is poisonous?" Raena hissed, glancing around to make nobody was looking at them. "And how can you be sure it's poisonous? I drank Amrod tea once and I didn't die!"

"It's a slow-acting poison," Elene replied calmly. "If you drink it a few times, it will not affect you. It becomes poisonous when it accumulates inside your body. First, you get weaker. Then you get sick more easily. Finally, you start coughing blood. It slowly damages your internal organs. This bag won't kill you, but it can make you barren."

Raena's eyes widened as she stared at her servant.

"Where did you learn...?" she started when Vega's voice interrupted their hushed conversation.

"Your H.. Raena, may I ask you something?" Raena turned to look at her and Elene swiftly stepped back, circling the table to pour the others more tea. "The silver-haired man from before – is he from Craidal?"

Raena blinked in surprise, her mind going blank. The question was so random and specific, it sent an alarm ringing in her head. The rest of the table grew quiet, a few of them repeating Craidal's name like it was some kind of curse.

"Yes. Why do you ask?" she asked, trying to look unconcerned.

"From the Northern Region?"

"Yes," Raena said again, barely holding back her frown. She had expected her to say something about him being dangerous or not trusting him or even ask if Kaessian knew about it, but her expression was not one of fear, but of curiosity.

"I'm from Northern Craidal too. When I still lived there, I once saw a noble lady with the same silver hair. It's a very odd color for a young person so it... Aaah!" Lady Vega screamed in pain, jumping in her seat and almost falling down as she hugged her arm.

"I'm so, so, so sorry!" Elene whispered with a terrified expression. "You moved your hand so quickly I didn't have time to react! I'm so sorry! Please, forgive me!" Raena stared between the two – Elene's face which suddenly expressed such a strong emotion – and Vega, who gritted her teeth as if to stop back another scream or maybe a curse. When the latter finally opened her eyes, she forced a smile.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Just a little burn!" she said, waving her hand. "I have a concoction at home that will help."

"We have one at the pool. It's almost time, anyway. Don't you think, Your Highness?" Elene asked, turning to her with her eyebrows raised.

Raena licked her lips, forcing a smile on her face as she got to her feet.

"Yes, yes, thank you for reminding me," she said, turning toward the ladies. "We ate, we drank, now let's go enjoy a good swim, shall we? I've prepared swimsuits for all of you."

She continued to smile despite the confused looks she received from everyone, motioning for Elene to lead the way. The others followed the servant, whispering curiously, while Raena took her time, her eyes locked on Lady Vega's back while she was just assuring the red-headed concubine that she was fine.

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 69 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

"Welcome back, Your Highness," Blaine greeted him at the threshold of his office. "How was the inspection?"

"Everything was in order," Ka.ssiian replied, pulling off his jacket. The weather was so hot outside that he had almost suffocated in his military uniform. But this was an inspection, not a casual walk among the soldiers and their dwellings, so he had to be presentable. Or so Blaine said. Ka.ssiian undid a few of the buttons of his shirt and let out a tired sigh. His aide set a tray with a pitcher of water on the desk, pouring some into a cup and handing it to Ka.ssiian. He gulped it down in a single breath, giving him a sign to pour some more. As he finished the second cup, he dropped into his chair, leaning his head on the backrest.

"Did anything happen while I was gone?"

"You were gone just for a few hours, Your Highness. What could have happened in such a short time?" he asked. Ka.ssiian didn't reply, keeping his eyes on the door despite the piercing look Blaine gave him. "Or do you mean at your wife's party?" Ka.ssiian moved his eyes to his aide, giving him a dark look.

"You knew of that already?" he frowned.

"Of course, I am informed of everything related to you and your residence." Blaine smiled readily.

"Then why don't I know of things that are related to me and my home?" Ka.ssiian raised an eyebrow.

"Because it's irrelevant to your schedule, Your Highness. Since you were not invited," Blaine replied with the same infuriating smile. The two of them stared at each other for a few long seconds before Blaine's smile faltered. "We're going there, aren't we?"

“Just to check what she is scheming this time. We’re not staying!” Ka.ssian said defensively, pushing himself to his feet. He heard Blaine mumble something that sounded very much like

“You’re not fooling anybody. ‘ under his breath, but when Ka.ssian looked at his aide, he was already wearing his blank expression, waiting patiently for him by the door.

They didn’t talk much on the way and when they reached the North Palace’s gates, the guards there straightened up, saluting them. One of them opened the gate to let them in, and Ka.ssian strode toward the mansion, raising an eyebrow when he didn’t notice anyone. The front door was wide open, but everything was quiet.

“Where is everyone?” he muttered, his hand reaching for his sword. He spotted a lone figure crossing the corridor inside, and he called for them to stop. The maid, who was carrying a basket with washed linen, almost dropped the load when she recognized him.

“Why is this place so empty? Where is my wife?” he demanded.

“S-s-she is in the garden!” the maid replied nervously. “M-m-most of the s-s-servants were sent o-o-out of the palace for p-p-privacy.”

For privacy? What was that supposed to mean?

“You can go,” he said with a sigh while the young girl shivered like a leaf. She didn’t wait to be told a second time, grabbing her basket and sprinting up the stairs. He glanced at Blaine, who shook his head that he didn’t know what was going on either, then the two of them headed down the empty corridor. As they stepped out into the garden, Ka.ssian frowned. There was a long table set under one of the trees, but there was no one nearby.

“What is going on here?” he murmured. Before his aide could say anything, the sound of laughter echoed through the garden. Ka.ssian moved forward, trying to follow the voices, and they walked for a good while until they reached the end of the garden. He was just wondering if the voices were coming from the other side of the wall surrounding the palace when something bright caught his attention. He turned his head toward the corner of the garden where a group of trees had been left untouched, only to realize there was something white shimmering in the distance, half hidden between the trees. Another burst of laughter filled the air, and this time, he was sure he came from there.

Ka.ssian headed toward it with growing curiosity, and just before he reached it, he noticed the first servant. Several maids stood outside of a wide space surrounded by white, slightly transparent fabric that fluttered under the faint wind. The first one to spot him was Raena’s new personal maid, but instead of greeting him, she quickly disappeared behind the white fabric.

The other servants bowed as he stopped in front of the strange construction. Metal poles were secured in the ground on all four sides, at least seven steps each, with small loops attached to them. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't a sudden whim. Where was she getting these ideas and what exactly was this?

The merry laughter and amused voices on the other side seemed to continue as if they had no idea he was there, but as much as he tried, he couldn't see anything more than the outlines of bodies.

"Where is...?" he started, turning toward the closest maid when the flowing fabric moved aside and the blonde servant stepped out. He was just directing his attention to her when he held the fabric up until a second person followed.

Ka.sian's eyes widened as Raena stepped out, wearing nothing but a tight-fitting piece of cloth scarcely covering her breasts and intimate parts.

Her hair was tied with a ribbon on top of her head and tiny droplets covered her exposed skin from head to toe as if she had just stepped out of the bath. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he tried to get a hold of himself.

She raised her hand and wiped her face, her eyes finally stopping on him.

"I don't remember inviting you today, Your Highness," his wife said in a displeased tone, and Ka.sian finally looked at her face.

"Why the hell are you naked?" he hissed, shocked at her complete lack of shame. This definitely wasn't how he imagined seeing her naked for the first time. And the fact that she stared back at him, completely unbothered, made him both excited and annoyed at the same time. He reached for his jacket so he could cover her with it, but quickly realized he had left it in his office. His head snapped toward where Blaine had stood a few moments ago, only to find his aide with his back turned to them and eyes locked in the trees. Ka.sian returned his attention back to his wife, trying to keep his attention on her face. "Well?"

"I'm not naked, I'm wearing a swimsuit," she replied with a smile, shifting her weight to one leg and crossing her arms in front of her. "Is there anything you..."

"How is this any kind of suit?" he interrupted her. "And where do you swim in a freaking forest?"

Raena let out an exasperated sigh and took a step aside, reaching for the cloth and lifting it so he could see inside. His eyes darted toward the scene on the other part of the construction, gaze gliding over the long rectangular hole covered with tiles and filled with clean water. There were even stairs starting from one end and disappearing into the waters. Around the pool stood a dozen chairs, but they had a weird shape as if the person was supposed to lie on them, not sit.

It took him a second to realize there were other women inside, all wearing similar swimsuits some were soaking in the water with pleased expressions, others lying down on the chairs or directly in the grass. The entire scene was so surreal that he flinched as Raena dropped the white cloth back in place.

“Why have you come here, Your Highness? Were you afraid that your women will have more fun with me than they do with you?” Raena asked with a bright smile, but to his regret, it didn’t look genuine at all. Ka.ssian gave her a dry look, trying to hold back his frustration.

“What are you up to?” he asked instead.

“I got bored and I decided to have fun with the ladies. As you can see, we are attended only by women and I have sent all male servants out for the afternoon, so we’re perfectly safe and hidden,” she replied in a tone that suggested she was sure he’d ask her that.

“So you have time to be bored and organize parties, but not to talk with your husband?” he asked without thinking. Her smile froze on her lips, but she didn’t look away.

“Are you feeling lonely, Your Highness?” she asked with a mocking expression, and Ka.ssian gritted his teeth before he said something he’d regret. More than her teasing, it was her calmness that annoyed him the most. She was smaller, weaker, naked and entirely at his mercy, yet she stared into his eyes as if she had put a collar on his neck and was firmly holding the leash. He wanted to wipe that smile off her face.

“What if I am? What are you going to do about it?”

She blinked in surprise, which lasted only a second, then tilted her head, the mocking smile returning.

“Well, I would have invited you to join us by the pool, but considering how you’re staring, you’ll make everyone uncomfortable,” she replied. “But now that I think about it... One of your lovers couldn’t make it today, so I’m sure that she’ll be happy to help you with your loneliness.” Her eyes flashed dangerously as she said that, but Ka.ssian couldn’t tell if it was out of hate or jealousy. Before he could think of a reply, Raena caught the white cloth again, preparing to lift it. “Please go back, Your Highness,” she said in a much gentler tone.

“We’re only having innocent fun. We’re not going to cause any trouble.”

She turned her back on him and stepped through the white cloth, letting it fall behind her. Ka.ssian continued to stare after her until the sound of laughter and conversations picked up again. He cursed under his breath and turned around, striding past Blaine.

“Your Highness?” His aide spoke as they were just crossing the garden. “I was going to tell you earlier in the office, but you were set on coming here and I didn’t get the chance.

“What is it now?” Ka.ssian sighed in annoyance.

His head was throbbing again and the needles piercing his temples were getting sharper.

“Her Highness ‘s Secret Palace is being sold,” Blaine said. Ka.ssian froze midstep, turning to face his aide. “I got word that there are two bidders for it, but Madam Lydia hasn’t made a decision yet.”

“She is selling?” Ka.ssian frowned. “Why?”

“She has told them that she has other projects in mind far away from the capital, so she wouldn’t be able to run the business. She is also selling all the other businesses she had-I found at least ten places that have recently been purchased by your wife,” Blaine said carefully. “She is supposed to choose the buyer for the restaurant by the end of the week. The transfer of property can be done in just a day if both sides are present.”

“How much money are we talking about?” Ka.ssian frowned.

“Enough to rival a member of the Imperial family. All of her businesses had flourished ever since she purchased them,” Blaine said, barely hiding his approval. “She also told the buyers she plans to explore ventures outside the Empire, which means she might be planning to leave the continent.”

“So she is planning to leave,” Ka.ssian repeated quietly, looking back to the way he came from. “Is this what this party is about? A farewell party?”

“I doubt the concubines know,” Blaine shrugged.

“Well, she is not going anywhere,” Ka.ssian said with growing determination. “Find out who the two buyers are and set up a meeting immediately. We’re going to make them back out. Also, warn every boat owner in all the nearby harbors that if someone dares sell her a boat or allow her on board, “I personally k!!l them.

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 70 - Tips

0 11 minutes read

Raena uncrossed her ankles, crossing them again as she adjusted more comfortably on the hard floor. The sun had set a few hours ago and as she watched the bright mix of orange, red, and purple get swallowed by the growing darkness, she couldn’t help but think how screwed she was.

The sound of quiet steps made her tense, but she didn't move. It was probably Kara – neither Zen nor Elene were that loud as if they knew exactly which floorboards creaked. That should have been a sign too. In the movies, the quiet ones always kept the biggest secrets.

"What are you doing?" Raena finally looked up, staring at Kara, who was standing behind her with a frown. "It might be summer, but you can still catch a cold out here. And why are you lying on the floor? Are you a child?"

"I'm staring at the stars, hoping they will tell me something useful again." Raena smiled while her friend rolled her eyes. "Did you speak with Lady Vega?"

"Yes, she'll be expecting you later," Kara replied, lowering herself to the ground. Raena gave her a surprised look but scooted over to the edge of the blanket to make space for her. Kara hesitated, but eventually lay down next to her, staring at the inky sky. For a few minutes neither said anything, they just quietly watched the small dots twinkle all over the place. "So you really think Lady Vega knows something about Zen and his siblings?"

"Yeah. I would have dismissed her words as drunken ramblings if it wasn't for Elene so obviously interrupting her. I am not sure if she did it to make the woman stop talking or to make me pay more attention," Raena said quietly. "I thought about asking her – Elene, I mean- but figured she'd just lie. She is good at that. She is good at pretending too. Takes a liar to know a liar." Raena smiled bitterly, turning her head to look at Kara.

"Cheer up, you were right to suspect them from the start! I was the idiot here."

"What are we going to do about them, then?" Kara asked, lowering her voice.

"Nothing for now," Raena replied, returning her eyes back to the sky. "We don't know what they hiding exactly. It might be that they have connection to that noble lady she mentioned – they may be nobles themselves – and they are just trying to hide that fact since most Craidal nobles were either killed or locked up to prevent them from organizing the peasants into causing trouble. Or they might be dangerous. Either way, it doesn't matter because once I sell the restaurant, we're leaving. Without them."

"So you really plan for us to leave, huh?" Kara said, her tone full of disapproval.

"Yes, now more than ever. What, you don't want to? You're free to stay and I'll transfer under your name twice the amount I've promised you. But if you stay here, I can't protect you from the enemies I've made," Raena said. The thought of leaving this place and going all alone in the unknown world brought a painful coldness that wrapped its freezing arms tightly around her. "I have a meeting set with one of the buyers tomorrow. I plan to accept their offer and complete the transaction the following day. I've asked Marden to find a boat that can take passengers to the new continent. He doesn't know

it's for us, so by the time he realizes that we would have left. We can't take much with us if we want to leave unnoticed."

Kara remained silent, eyes locked on the sky.

"Why do you keep pushing the third prince away?" Kara suddenly asked, still not looking at her.

"What?"

"Why do you keep pushing him away? I am not talking about telling him the truth. I get why you don't want to, even though he might surprise you, but why do you keep pushing his feelings and his attention away? You let Zen get close to you even though you don't plan to bring him along. Why push away your husband? You could be having a much easier time right now and with you by his side, he would have lowered his guard.

"Mmmm, I have my reasons." Raena smiled, moving her hands on her stomach to intertwine her fingers. She glanced at Kara, only to find her lying on her side and staring at her intently.

"It's something from your other life, isn't it? You never talk about that time, apart from a word here and there, mostly related to our business." Her usual cold and serious expression was gone and she was staring at Raena with a mix of curiosity and pity. For the first time since they knew each other, Kara looked her age – like a young woman just as alone in this world, with only one person to rely on and follow.

Raena sighed.

"Back in my world, I had a fiance," she said, licking her lips. "He was a lot like Kassian, at least personality-wise. He was a good and honest man who said exactly what he thought and did exactly as he promised. He worked as a policeman... er, as a guard of sorts," she added when she noticed Kara making a confused face. "He protected people from harm and investigated cases where people already harmed so the guilty could be punished."

Kara continued to watch her quietly, waiting for more. "We were together since high.. since we finished school. Then, I went to study more and he became a policeman. We were really happy." Raena paused, looking back at the stars again. "And then, just like that, he died. He was killed while on duty. He died before help even came."

Raena swallowed the lump in her throat, keeping her eyes on the stars. It had been a while since she told anyone that story. It had been a while since she thought of him.

"I'm sorry," Kara whispered, touching her shoulder.

"It's fine!" Raena laughed, blinking a few times to chase away the stinging in her eyes. "A lot of time has passed since then."

"So that's why you didn't want to have anything to do with him? Because you know he is going to die." Kara nodded with a thoughtful expression.

"Yeah. Why pour feelings into someone who is going to disappear?" Raena scoffed.

"But you said things have changed from what you knew and they keep changing. What if he doesn't die now?"

"Yeah, this is the scarier part." Raena smiled, eyes locking on the biggest star just above them.

The sky was different here, brighter somehow, and the stars were aligned in constellations much different from the ones she remembered. "What if he lives and I stay? What if I fall in love with him and we live happily ever after? And what if one day, as I sit and enjoy my perfect life with my perfect husband, whatever brought me here yanks me back into my empty gray world? What do I do then?" She turned to look at Kara, who stared at her with wide eyes. "Why do you think I've been avoiding emotional attachments to people all this time? I like Zen and having him around was fun and exciting, but I can leave tomorrow without him and I will be fine. But with Ka.ssiian... if I let myself get too close, I am not sure if I will have the heart to leave."

Kara continued to stare at her for the longest time. Then she suddenly reached out and flicked Raena on the forehead.

"You silly woman!" she murmured, sitting up.

"You cannot control everything that happens in life – who lives, who dies, who betrays you or surprises you. Choosing not to get close to people to avoid pain is like choosing not to eat because you'll get hungry again. You're only hurting yourself." She raised her bandaged hand, scratching her head with her stiff fingers. "How can you create such a successful business from nothing, outsmart the smartest people in this country and wrap so many people around your finger, but still be so stupid when it comes to things like this? I feel like something in your head is broken."

"Yeah, thanks!" Raena chuckled, sitting up and leaning her hands on her knees.

"Tell him," Kara said, and Raena looked at her, surprised by the sudden softness in her voice. "If you think you have feelings for him, tell him. Screw the plan! It has already gone way off course anyway. Tell him the truth before it's too late. So far, you've only said you are going to support the second prince and made your connection public. You haven't actually done anything illegal that might be considered treason."

“Ugh,” Raena mumbled, looking away.

“Don’t be a coward, modern girl,” Kara scoffed.

“Hey! Who here has already died once, huh? It’s not pleasant, you know!” Raena grumbled.

“If it’s any consolation, whatever you decide, I’ll support it. Just don’t make the decision out of fear.

Figure out what you want and fight for it. We’re lucky if we find one great love in our life. Don’t waste the second chance you’ve been given.”

“Have you chosen a profession already? You’d make a lovely matchmaker.” Raena grinned and Kara rolled her eyes.

“Shut up.”

Raena chuckled and was just about to tease her some more when a loud knock came from inside the room. Kara frowned, getting to her feet and walking inside while Raena craned her neck to see who it was.

“There are two guards waiting for you downstairs,” Kara said as she returned to the balcony. “His Highness ordered them to escort you to the Main Palace. They were told not to take no for an answer.” Raena raised an eyebrow, and Kara smiled at her. “Here is your chance. Lady Vega can wait.”

Raena grimaced, getting to her feet and dusting her skirts. Kara gave her a disapproving look, but the blonde woman tiptoed around her before her friend could force her into changing into something more presentable. She stepped out of the bedroom and into the empty corridor, Kara’s steps following closely behind.

The two guards waited in the anteroom by the stairs, both wearing full uniforms and with a sword hanging from their waists. Raena swallowed the cold chill that suddenly ran through her body, forcing a smile instead.

“Hello, gentlemen!” she said and they immediately bowed to her, returning her greeting in one voice. “Let’s not keep His Highness waiting.”

They nodded and headed for the door, adjusting the pace to match hers as she followed. They passed a few servants that threw her curious glances, then they left the North Palace. Could Ka.sasian have found out something about her connection to the Empress and wanted to face her before locking her up? Or maybe she teased him a bit too much earlier at the pool and he had decided to demand she fulfilled her wifely duties?

But why send guards, though? It's not like she didn't have guards and so far every time they met, it was him coming to her. He did own the North Palace after all.

Too occupied with her thoughts, she didn't notice when they left the lights of the garden lamps behind and set on one of the paths going through the Concubines' palace. It was probably going to take them to the Main Palace as well, but going through there was almost doubling the distance.

They were passing close to Zen's secret spot too, which meant this was the least guarded part of the entire residence.

"Um, excuse me?" Raena asked, trying to catch the attention of one of the guards. "Can we go back to the garden? I thought we were going to the Main Palace"

"We are," the guard replied curtly. "This is a better route. His Highness said to take you there directly, not to take you on a stroll through the garden. Please follow us."

Raena raised an eyebrow. His nervous tone and the fact that he called her you instead of using her title made her heart beat faster. Something didn't feel right.

Raena looked around carefully, searching the shadows for any movement. Could it be that the Empress had sent them to kill her? Or maybe Lara bribed them to do something to her in a place nobody was going to find her before it was late?

Raena looked over her shoulder, wondering if she should run. She was wearing a dress and she wasn't particularly fast, while both of them seemed fit and comfortable with their weapons. Maybe she should just scream and hope there was somebody nearby. Where was Zen when she finally needed him to guard her body?

"You're late," a voice said all of a sudden, and Raena looked forward again, surprised by the sudden appearance of a man that was now blocking the two guards' path. They looked at him tensely, but neither drew their weapon. "Is that her?"

Raena frowned, meeting the stranger's eyes. He was wearing dark clothes and knee-high boots and as he moved, she noticed his gloved hand was casually resting on a hilt of a long dagger tucked in his belt. His face was covered with a mask too, exposing only his eyes that studied her with cold calculation.

"Yes," one of the guards said without looking at her. "Hurry up and take her. And the rest of the money?"

The masked guy stopped his advance toward Raena, looking at the guard that had replied to him.

The stranger unfastened a pouch from his belt, tossing it to the guard. The bag clunk with the sound of metal and the guard quickly slid it inside his jacket.

“One more thing,” the masked guy said, making the two guards pause just as they were about to leave. “They said no witnesses, so..” he shrugged, making a sign with his hand. “Kill them.”

As if the night suddenly came to life, the trees and bushes around them rustled while several figures stepped out with their weapons drawn. One of them even had a bow in his hands, which he had already drawn with an arrow in place. His arrow sunk into the chest of one of the guards, sending him to the ground. The other one unsheathed his sword, cursing loudly while moving into a defensive position.

All this happened in a blink of an eye – a few precious seconds Raena had lost. Her eyes snapped back to the masked man who had kept walking toward her, and without thinking, she picked up her skirt and ran. She heard him laugh and before she got much further, two hands – grabbed her by the waist, picking her up. Raena screamed, kicking and hitting him, but that only seemed to amuse him. She forced herself to calm down – with her in the air and him being twice her size, she couldn't pull any of the moves her father had taught her. There was only one thing she could try.

She drew both her legs to her chest and kicked his knee with all her strength. He lost his balance, bringing them both down. Raena squirmed as her wounded arm hit the hard ground, but pushed herself up and wiggled out of his grip, dashing for the trees.

“You little b***h!” the masked man shouted after her, his heavy steps following her through the underbrush. “We're not supposed to hurt you, but can't help it if you hurt yourself falling, can 1?” He snickered from even closer.

Raena gripped her skirts tighter, focusing her attention on her feet. If she twisted her ankle now, it was game over. She needed to get somewhere with guards, somewhere where people could hear her scream. She had to do it before.. Raena tripped on one of the protruding roots and landed hard on the ground, the air leaving her chest. She coughed as she tried to take a breath, stumbling to her feet and preparing to flee again.

The air swished by her head and an arrow sunk into the trunk of the tree next to her. She heard another arrow fly and just as she tried to hide behind a tree, she felt something pull her back. Her eyes stopped on the second arrow that had pierced her skirts, pinning them to the ground. Raena looked back, heart skipping as she noticed the figures moving through the shadows and she did the only thing she could. She screamed.