

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 71 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

Kassian leaned back in his seat, running his thumb over his lips. His mind kept flying off to things entirely unrelated to the paperwork he had been going through, so he just gave up on it. Blaine kept throwing him glances as if he knew he wasn't working anymore but kept quiet.

Going behind Raena's back and scaring off her buyers was going to be easy now that he knew their names. One was on the board of the Trade Union he had become part of and the other was a recently appointed Marquis who had made his fortune in trade and who also owned The Golden Deer. Both seemed more than ready to pay the exorbitant amount Raena was asking for the restaurant, so they probably thought they could return their money in full and go beyond with this venture. They probably would have if they kept doing what she was doing,...

It still felt wrong. It was her venture, she could do what she wanted. But then again, if she was doing it in order to run away after helping their enemy, then that was not something he could allow.

If she was a traitor, he...

"I'm going for a walk" he said, getting to his feet. Blaine was just about to follow when he added. "Alone. You can finish up here and take the rest of the night off."

Before Blaine could say anything, he was already walking out of his office, gesturing for his guards not to follow. He headed for the garden without thinking, just as he usually did when his head was heavy with thoughts. His mother had loved that place and she used to take him on long walks around it, playing and hiding in the bushes while exploring every little spot among the flowers and the blossoming trees.

He looked up at the bright sky, staring at the stars in the hope that at least they would tell him what to do. His brother kept insisting that he should stay away from Raena and not reveal his cards, but his own head was telling him to go there and put it all on the table. The thing with lies and secrets was that they grew and festered and before long, it was too late to save the relationship between the people they connected. He was going to be damned if he let this happen with her. He would much rather hear her say she hated him or told him she was the enemy than have her leave because he hadn't said the things he wanted to say.

Before he knew it, Kassian was at the North Palace's gate, staring at the gates the guards were holding open for him. He crossed the threshold letting out the breath he was holding before heading toward the building. Most of the windows were overflowing with light, and he could hear the buzzing of voices coming from inside. He climbed the steps leading to the closed front door, preparing to knock.

“Your Highness?”

Ka.ssian’s head snapped in the direction of the voice, his eyes stopping on the lone figure that sat in one of the rocking chairs on the porch. She got up and bowed before looking at him again. As he recognized Kara, Ka.ssian turned to face her.

“Is she up?”

“What do you mean?” Kara frowned, holding her bandaged arms in front of her.

“Is Raena awake? Is she in her room?” he asked with an exasperated sigh.

“No,” Kara replied, her whole body tensing. “She is probably on her way to the Main Palace, just as you ordered. The guards you’ve sent...”

“I haven’t sent any guards and I have not ordered her to go anywhere,” Ka.ssian interrupted her, studying the maid’s face to see if she was just covering for her mistress again. “Kara, think very carefully about how you’ll answer my next question. Where is Raena” Kara’s face paled in an instant, and her eyes filled with fear.

“I swear to the gods, two guards came to escort her ten minutes ago! They said you’ve sent them and that they were not to take ‘no’ for an answer. She went with them.”

Ka.ssian’s heart skipped a beat as he continued to watch the dark-haired girl. She was scared, that was obvious, but she wasn’t scared of him.

He spun around and sprinted toward the gate, keeping his sword out of his way. The guards at the door jumped as he dashed past them, shouting something after him. He barely slowed down, his heart beating so fast and so loud he could barely hear anything. He ran toward the garden – that was the only way they would have taken her since if they had gone in the opposite direction, they had to go past Sarea’s place and there were too many guards there. This meant they either crossed the garden or Ka.ssian locked his eyes on the tall trees in the distance, separating the garden from the west wall and hiding the Concubines’ residence in their embrace. From where he stood, the place seemed even darker and more sinister than he remembered.

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Ignoring the carefully arranged paths and flowerbeds, Ka.ssian sprinted across the garden, his eyes still locked on the looming trees. He was almost at the edge of the thicket when the bubble of panic and sheer focus popped up as he heard the scream. It sent the birds in the trees flying in alarm and echoed through the forest, turning his blood to ice.

Not caring about the terrain or the fact that he was all alone against at least two men who already had Raena, he continued to run, willing his feet to move faster. He dashed

past trees and over bushes, slipping on rotten leaves and avoiding low branches, his eyes darting in every direction in search of her.

“Raena!” he shouted, hoping she was still alive to hear him. He needed her to scream again or call his name- anything!- so he could find her. He couldn’t just run around aimlessly, and they wouldn’t be stupid enough to keep to the road. And if they had a way to jump the wall or had taken care of the guards, then..

A shout for help echoed through the forest and Ka.ssian raised his head, trying to determine the direction it came from. Once he did, he dashed single-mindedly toward it.

The moment he started hearing voices, he forced himself to slow down and check his surroundings, letting his instincts take over. He clung to his training, ignoring the voice in his head that shouted in panic when he couldn’t see Raena anywhere.

He spotted the first person standing among the trees with his back to him, eyes locked on something ahead. A few seconds later Ka.ssian noticed the others too – there were maybe half a dozen that he could see, all wearing dark clothes and masks.

Ka.ssian sneaked behind the one closest to him, wrapping his arms around his neck and twisting it until he heard a crack. The stranger’s body went limp in his hands. He lowered it to the ground, sneaking ahead while keeping his sword close to avoid making a noise.

The next guy he approached from behind turned just as he was about to wrap his hands around his neck. His eyes widened in surprise, but by the time he opened his mouth to shout, Ka.ssian had already pressed a hand over it and had slammed him against the closest tree. A loud, plopping sound came from the guy’s head and his eyes rolled backward. As Ka.ssian put him down, he noticed that the guy’s head had hit a stump of a broken branch and the wood had plunged deep into his skull.

Another scream made him grit his teeth. He rose to his feet and strode in the direction it had come from, eyes darting between the trees. A few steps later, he saw her. One of the masked people was holding her by the throat, her feet kicking helplessly in the air. He dropped her on the ground and she landed with a grunt, rising to her elbows and staring up at the masked person with a mix of anger and fear.

“You’re a real pretty thing, but that mouth of yours really needs to learn its true purpose!” the same man said, crouching in front of her. “And you bite! What kind of lady bites and kicks like you, huh?”

“Are you sure you’re a lady? Does she look like a lady to you, guys?” A few people snickered, their attention locked on Raena and the man standing next to her. “Come on, act like a lady, and I promise to treat you like a lady. Alright?”

She hesitated, swallowing with difficulty, then nodded.

“Good girl!” The man praised her, getting to his feet. “Now let me teach you how a proper lady uses her mouth.”

She gave him a confused look, then her eyes widened. Ka.ssian couldn't see what the man was doing, but then the sound of a belt being unbuckled reached his ears. All caution and calm disappeared in an instant, and Ka.ssian's hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword, pulling it out.

“Suck it!” the masked man ordered as he took a step toward Raena. She crawled backward, her expression turning disgusted. Before Ka.ssian could think about it, his body was moving. As he reached the guy looming over his wife, his sword flew on its own, sliding through the guy's neck like a knife through butter. The masked man's head toppled forward while his body slumped sideways. Raena's piercing scream made Ka.ssian snap out of his haze, and he stared at her as he kicked the severed head away.

Ka.ssian stepped next to her, looking at the rest of the group, who seemed to have shaken off their stupor. He counted seven – more than he anticipated. Only one of them had a bow, but the trees were too low, making it hard to draw it properly. Everyone stared at the blood dripping from Ka.ssian's blade as if wondering what to do.

“Get up,” he said, extending his hand toward his wife. When she didn't take it, he glanced down at her, only to realize she was looking at the dead body behind him with eyes full of horror. “Raena!”

He called and she flinched, finally clasping his hand. Ka.ssian pulled her to her feet, pushing her behind him. The masked men had used his momentary distraction to fan out and were slowly closing his escape routes from all sides. Only the side where he had come from was still open, but he doubted they could escape them in this terrain. Not with Raena to think of.

“Close your eyes and cover your ears,” he commanded, squeezing her hand. She squeezed back, her fear so palpable he could barely stand it. “Let go of my hand.”

She squirmed but did as she was told. Ka.ssian fell into a defensive position, eyes locking on the enemy. He watched them approach with painful slowness, his hands tightening and loosening around the hilt of the sword as he prepared for what was to come.

They attacked together, coming from all sides. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then brought his sword up, parrying the attack coming from the left, then drew his sword back and met the blade of the second enemy, kicking him in the knee.

His eyes darted between his two opponents, noticing the third sneaking behind him as if preparing to jump him from the back.

Ka.ssian's gaze darted toward where Raena stood, her eyes squeezed shut and her hands covering her ears. He couldn't let her get hurt; he couldn't get killed in his own home; he couldn't leave his brother to fend for himself against all those enemies.

Ka.ssian's sword flew faster, his movements turning sharper and more precise while his mind settled on a singular goal: kill.

He thrust his weapon into the stomach of one of his opponents after he had exposed his side in a risky attack, sinking it deep and then pulling it sideways with all his might. The razor-sharp blade sliced through muscle and skin, cutting the guy almost in half, and as he was trying to keep his insides in, Ka.ssian turned toward the next one.

His body felt light and it wasn't because he wasn't wearing any armor. Searching for an opening in his opponent's movements was quicker and taking them down seemed easier. It was almost back on the battlefield and his past, his future and his present collided, making everything but the current moment matter.

After Ka.ssian plunged his sword into the stomach of yet another masked person, he realized it was too noisy around him. He stopped and looked around, his eyes landing on the armored soldiers that had surrounded the last remaining enemies.

Raena still stood with her hands covering her ears, eyes tightly shut. Ka.ssian rushed to her, dropping his sword and falling to his knees beside her. There was blood running from her broken lip and her face was smeared with dirt, but apart from that, she seemed unharmed. Her body was shaking so badly, it almost felt like she would break into pieces.

"Raena," Ka.ssian called. When she didn't react, he caught her hands, pulling them from her ears.

Her eyes immediately opened, the fear and panic making him want to hug her tightly and never let go. He stayed still, careful not to spook her. "You're safe now. It's alright. You're safe."

Tears rolled down her cheeks and her lips quivered as if she was fighting to stop back her sobs. When the first one escaped, she looked almost surprised, covering her mouth with her dirty hand, her body shaking even harder.

Ka.ssian gently wrapped his hands around her, bringing her closer to his body. He was ready to let go if she pushed him away, but as he felt her small hands tighten on his shirt, his hold tightened.

"Your Hi." One of his soldiers started as he drew near, but one look from Ka.ssian and he froze, hesitation taking over his face. He raised his hands and signed that they had taken care of the others and Ka.ssian nodded curtly, giving him a sign to carry on. He looked down at Raena, who had hidden her face in his chest and was quietly crying.

“Raena, I’m going to pick you up now. Hold on to me and don’t let go, alright?” he whispered in her hair. She didn’t reply, nor did she react, but she didn’t protest or fought him either as he scooped her in his arms. She squeezed his neck tighter and her hot breath tickled his skin, making him realize that her sobbing had stopped. Kassian’s hands tightened around her small frame, but she still didn’t react.

“It’s alright now,” he whispered as he strode through the trees, a few of the guards falling in a protective formation around him. “I’m here. You’ll be safe with me.”

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Marden gulped another glass of alcohol down, leaning back in his chair while his eyes remained on the documents in front of him. She was selling it – she was selling the restaurant. Why was she doing that? She had barely started working it and there was so much money to be made off of it. It was almost ironic that he had found all of that from a client that spilled the secret to one of his bed partners was this why she wanted him to inquire about boat passages to the new continent? He had thought it was a weird request weird, but he had learned not to ask questions that wouldn’t be answered in straight or comprehensible answers.

But if she was leaving, he...

Well, he couldn’t exactly stop her. But she was his business partner and a friend of sorts, so she owed him at least an explanation. And what about the connection between the restaurant and the brothel? Was the next owner going to honor that? Would they also want a percent from the brothel’s earnings? What about the money he owed her? He couldn’t pay her yet. Maybe in another half a year or ten months...

“Ugh,” Marden grunted, his eyes stopping on the half-empty bottle at the edge of his desk. He reached for it, unfastening the stopper, and pouring some more into his glass. When it was half full, he put the bottle away, lifting the glass to his lips.

A loud, terrifying scream erupted somewhere above, echoing through the entire brothel and making the conversation and laughter coming from the reception rooms cease. Marden choked on his drink as he heard it, spilling half of the liquid over his shirt.

“Bloody hell!” He cursed, rising to his feet and putting the cup down. He tried to clean the stain off his new shirt, glaring at the ceiling. What was that about now? Did someone see a cockroach again? It was not like it was going to eat them.

Those things appeared everywhere, no matter what you did, and they couldn’t just disturb the work of others because they were disgusted. It was probably Lisa again. She was the worst of the bunch when it came to bugs.

He almost hoped it was something as stupid. If not that, then probably one of the clients had turned too rough again. They were all warned about that, but some people never learned. Marden sighed, heading for the door with unhurried steps. He hated kicking patrons out, but his workers were expensive to hire and they were doing an excellent job, so protecting them was a must. And Lydia had warned him not to let such things pass, or eventually, his clients would start doing whatever they wanted. Especially the more powerful ones.

He opened the door and headed for the staircase when a second scream joined the first.

"I'm coming, I'm coming, damn it." He murmured to himself, taking two stairs at once until he was on the second floor. He didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, so he proceeded to the third floor. As his head appeared above the landing, he checked the corridor, wondering which room the scream had come from, when he noticed that a few of them were open and a small group had gathered by the last one.

He took the last few steps running, then strode to the end of the corridor, pushing aside both clients in their undergarments and working girls in the nude who were trying to peek inside Hale's room. When Marden got to the front, he looked inside with a scowl, expecting to see Hale curled in the corner with an angry client demanding a refund.

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His pain endurance was worse than most of the girls' but his regulars liked him and went gentle on him so Marden rarely got complaints about him.

What Marden didn't expect to see was a body lying on the ground in a pool of blood with Arissa and one of the bodyguards trying to put pressure on his chest wound. Marden blinked a few times, making sure his blurry vision wasn't making him see weird things, then took a step forward, then another, until he was kneeling next to Arissa.

"What the fuck is going on here?" He asked, looking down at Hale's pale face. Hale stared at them with a hazy expression, his unnaturally long lashes fluttering tiredly. His thin, feminine lips had turned almost transparent, and there was blood running from the edge of his mouth. Marden couldn't see the wound from the cloth the bodyguard was pressing against it, but judging by the amount of blood on the floor, there was nothing they could do for Hale.

"Marden," Arissa called, and he looked at her, only to realize she was looking down. He followed her gaze, eyes stopping on Hale's hand that was reaching out for him. He took it and the young man pulled him weakly, but Marden lowered himself nonetheless.

"Bed," Hale whispered with a raspy voice full of struggle. Marden frowned in confusion.
"Note. Danger."

Hale started coughing and Marden pulled back, watching as the young guy breathed his last, head rolling to his side as his glassy eyes remained locked on the bed. Marden looked at it as well, then turned to the people watching from the hallway. A few of the girls were crying while another one had dropped to her knees with a blank expression and wide eyes.

“What the fvck happened, Arissa?” Marden turned to the red-headed woman next to him. She had pulled her hands away from the body, covering her mouth.

“I.. I.. I.. don’t k-know!” She said with a panicked expression. Marden stared at her uneasily, wondering if he had ever seen her so shaken. “One of the g-g-girls heard the struggle in the room and a shout so she opened to c-C-check if he was being hurt and saw someone jumping from the W-W-window!”

“When?” He asked.

“T-two minutes ago when she screamed.”

By the time Arissa replied, Marden had jumped to his feet and was sprinting out of the room, pushing past the growing crowd while people kept asking him what was going on. He rushed down the stairs, tripping and almost falling a few times. When he yanking it open and stepping outside. It was for the day and half of the street lamps had already finally reached the first floor, he rushed to the door, already past midnight so everyone else was closed run out of oil, drawing half of the streets in shadows.

There was no one on the street, not even a damn dog digging through the trash or the leftover food some of the owners left for the stupid animals.

Everything was quiet too, the only sounds coming from the brothel, and even then seemed muffled tonight.

Who would want to klll Hale, of all the people? The guy was harmless – he was as weak as a girl and even got scared easier than them. If it wasn’t for his pretty face and his willingness to work with men, Marden would have never taken him in. But apart from one client who got rough with him, there had never been complaints from and for Hale. He didn’t have any enemies, either.

So what could have caused someone to come specifically for him and to leave through the window on the third floor? Who even could do that?

Could they fly or walk over walls? This made no sense.

Was this about what Hale had heard a few nights ago? The boy had told him he had something to report, but Marden had been busy searching for passenger ships and Hale had been booked every night so they never had that talk. What if he had overheard something dangerous?

Bed. He mentioned the bed for some reason. And a note. A bed, a note, and danger. He must have written it down and hid it. He used the last of his words to tell him that. Just how important was that information? probably long gone. Maybe the girl that opened the door saw something – their face, or something distinctive that he could give to the guards and ask to investigate. Maybe Lydia could do her magic and get them to actually try to do their job, even though the victim was a prostitute. It's not like he was less of a person because of his occupation.

Marden ran a hand through his hair, cursing out loud. Whoever had done it, they were Marden shouldn't have drunk this much.

He should have been sober for this. "Damn it!" Marden shouted angrily. He stopped and put his hands on his hips, taking a deep, calming breath. He had to stay calm and deal with this situation properly.

He had to report to the authorities first.

Take care of the body. Notify the family and arrange for a funeral. He... A sharp pain exploded in his back, moving through his body and stopping at his stomach. He looked down in surprise only to see a blade sticking out of his chest, dark blood dripping on the pavement in front of him. Still in shock from the sight, Marden barely felt the hand that squeezed his shoulder.

"You give bastards a bad name, Marden, so hurry up and die already." A voice whispered in his ear before the same hand that held him in place, pushed him. He tried to steady himself, but his body felt strangely weak. As he crashed onto the pavement, the pain in his stomach spread like fire, engulfing every inch of his body and making him cry out. He managed to roll to his back, hand reaching for his chest, where something warm and sticky slipped through his fingers.

His vision had turned even blurrier, but he still raised his head and looked around as he heard steps running away. When the figure disappeared from view, he let his head fall back to the ground, staring up at the stars instead.

When he asked Lydia questions sometimes, she often said the stars told her the answer. But looking at them now, they were eerily silent. He wondered if they would tell him who stabbed him just now. Maybe it was the same person who stabbed Hale. That would solve two mysteries at the same time. And what was that about bastards? Since when did the bastards have a good name at all?

"Oh, my gods! Marden!" Arissa's piercing voice cut through the silence of the night, and a few seconds later a pair of the stomping feet stopped next to him. Arissa's blurry face appeared in his vision, her hips moving so fast all he could hear was a slurry of words. Finally, he caught the words 'doctor' and 'help' then she started talking to him again.

Marden closed his eyes tiredly, only to receive a slap on the face. He opened them again, giving Arissa an annoyed look, but she was no longer looking at him. There were more people around too, but they were too fuzzy to recognize.

Marden locked his eyes on the stars again, trying to distract himself from the pain.

“Bed. Note. Danger.” He repeated to himself, wondering if he’d live to find out what the fvck that meant.

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0 9 minutes read

Ka.ssian strode into the Main Palace, ignoring the stares of the servants and the whispers that rose behind him, his hands instinctively tightening around Raena’s relaxed body even though nobody tried to approach him. He headed directly for his quarters, barely slowing down as Blaine appeared from his office with a frown.

“Your Highness, there was some kind of disturb.” his words trailed off as his eyes landed on her sleeping form and the confusion turned to panic for a second. “Is she...?”

“She passed out. Get me a doctor immediately.” Ka.ssian snapped. Blaine continued to stare at them until Ka.ssian barked at him, Now!”

His aide jumped, disappearing back the way Ka.ssian had come from, shouting at the servants to scatter and for the Head Maid to follow her master. Ka.ssian heard steps trailing behind him, but he didn’t wait for her to catch up. He strode to his bedroom without thinking, stepping towards his bed and laying Raena down gently. Her head wobbled to the side, her pale face still covered with dirt and smeared with tears and traces of blood.

Her sleeve was torn and so was the hem of her dress, but apart from the splatter of red on her clothes and hands, she seemed unharmed.

She is fine, Ka.ssian told himself again as he ran a hand over his face, trying not to think about what could have happened to her had he been just a bit late. The rage that he had pushed aside surged, gripping his throat tightly.

Who dared invade his own home, hurt his own people, and try to harm his wife? Even the Empress had never been so bold, although her hate was well known even to the lowest of nobles.

Craidal insurgents? The guy that spoke didn’t have a Craidal accent, he had the typical Eetrobian accent that was so well-known here in the capital. Then mercenaries? But who would send them, and why after Raena? Could it have been because of something she did as Madam Lydia?

His head was going to explode. A knock came from the door and a second later the Head Maid stepped in, bowing her head.

She said something and waited, but when Ka.ssian didn't reply she just headed towards the bed. He tensed as she neared Raena, but forced himself to relax when the woman checked Raena's pulse, then proceeded to search for any wounds. When she confirmed there were none, she gently turned Raena to the side, unfastening the ties on her back so she could strip the dress. She paused a few times, checking if he was still there, but proceeded when he didn't move from his spot by the feet of the bed.

Ka.ssian turned around after he received another silent stare, staring at his table instead while the sound of rustling fabric filled the room. A knock came from the door and he went to open, glaring at the elderly man that stood on the other end. His resident physician curled under his gaze, but relaxed when Ka.ssian looked away and let him in.

Ka.ssian was just about to close the door, his eyes following the man as he neared the bed, when somebody pressed their hand against it. He looked at Blaine's grave expression, frowning.

"Please come with me, Your Highness," Blaine said in his usual calm voice, but he couldn't hide the tension in his voice. "The doctor needs time to check on your wife and the Captain of the Guards is waiting to speak with you."

Ka.ssian threw another look towards the bed, then stepped outside and closed the door. He let Blaine lead him to the reception room and as they stepped through the door, his eyes immediately landed on the Captain of the Guards he was a man almost twenty years older than Ka.ssian, with a hair and beard that were gradually turning gray and a fair, but stern disposition. For all the time he served him, Ka.ssian had had no complaints. But tonight he had let him down.

His second-in-command was standing by his side, looking around nervously. Gerrin was there with his sheathed sword in hand, but he was not wearing any of his armor. As they saw them enter, all three soldiers saluted him, bowing their heads down.

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Ka.ssian strode to them, stopping in front of the Captain of his Guards and giving him a sign to raise his head. The older man did as he was told, opening his mouth to speak, when Ka.ssian's fist connected with his cheek. The Captain staggered backwards, bumping into his second-in-command, who kept him to his feet. Gerrin stepped forward, pressing a hand against Ka.ssian's chest as if to stop him from attacking again.

"The only reason you still have your head is because she is alive." Ka.ssian spat, pushing Gerrin's hand away without even looking at him.

You allowed enemy combatants to enter my home and almost harm my wife without anyone even raising an alarm! Where were your guards? What were your defensive measures? Why are you even here? I picked you because I trusted you to keep safe what is most important to me and you failed me today.”

Even before he finished speaking, the Captain had dropped to his knees, bowing so low, his head touched the floor. His second-in-command didn't hesitate to do the same.

“I have failed at my duty, please punish me as you see fit, Your Highness.” The Captain said in a shaky voice, staying in the same position. Ka.sasian gritted his teeth, his hand itching to reach for his sword, but then remembering he had left it behind in the forest.

“We had turncoats,” Gerrin spoke, bringing Ka.sasian's attention to himself. “We found two of our guards dead by one of the roads in the Concubines' palace. One of them had a large amount of money on him.”

Ka.sasian glared at the Captain again, then turned to Blaine, who silently watched from his side.

“Demote those two to footsoldiers. I don't care about their position or achievements. Also, interrogate everyone who was on duty in the past week. I want to know who approached the traitors and if there are any more of them. Fire all the guards if you have to.”

“Your Highness...” Blaine and Gerren said at the same time, looking at each other. Blaine looked back at Ka.sasian, his lips pursing. “Yes, Your Highness.”

“Is anyone left alive? Did anyone escape?” He asked, looking at the others in the room.

“One of them is still alive. They caught him running.” Gerrin said quickly. “I'll personally interrogate him, don't worry. Everything he knows, you'll know too.” Ka.sasian nodded, raising his hand to rub his temple. His head was killing him. He wanted to just go back to his room and stay in the quiet until she woke up. “Your Highness, is that your blood? Are you hurt?”

Ka.sasian looked down at where Gerrin was pointing, touching his arm with his fingers, only to have them come back smeared in red.

“It's just a graze.” He said, letting his hand fall. He didn't feel it, he felt no pain. Only worry and relief. This had been close, too close. If he hadn't gone to see her tonight, he never would have found out she was gone. Not before it was too late. “Send someone to alert her Head Maid that she will be staying here tonight.

“Staying in the Main Palace?” Blaine asked in surprise, but when Ka.sasian looked at him he quickly nodded. “Yes, Your Highness, I'll take care of it.”

“Good.” Ka.ssian nodded. “Dismissed. Get those two out of my sight.” He added, nodding towards the ex-Captain of the guards and his second-in-command, “Report to me if there is any urgent news.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Gerrin nodded, saluting him, and he stepped towards the other soldiers, barking at them to get up. Ka.ssian turned on his heel and headed back towards his private quarters with Blaine in tow. They reached his room just as the doctor was walking out and before he knew what was happening, Blaine had told the man of Ka.ssian’s gaze and he was being forced into a chair, his shirt stripped like he was a child that couldn’t undress himself. After his flesh wound was tended to and the doctor confirmed that the weapon that left it wasn’t poisoned, the two men finally left him alone with the Head Maid, who continued to fuss over Raena. They had wiped her clean and changed her into a nightgown, and she was sleeping easily under the covers.

In his bed. In his Palace.

He had never allowed any of his women to step foot here, not even Sarea. He had way too many important documents and conversations to allow somebody to roam inside freely. Yet he had brought her here without thinking, without a moment of hesitation.

“Leave.” He said and the Head Maid turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow. “I’ll call for you if we need anything.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” she said, but didn’t move right away. “If she wakes up, and she is in an emotional state, make her drink this. It will calm her.” She motioned towards the cup that stood on the nightstand, then bowed and left. The click of the door sounded unnaturally loud as the quiet settled into the room.

There were just a few candles still burning, so most of the room was drowned in shadows.

Ka.ssian sat in a chair in the darkest corner, leaning his elbows on his knees and staring at the unmoving form in his bed. A few minutes dragged, then a few more, but Raena didn’t shift or move even slightly. Unnerved, he got up, stepping towards the bed.

She looked perfectly relaxed in her sleep, almost as if what happened tonight never did. Only the traces of it remained – a broken lip, a grazed palm, a handprint of fingers around her neck.

Raena finally shifted, tossing her head aside, her hair falling over her face. Ka.ssian hesitated, then sat at the edge of the bed, reaching out and pushing the long blonde locks out of her face. She looked so innocent and peaceful when she slept. Her eyes fluttered excitedly under the pale eyelids despite her relaxed expression, her brows creasing and straightening up.

It was almost funny how in just a few months she had turned from a burden he didn't want to have anything to do with, to someone that made him rush at the enemy with nothing but a sword – outnumbered, unprepared, reckless. The thought of losing her had rendered everything else irrelevant.

Kassian gently ran the back of his hand over her cheek and her face relaxed immediately, settling into a content expression. The edges of her lips curled into a gentle smile. It was beyond him how she could smile like that when she had almost died, but then again, for some reason, he realized he was smiling too, despite taking so many lives tonight. They were quite the pair.

Kassian got up reluctantly, preparing to return to the chair so he wouldn't disturb her, when something touched his hand. He looked down at her as she held his hand with her delicate fingers, almost jumping as he noticed that her eyes were open. He was just about to call her name when her eyelids fluttered and she closed them again, sinking back into her slumber. She kept holding onto his arm, though, keeping it close and refusing to let go.

Kassian tried to unfasten her grip, but she just tightened her hold, hugging his hand even harder. He hesitated for a moment, then climbed into the bed behind her, trying to settle down as carefully as possible. She didn't react, her body moving ever so slightly as she let in and out deep breaths.

Closing his eyes, he tried to calm himself down, but despite everything that had happened, despite the fear and anger that lingered at the back of his mind, his heart was full of joy. Kassian opened his eyes and stared at the messy hair and frail shoulders, the small ears, and fair skin. Even without seeing her face, his mind cheered in contentment just looking at her lying next to him.

He tensed as she shifted, turning around and burying her face in his chest. He lay perfectly still, staring down at her, but she didn't pull away, and soon her soft breathing became even slower.

He probably should have changed – his trousers were dirty and stained with blood. He should have taken a bath too. But now that she had snuggled against him, he didn't think there was anything that could make him move.

Kassian raised his hand and pushed the hair out of her face again, then slid his hand over her shoulders and pulled her closer. Her body was cool despite the warm weather, and so soft he loosened his hold, afraid he might break her. Her – hair smelled of flowers with a hint of dirt and leaves, but he didn't mind as he buried his face in it, taking a deep breath.

She was safe, that was what was important. She was safe, and she was here, with him, at least for tonight. That was what was important.

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 74 - Tips

0 12 minutes read

Raena sighed in annoyance, wondering why she had so many covers on top of her when the weather was so hot. She tried to turn around and throw them off, when she realized she couldn't move and the covers were concerningly heavy.

She forced her eyes open, looking down at them only to realize there was just a thin sheet snaking around her lower body, and a big hand that definitely wasn't hers wrapped tightly around her waist. What she thought were covers was actually the body of the hand owner, which seemed to be radiating enough heat to cook breakfast.

She turned her head slowly, craning her neck to look at the person lying next to her, only to have her breath catch in her throat. Ka'ssian's head appeared right next to her shoulder, his face close, their noses were almost touching. His expression was completely relaxed, lips curved into a content smile. He looked even more handsome like that and as she stared at him with shock and confusion, her heart was beating so hard she was afraid the damn thing might wake him up.

How the hell did she end up in the same bed as him? And what was this place?

Her eyes examined the room they were in – painted in dark blue, black, and silver, the space gave a cold and stoic feel. There was barely any furniture apart from the bed, a table with two chairs, and a wardrobe, but they were all exquisitely made.

The Ultimate Trump Card

The only other thing inside were a few big plants-with giant green leaves that seemed to spread around a pleasant but unimposing smell of vegetation. Everything was tidy and clean, only the table had a few papers and quills scattered chaotically on it.

Her eyes landed on the sword that was propped by on the wall and the memories of last night flooded her head. The running in the forest and the people chasing her, the guy that had caught her and taunted her and then.. the blood and the bodies. The head that had fallen in her lap...

Her stomach turned and bile rose in her throat, threatening to suffocate her. Raena pushed Ka'ssian's hand off and jumped to her feet, looking around in panic. She ran to one of the flowerpots and threw up in it, retching painfully as her chest tightened and her stomach continued to twist and turn until there was nothing left in it. She leaned her head on her hands, trying to calm down and regain control of her trembling body.

"Here, drink this." Ka'ssian's voice said somewhere next to her. She froze, staring at the floor for a second before closing her eyes. Of course he'd wake up with all this noise. Why was she even surprised?

Raena wiped her mouth and pushed herself off the pot, looking up. He was standing next to her, holding a tall transparent glass with a yellowish liquid inside and waiting for her to take it.

His expression was still sleepy, but his eyes were wide awake as he watched her get to her feet. He wasn't wearing a shirt for some reason, but at least he had pants on. Raena glanced down at her own body, somewhat relieved to find herself dressed in a nightgown reaching to the middle of her calves. For a second she wondered if he had been the one to change her clothes, but then pushed that thought away.

Raena accepted the glass silently, raising it to her lips. She took a big gulp, expecting it to be tea or water with some herbs, but the taste was bitter and unpleasant, almost as if it was mixed with medicine. She tried to move the cup away, but he reached out and put his finger on the bottom of it, forcing it up again.

"Drink all of it." He insisted, holding it like that until she resumed drinking. He pulled his hand away, his eyes still locked on her until she finished the rest of the nasty stuff. Raena wiped her mouth again, shuddering at the aftertaste.

"What was that?" She asked in a hoarse voice, glaring at the glass.

"A medicine to calm your nerves." He replied, taking the cup from her and walking back to the bed to leave it on the nightstand. Raena glanced at the door she had noticed a few seconds ago, wondering if that was the way out. When she looked back at him, she realized he had seen her do that.

"Do you want to leave?" He asked.

"Kara will be worried about me," Raena said the first thing that came to mind.

"Alright." Ka.sasian nodded. "But first, let's have a talk." He strode to the table, sinking in one of the chairs and looking at her. When she didn't move, he pointed at the chair across from him. "Sit. Now."

Of course it wasn't going to be that easy. And of course he would want to talk. With everything that had happened and in this situation where she literally had nowhere to go, he wasn't going to let the opportunity pass.

But neither was she.

Raena strode to the chair and sunk into it, ignoring the pain in her muscles. The way Ka.sasian was staring at her was unnerving, even more so by the fact that he had no intention of putting a shirt on, and looking at his hard, well-defined muscles was more distracting than she thought it would be.

He was now leaning his head on his hand, staring at her with a thoughtful expression. Raena bit the inside of her lip, forcing herself to return his look. Kara's voice kept whispering in her ear, like a little devil – or an angel – hovering over her shoulder.

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“Does it hurt somewhere?” He finally spoke, and Raena blinked in surprise at the unexpected question. “The doctor said you were not seriously injured, but you probably know your body better...”

“I'm fine, thank you,” Raena replied stiffly. Another long pause followed, broken by Ka.ssian's heavy sigh.

“About last night... Do you know any of the people that were there? The guards or the masked men? Have you met them before, do you recognize their voices or anything else?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” He asked, letting his hand fall and leaning forward. She nodded. “Then why were they trying to kill you?” Raena swallowed the lump in her throat, unable to look away from his eyes.

“They weren't trying to kill me. They said they were there to take me.” She said carefully, watching as his expression changed. “I just got their leader angry, so he decided to teach me a lesson before taking me wherever they were supposed to take me.”

“And where is that?”

“I don't know.” Raena said quietly. Ka.ssian sighed, letting his head drop down, then rubbing his neck. “I swear I don't know. The guards came to my residence saying you summoned me here, and I followed them. I found it weird that we didn't go through the garden but through the Concubine's palace, but by that time the one with the mask appeared and then his buddies killed the soldiers, saying they weren't supposed to leave witnesses. I ran, and they caught me in the forest where you found me.”

Ka.ssian had returned to staring at her, his eyes cold and full of suspicion. The way he was looking at her bothered her more than if he had turned angry, but she knew she deserved it. She had done nothing but lie until now so him not believe her was actually smart of him.

He got up without a word, walking away from her and heading towards another door that she hadn't noticed before, half-hidden by the enormous unlit fireplace facing the bed. He pushed the door and disappeared into a room drowned in darkness, the only

sound coming from his steps and the screeching of a drawer being pulled. Raena waited impatiently, wondering what he was up to.

He returned shortly after, but he was still empty-handed. Raena raised an eyebrow as she looked back to his face, which for the first time showed absolutely nothing. He took a seat across from her again, locking his lips. A moment later, he looked back at her, and his hesitation disappeared.

Raena raised her eyebrows in question, waiting for him to say something.

Kassian extended his hand over the table, raising something between his thumb and his forefinger. Raena switched her attention to it – it was a small golden plate with a square form, holding the Imperial crest in its center. Raena narrowed her eyes in confusion before looking back at him.

“Do you know what this is?” He asked. Raena shook her head. “This is an immunity token.

There are only a few of those and only direct members of the Imperial family – as well as a few distinguished nobles and military commanders –

Own one. With this token one can receive immunity for any crime excluding high treason such as attempted murder of the Emperor or a member of the imperial family.” Raena’s eyes widened as she stared at the token, so she jumped as Kassian’s other hand caught hers. A second later, he was pressing the token against her palm, closing her fingers around it. “I give you this token but I want you to tell me everything.”

“I-I-I really don’t know anything about the two soldiers or the masked men, I swear,” Raena said breathlessly, raising her wide eyes to him. His expression made her tense, but she forced herself to keep calm.

“I know,” Kassian said quietly. “That much I can tell. But that’s not what I am talking about. I want you to tell me everything. Starting from the reason you married me, the reason you pretended to be something you’re not, the reason you bought those slaves at the market, the reason you kept all those secrets. The reason you became...”

“..Madam Lydia.” Raena finished, and his hold on her hand tightened. “So you did know. I thought as much, but you never said anything.” His expression didn’t change, but the look in his eyes was so impatient and so intense that she suddenly felt threatened. She looked down at their hands-hers holding the immunity token and his holding hers so gently yet so desperately.

She could almost imagine Kara screaming at her right now. He had just given her the ultimate trump card, which cleared all obstacles in her path.

With this token, even the Emperor could not kill her.

The worst it could happen.. the worst it could happen was for Ka.ssian to hate her. But if that happened, she'd be getting exactly what she thought she wanted – divorce and freedom to leave.

And at least he'd get some answers and hopefully enough information to protect himself.

But how much could she tell him? How much would he believe? Even Kara, who had been with her from the start, struggled with accepting everything Raena had dumped on her at first. And Ka.ssian.. he didn't even trust her to begin her, why would he believe..

Raena looked back at his face, searching for something to tell her how to go about it. When their eyes met, she froze, feeling almost as if somebody had just punched her in the gut. His gaze was overflowing with desperation and hope she would accept his offer and tell him the truth this time. Hope she'll finally open up.

Damn it, Raena thought, her c.hest. He wanted to believe, he was, desperate to tightening.

If only I had done this from the start..

"Alright," Raena said quietly. He looked surprised for a second, then his expression turned so relieved, she almost laughed.

"Alright." He nodded.

They continued to stare at each other for a few seconds, then Ka.ssian pulled his hand away, leaning back in his chair. Raena raised the token and placed it on the table next to her, letting her hands fall in her lap.

"Do you believe in life after death, Ka.ssian?" She asked, watching him as he blinked in surprise at the mention of his name. "What do you think happens to a person's soul after that person dies?"

"I don't know... What does that have to do with...?" He asked, frowning in confusion.

"Answer me, please." Raena insisted, and he sighed in exasperation.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "The priests say that once a person dies, they go to a different world and live the life they earned according to the deeds they had performed in the last life."

"Would you believe me if I told you that I died in another world and woke up in this body shortly before our wedding?" Raena asked, her heart beating so hard in her c.hest, she found it hard to breathe. Ka.ssian stared at her for a few seconds, his eyes hardening.

“No.” He replied. Raena swallowed the lump in her throat but kept her smile on.

“What if I can tell you what your mother’s last words were before they dragged her for the execution? That was before I was born, wasn’t it?”

There is no way I could know that considering it was just the two of you when she spoke them.” Ka.ssian’s face changed in an instant, his hands tightening over the armrests.

“Protect the ones you love at all costs, my love, even if it means giving up everything because loving someone means having your heart living outside of your body. And without a heart, life isn’t worth living.”

Ka.ssian continued to stare at her with a mix of shock and anger, his mouth slightly open if he planned to speak but couldn’t remember how.

Raena waited patiently for the words to sink in, watching him as he leaned on his elbows, running a hand over his face.

“Let’s say I believe you,” he finally said, his voice low and uncertain, as if even he didn’t know what he was saying. “How does that relate to anything you’ve done?”

“This is the reason for everything I’ve done.” She replied. “When I woke up in this body, I somehow knew things about this world and the future, and I planned my next steps around those things. I knew I would marry you and I knew I would divorce you. I knew certain changes would happen in the capital which would allow some businesses to thrive while others would fall into ruin. I used that knowledge to invest and develop thus making my businesses successful.”

“Wait, you ‘knew’ we’re going to get divorced?” He frowned.

“Yes. You were supposed to divorce me of your own volition.” She replied.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you were supposed to fall in love with someone else” Raena said, watching his eyes widen. “But as time passed, I realized that those things I ‘knew’ were likely things which could happen. Still, it seems those futures can also be changed.”

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“My plan was to get married to you like it was supposed to happen in our future I saw and create a business that would make me money so own to rely on and I wouldn’t have to go back to my family only to be married off to someone else. And once I made enough money, I planned to leave the Empire because in the future I knew of, the Empire will soon go to war with Craidal and things here will turn ugly.” At the mention of Craidal, Ka.ssian’s eyes snapped to attention, and he locked them on her. “I am not working with them, I swear. And when I bought Zen and his siblings, I didn’t even know

they were from Craidal. I gave them their freedom the moment we were out of the market. They chose to stay with me and serve me.”

“And you’re sure they are not spies for Craidal?” He frowned.

“I am not sure of anything anymore,” Raena replied cautiously. “They’ve never hurt me and they’ve never opposed any of my others, but..”

“But..?”

“But I have concerns.” She added. “Which is why I am trying to figure out if those concerns are deserved or unfounded.”

“And the Empress? What is your connection to her exactly?”

“That’s..” Raena started when a knock came from the door. Raena glanced at it, then back at Ka.ssian, who continued to stay still for a few seconds before rising to his feet and going to open it. When she heard steps, Raena turned to look at the newcomer, not at all surprised to find Blaine there.

He bowed at her gingerly before returning his attention to Ka.ssian.

“I apologize for interrupting your rest” He said with a tense, almost fearful expression. “But I have urgent news. Lady Vega was found dead along with all her servants.” Raena blinked in shock, her eyes darting towards Ka.ssian’s back, which had stiffened, his hands balling into fists. “There’s more,” Blaine added and Raena’s grip on the chair tightened as she wondered what could make him get that panicked expression. “It’s about your brother. The Crown Prince was gravely injured last night and the imperial doctors say he might not make it.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 74 - Tips

0 12 minutes read

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“My plan was to get married to you like it was supposed to happen in our future I saw and create a business that would make me money so own to rely on and I wouldn’t have to go back to my family only to be married off to someone else. And once I made enough money, I planned to leave the Empire because in the future I knew of, the Empire will soon go to war with Craidal and things here will turn ugly.” At the mention of Craidal, Ka.ssian’s eyes snapped to attention, and he locked them on her. “I am not working with them, I swear. And when I bought Zen and his siblings, I didn’t even know they were from Craidal. I gave them their freedom the moment we were out of the market. They chose to stay with me and serve me.”

“And you’re sure they are not spies for Craidal?” He frowned.

“I am not sure of anything anymore,” Raena replied cautiously. “They’ve never hurt me and they’ve never opposed any of my others, but..”

“But..?”

“But I have concerns.” She added. “Which is why I am trying to figure out if those concerns are deserved or unfounded.”

“And the Empress? What is your connection to her exactly?”

“That’s..” Raena started when a knock came from the door. Raena glanced at it, then back at Ka.ssian, who continued to stay still for a few seconds before rising to his feet

and going to open it. When she heard steps, Raena turned to look at the newcomer, not at all surprised to find Blaine there.

He bowed at her gingerly before returning his attention to Ka.ssian.

"I apologize for interrupting your rest" He said with a tense, almost fearful expression. "But I have urgent news. Lady Vega was found dead along with all her servants." Raena blinked in shock, her eyes darting towards Ka.ssian's back, which had stiffened, his hands balling into fists. "There's more," Blaine added and Raena's grip on the chair tightened as she wondered what could make him get that panicked expression. "It's about your brother. The Crown Prince was gravely injured last night and the imperial doctors say he might not make it."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 75 - Tips

0 9 minutes read

"Your Highness? Your Highness, did you hear me?" Blaine asked, his voice suddenly sounding distant and incoherent.

"Give him a minute." Raena's voice came from his side, and he instinctively looked at her. How badly is he injured?"

"Well." Blaine started, glancing at Ka.ssian before returning his attention to her. "From the news we got from the Imperial palace, he is unconscious and fighting for his life. They said there is nothing else they could do for him, he either wakes up in the next few days or he doesn't."

"We're going there," Ka.ssian announced and Blaine nodded readily, stepping towards the door. Ka.ssian turned to look at her. "Stay here. I"

"I'm not staying." She interrupted him, raising her chin stubbornly. "I have things to take care of at my residence and at the..." she glanced at Blaine then returned her eyes to Ka.ssian. "... and the restaurant staying."

"Somebody just tried to kidnap you in the middle of our own home. Do you really think you'll be safe out there?" Ka.ssian snapped. "You heard Blaine, didn't you? Vega and her entire household were killed. Somebody got to my brother in the damn Imperial Palace. And you want me to let you go outside? Do you hear yourself?"

"Blaine, can you step outside and call for someone to bring me a change of clothes, please?"

She asked his aide, who blinked in surprise at the sudden request, looking at Ka.ssian for approval.

When he nodded, Blaine sneaked outside and closed the door. Ka.ssian turned to face her, putting his hands on his hips. "Here." She said, suddenly raising her hand. Ka.ssian looked down, only to realize she was handing him the token. "Hold on to that until we have the time for the rest of our conversation. I am not stupid, I realize the danger hasn't passed, but not doing anything is not going to make me any safer."

"Is the restaurant that important right now?" He frowned. "Or is it that you think you can quickly sell it and run while I am distracted by something else? It's not going to work."

"It's not that." She said. "I am not going to run." He gave her an incredulous look, and she sighed. "I promise I will not run before we finish our conversation. If you then decide to let me go, I will leave."

"You want to leave that badly, huh?" He said with a grim expression.

"Let's leave that conversation for later." She sighed, looking away from him. "Please don't stop me from leaving the residence. You already have people watching me, don't you? I promise not to try to lose them today. They can keep an eye on me and report to you what I do if that makes you feel better. I just need to get to the restaurant."

Ka.ssian sighed. Arguing with her was just as exhausting as arguing with his brother.

"Fine." He said at the end and she gave him a small smile, pressing the token with one finger against his chest. When he finally took it she strode to the door and opened it without a hint of shame from the fact that she was wearing nothing but a nightdress. Ka.ssian shook his head and by the time he looked at her again, she was striding back with a maid trailing after her. A second servant stepped in, bringing clothes for him as well.

Ka.ssian slipped on the new shirt and then changed his pants, looking around the room for Raena, only to realize the maid must have led her to the bathroom. He was already ready and waiting impatiently when she appeared from the bathroom door, fully dressed and with her hair pulled into a ponytail. The traces around her neck looked even more striking, with her skin exposed to the light, but she didn't look bothered at all.

She seemed surprised to see him waiting, but then quickly followed him outside as he opened the door. Blaine met them with an impatient expression, taking the lead and setting on a quick pace, which she seemed to struggle with. Ka.ssian was just going to tell him to slow down when they finally reached his outer rooms.

They stepped outside, side by side, both squinting against the blinding sun that greeted them on its way to the top of the sky. Ka.ssian looked away, his gaze locking on the two figures waiting for her at the base of the steps. She was just taking a step towards them when Ka.ssian reached out and caught her hand, forcing her to stop. She looked back at him with a question in her eyes, so he moved closer, leaning down so he could speak

in her ear. His eyes remained on the silver-haired guy who kept watching them with a stiff expression, eyes dark with frustration.

Updated by Jobnib.com

“Don’t go anywhere alone with that guy.”

He said. “And keep in mind that if you do try to run away from me now, I will find you, no matter how fast or how far you run. So keep your word.”

He stepped back, looking down at her face, only to find her swallowing nervously.

“I won’t.” She replied quietly, holding his gaze, then turned around and walked down the stairs, lifting her skirts so she wouldn’t trip on them. Ka.ssian watched her as she joined her maid guard, picking up the path leading to the main garden. Ka.ssian looked back at the guards standing on duty by the door and made them a sign to follow her. The two men saluted him, then hurried after the three.

“Your Highness,” Blaine called impatiently and Ka.ssian sighed, tearing his eyes away from her and focusing them on his aide. “I’ve called for a carriage so it should be waiting for us at the gate”

“I don’t have the patience for a carriage. We are riding” Ka.ssian announced, moving past his aide and heading down the path, leaning around the Main Palace and towards the outer gate. There was indeed a carriage waiting for them, but Ka.ssian quickly dismissed it and ordered horses to be prepared instead. As the stable hands rushed to fulfill his command, Gerrin and two of his men joined their entourage with his second-in-command pretending to be conveniently deaf when Ka.ssian told him he didn’t need an escort.

“With all the attempted murders around the capital last night, you need a few extra pairs of eyes to watch your back anywhere you go,” Gerrin said in a surprisingly calm voice. Usually he was the first one to call for retaliation and draw his sword, so his sudden restraint was actually concerning. “One poisonous arrow is all it takes. And we can’t have our Commander dying in the middle of this sh!t-show.”

“All around the capital?” Ka.ssian frowned, glancing towards Blaine who shook his head that he didn’t know anything about it.

“Yeah. The attack on your wife and the concubine were not the only ones.” Gerrin said quietly, moving closer to Ka.ssian. “I was out on a patrol, so I heard the news even before the sun was up. There is already word all over the city that the crown prince is dead. Besides that, there was an attack on the Prime Minister’s mansion and two in a brothel downtown, the one on that street that suddenly turned really popular.

“Ruby Street?” Ka.ssian and Blaine said at same time.

“Yeah, that one.” Gerrin nodded, his eyebrows almost connecting on his forehead as he frowned. “Two people were stabbed there, but the attacker escaped. These many attacks at once... it feels like someone is trying to clean house. But I can’t see the connection. Even if your wife was attacked because of her connection to the Prime Minister, what about your concubine, a prostitute, and a brothel owner? Not to mention the crown prince – if that is true at all.”

“We’re not going to talk about this here.” Ka.ssian cut him off, glancing at the stable hands who were just bringing out the horses. “Gerrin, you’re coming with me. You two – go watch the North Palace and if you see my wife leaving, follow her. Keep your eyes open, she might be in disguise or have someone with her. If you lose her, don’t bother coming back.”

They saluted him without hesitation, then left to fulfill his orders. Gerrin glanced after them, looking back at Ka.ssian with an inquisitive expression. Ka.ssian ignored him, climbing on horse instead.

He barely waited for his aide and second-in-command to follow before kicking his horse in a gallop and leading it out of the residence.

He barely slowed down on the way to the Imperial palace, his body falling into the habit of legs squeezing the back of the animal, body leaning forward for a better grip and balance, one hand squeezing the reins while the other one remained free so he could draw his weapon if necessary.

Nobody spoke on the way, so his mind quickly slipped back into its chaotic state and every single word Raena uttered came back into his head, bringing him the worst headache he ever had after his mother died.

If what she said was true... if the fables and all beliefs were true... if people really got reborn in a new world after dying on their one then... that would explain so much. But it was so bizarre and so phantasmagorical that Ka.ssian wasn’t sure if it made sense or if he just wanted to believe her that badly. There were probably hundreds of other plausible explanations for her actions, but she had chosen this one while she stared at him with those calm eyes and a beautiful smile.

He wanted to believe her. He really did. He didn’t care if she had been born into this body or woke up into it when she said she did. But she had lied so many times already.

Yulien was probably going to kill him if he survived this. And if going against his orders wasn’t enough, he had offered her immunity against all crimes. But he had been at the end of the rope already. It’s just that there was something in the way she looked at him that was kind of sad, like she really wanted to say something but was afraid to speak.

There was no going back now. He had chosen to put his trust in her and if she betrayed him, it would be all on him. And if she was finally telling the truth..

Ka.ssian pulled the reins of the horse, forcing it to an abrupt stop, frowning at the solid metal grid that had been lowered over the gates.

The guards on the other side stood at attention, but none of them moved to raise the grid for him to pass.

“What is the meaning of this? Don’t you know who I am?” He snarled at the one closest to him. The man looked up hesitantly, bowing down.

“My sincerest apologies, Your Highness, but the Imperial Palace has been put on lockdown. No one can go in or out. We are not allowed to open the gates.” He replied in a shaky voice “Once the investigation...”

“I am a member of the royal family and commander of the Imperial army. You’re telling me I don’t have the trust of the royal family, is that it?”

Ka.ssian barked at him. The foot soldier curled down, eyes darting helplessly around, but his comrades remained silent and staring aside as if pretending not to notice anything. Ka.ssian was about to shout at him again when he noticed a figure hurrying towards them.

As one of Yulien’s aides reached the gate, Ka.ssian quickly got off his horse, holding the reins while watching the young, energetic man discuss something with the leader of the guards, gesticulating excitedly.

“I sent word we’re coming before I came to tell you.” Blaine’s voice answered the question that was floating in his head. “I figured they will put the place on lockdown and won’t let us in without an imperial order.”

Ka.ssian glanced at Blaine, who stared back with tired eyes, dark circles forming around them. The sound of steps made them all turn just as Yulien’s aide stopped next to the grid.

“I apologize for this, Your Highness, but you know the protocol.” He said awkwardly. “They’ll let you in through the side door, but you won’t be able to leave until the case is closed and they lift the lockdown.” His eyes darted towards Blaine and Gerrin, and he gave them an apologetic smile. “I am sorry, but only His Highness can come in.”

Ka.ssian gritted his teeth but then nodded, turning around and passing the reins of his horse to Blaine. He was just opening his mouth to tell him to take care of the residence in his absence when Blaine spoke.

“I’ll take care of it.” Ka.ssian held his eyes for a second, nodding. He looked towards Gerrin, who gave him his usual crooked smile.

"I'm taking over the captain's position until you choose a new one so I'll make sure not even a bird goes over that place. And I'll keep an eye on your precious lady."

"You better stay away from her." Ka.ssian nodded, and Gerrin scoffed.

"What? Scared of some competition?" He chuckled, but there was no amusement in his eyes.

"Go on, Your Highness. We'll hold the front. Your brother needs you more than we do right now."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 76 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

"Does it hurt?" Kara asked as she spread the ointment over Raena's neck, wincing as if the ugly bruises that had turned almost black were on her own neck.

"No." Raena lied, picking up his hair so her maid could tie the small scarf around her neck. The skin was tender to the touch and swallowing was uncomfortable, but it was her own fault anyway.

She should have figured the whole situation was off.

Raena shook her head before memories from that night could appear again. Every time she remembered it, all the blood and the people dying around her, her body covered in a cold sweat and her hands started to shake. She knew Ka.ssian had done it to protect her but seeing it with her own eyes had been horrifying. She had thought that after watching so many thrillers and horror movies where people got murdered in all kinds of ways, she would have been fine if she saw someone die, but the reality was much, much different.

Her eyes darted towards where Zen stood in the other end of her room, leaning on the wall with his hands crossed. Ever since the morning, he had been like a bomb that was going to explode any moment. The maids started avoiding him and even Kara seemed more careful in how she talked to him.

Apart from checking if she was alright and grumbling about the third prince keeping her there throughout the night, he had barely said two words to her, but he followed her like a shadow that even the sun couldn't force away.

"Zen, I need you to do something for me," Raena said carefully, keeping her eyes on her reflection as Kara helped her put on her black wig.

She didn't look at him, but she could sense his piercing gaze settling on the back of her head.

“No.” He said almost immediately. “I’m coming with you. Whatever you need, I’ll do it after I bring you back safely.”

Raena waited for Kara to finish, then turned to look at him.

“I don’t have that much time to spare.”

Raena sighed, adjusting the cufflinks of the sleeves of her maid uniform. “I need you to go and find everything you can about Lady Vega’s death. Those men that attacked me said they were here for me, so it makes no sense to kill her and her servants. And they didn’t touch any of the other concubines, so this was personal. I also need you to go and check on my family and find out if any of them have been hurt.”

“I said no.” He replied coldly.

Raena stopped fiddling with her buttons, slowly raising her head to look at him. She gave him her coldest look, taking a few steps towards him.

“Are you disobeying my direct order, Zen?” she asked, looking him in the eyes. “I don’t need a guard who refuses to do what I ask.” His jaw tightened and his stormy gray eyes turned even sharper – like a storm that was about to destroy everything on its path.

“You should know me well enough by now. I value my life very much, so if I am asking you to do this, I have calculated that my life will not be in danger. I need to know that my family is safe and I need to know what happened to Lady Vega. Just before she died she told me she had important information she wanted to share with me so I need to know what that was.”

Zen remained silent for a bit, then let out a loud sigh.

“At least take Davin with you.”

“Davin has other tasks to do.” Raena turned her back on him, going back to the full-body mirror and giving herself one last look. “Ka.sasian’s aide has been poking his nose in our documents and finances and he is looking for something, so need Gavin to make sure everything is in order here. And I need him to figure out what sir Blaine is looking for so I can prepare ahead. He is already in my office doing that

“Then take Elene,” Zen said in an exasperated voice.

“And how is a maid going to keep me safe?” Raena frowned, trying to keep her expression of confusion. “Besides, Elene needs to stay here to take my place. I’ll be fine with Kara, two maids are of no interest to anyone. And once I am at the restaurant, there are enough bodyguards to protect me. When you are done, just meet us there and we’ll go back together.” Zen opened his mouth as if to argue some more, but Raena raised her head. “That’s enough. I know we are all on edge, but I have made my decision. With Ka.sasian stuck in the Imperial Palace, this is a good time for me to make

a few moves. I need everyone to do as they are told, not to question me constantly. I know what I am doing.”

Updated by Jobnib.com

“Fine,” Zen grumbled with displeasure. “I’ll finish as fast as I can and meet you there.” Raena nodded and he headed towards the door, stopping at its threshold. She saw him through the mirror as he looked back at her, his face twisting as if he wanted to say something more. “Stay safe.” He muttered eventually, then stepped out of the room.

Raena let out a quiet sigh, looking at Kara, Raena raised her finger and pressed it against her who was just opening her mouth to say something.

“Let’s get going,” Raena said instead, and the two headed towards the door.

The guards at the outer gate took longer than usual to verify them and their reason for leaving the residence, but in the end, they let them go. Raena kept glancing left and right to see if they were being followed, but no matter how often she looked, she couldn’t see anyone. She doubted that meant she wasn’t followed, though.

She put her hood on as they neared Ruby Street and let Kara lead her to the back alley, where one of the managers let them in and guided them to her office. After changing into one of Madam Lydia’s dresses and securing her veil, she finally turned to look at Kara.

“Can I speak freely now?” Kara asked almost immediately.

“I think this is as safe as it can get,” Raena replied, rubbing her forehead.

“What exactly is going on? Did you find something about Zen? Is this why you warned me not to ask or talk about anything apart from the attack?”

“I have not found anything yet” Raena said. “But Lady Vega’s death. I don’t think it is a coincidence she died just as she was supposed to talk to me. Somebody wanted her silenced.” Kara’s concerned expression grew even darker, fear making its way into her eyes. “Ka.ssian also doesn’t trust him. And.. kind of told Ka.ssian the truth. Well, some of it.”

“What? You did?” Kara exclaimed, quickly lowering her voice and stepping closer. “How much did you tell him?”

“I told him about waking up in this body and knowing certain things about the future like us getting divorced and the Empire going to war with Craidal.”

Kara grimaced. “Did he believe you?”

"It's too early to say. I did give him some"

"And your deal with the Empress.?" Kara irrefutable proof, but it's still a lot to take asked carefully.

"We were interrupted just as I was getting to that. It seems not only Lady Vega was attacked, but the crown prince too. His aide said it was serious, like death bed serious. But this wasn't supposed to happen. He was never supposed to be attacked, he was supposed to die from poison."

"I think we established that things have already changed," Kara murmured. "But you should have told him. Waiting any longer now will feel like hiding it and that..."

"He gave me his immunity token so no matter what I say or what I have done, with that token he can't execute me," Raena said quickly, and Kara's eyes widened. "But I gave it back until we could finish our conversation. He still doesn't trust me, so keeping it would make him even more suspicious."

Kara continued to stare at her with a weird expression when she suddenly smiled.

"I'm happy for you." Raena frowned, giving her a confused look.

"About telling him the truth?"

"No, about finding someone who is ready to go to such lengths for you. The immunity token is not only a rare and extremely important object.

For the third prince, it must be his only protection against the Empress and his enemies. Imagine, without that immunity, they could set him up and with the Emperor already hating him, he could be executed for breathing the wrong way." Kara took a step forward, carefully putting her bandaged arm on her shoulder. "You've already decided to tell him the truth. Does that mean we're helping him to avoid getting executed as well?"

"Let's hope we've already done that." Raena scoffed.

"And the restaurant?" Kara asked, raising an eyebrow. "Are you selling it?"

"That's on hold for now. But I am definitely buying boat tickets. If things go awry, we are leaving. Which reminds me, I need to speak with Marden." She fished the key for the secret compartment on her desk, handing it to Kara. "Get started with the ledgers, and look for any irregularities, no matter how small. I'll go next door and I'll be back as soon as possible."

Kara nodded, heading towards the desk while Raena stepped out of the room, closing the door and looking in both directions. She strode to the back door, ignoring the glances her staff gave her, and slipped outside, heading for the neighboring building. As

she stepped inside, it struck her how unusually quiet it was. It was already past noon and while they weren't that busy around that time of the day, there had always been the sounds of conversation or laughter or the distant echo of moans and screams of pleasure.

She pushed the curtains out of the way, stepping into an empty reception room. Even the bartender was missing. Raena paused, listening in for any sound to show there were people there, and after a few seconds, she picked on quiet voices coming from upstairs mixed with crying.

Raena swallowed the lump in her and, ignoring her racing heart, strode across the reception room and towards the end of the corridor where Marden's office was. She opened the door without knocking, finding the insides dark and empty as well.

"Arisa?" she called as she returned to the corridor, wondering how smart of an idea it was to make such a loud noise. For a moment, nothing happened, and she was just about to head upstairs when the sound of feet running down the staircase made her tense and move closer to the wall. She watched the corner where the person was supposed to appear and let out a sigh of relief when she noticed Arissa staggering on her way, her hair a mess and her face pale with fear and lack of sleep. "What is going on here?"

"Marden, he..." the woman started, then suddenly burst into tears. She threw her hands around Raena, who stood still, unsure of what to do or what was going on. She had never seen Arissa without her ironic smirk or perfectly arranged hair and clothes, so to see her sobbing in her shoulder and trembling like a leaf was unsettling.

"Calm down, Arissa," Raena said, patting her on the back. "Calm down and tell me what happened. I can't help if I don't know what is going on. Take a deep breath and look at me." The red-haired woman pulled away, wiping her face with the back of her hand and taking a deep breath.

"That's it, that's it. What happened?"

For a moment, Arissa looked like she was going to start crying again, but then she closed her eyes and let out a long, heavy sigh.

"Two nights ago, there was a murder at the brothel. Somebody stabbed Hale to death in his room, then jumped out of the window." She said in a shaky voice. "When Marden found out he..." she paused, her lips quivering, "he went out to see if he could catch the guy and..."

"And what? What happened?" Raena asked impatiently, her skin bristling with tension.

"He was stabbed in the back just outside the building," Arissa said before bursting into tears again.

"Is he..?" Raena asked breathlessly, reaching out to lean on the wall before her feet gave in from underneath her. Arissa shook her head, then tried to say something, but her words were entirely incomprehensible. "Where is he? Is he here?" Arissa shook her head again, saying something, but the only thing Raena understood was the word 'home'. "Arissa, pick yourself together. You need to take care of the others. They are probably just as worried and afraid. This is your job, the job Marden gave you. Do your job properly so when he comes back, he wouldn't be complaining again. I'm going to see him."

Arissa's head bobbed in a nod, but she continued to sob in her hands. Raena pushed herself off the wall and strode back to the restaurant, heading directly for her office. As she pushed the door open and entered the room, Kara raised her head from the papers she was looking at, her frown turning into a concerned expression.

"Marden was attacked two nights ago," Raena said in a shaky voice. "The same night I was, This has to be the Empress. She is going to make her move soon, and she is getting rid of all the obstacles"

Kara's face turned white, and she slowly sat back in her seat, licking her lips.

"I'm going to see Marden if he is still alive," Raena announced. "You stay here and keep checking. I'll post a guard outside. If Zen comes before I'm back, tell him you don't know where I am.

"Raena, I know you care about Marden, but it's too risky. What if..."

"He was hurt because of me, Kara. If he dies, it's on me."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 77 - Tips

09 minutes read

"So it was all a lie? The attack, the injury, the doctor saying you might not make it through the night?" Kaessian exclaimed, his mind jumping between being relieved and pissed off beyond reason. He kept pacing back and forth in the spacious reception room in Yulien's quarters, his glare moving between his brother, who was supposed to be mortally wounded, and his brother's bodyguard, who was supposed to be dead. "I waited for hours outside, thinking about how you might be drawing your last breath any moment! Your aide could have told me the truth at least, damn it! Are you trying to put me in an early grave?"

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting but I had something to finish. And I'm sorry that I kept my plan from you, but I had to make a quick decision and there was no safe way to inform you of my intentions." Yulien said with an even tone, his smile giving place to a serious expression. "Please calm down and I will explain everything."

"After the night I had and the news of your 'condition' I received this morning, I am sorry if I cannot be calm!" Ka.ssian shouted at him. Vyn tensed, his hand tightening on the hilt of his sword as if preparing to unsheathe it. Ka.ssian gave him his most threatening look. "Do not tempt me. If you pull that weapon out even an inch, I will not be responsible for what happens to you next."

Yulien sighed, turning to his bodyguard.

"Please leave us alone for a minute." He said, returning Vyn's disapproving look without hesitation. Vyn's shoulders drooped in defeat and he strode to the door with heavy steps, disappearing into the adjoining room. Yulien returned his eyes back to his brother, nodding towards the seat across from him.

He waited until Ka.ssian finally sat down, then the crown prince bent forward, leaning his hands on his knees.

"I am sorry, Ka.ssian. Truly." Yulien said quietly, holding his gaze. "And I am relieved to hear that both you and Raena are safe. You also have my condolences for Lady Vega's untimely passing. I will do my best to help you find her klllers. But we have more urgent matters to deal with. Are you ready to listen now?"

Ka.ssian took a deep breath, nodding. His bl00d was still boiling and his desire to shout and hit was as strong as ever, but Yulien's relaxed demeanor and posture were forcefully making him calm. He sat down, copying his brother's pose, and waited.

"Thank you," Yulien said, giving him one of his polite smiles. "I got a report that Rissen has met with someone at the brothel next to Raena's restaurant. One of my Shadows went missing that night, but another one that was watching the restaurant itself caught a glimpse of at least two figures sneaking over the rooftops. He was on strict orders just to observe and not to interfere, so nobody noticed him. He saw Rissen going in almost at the same time the two figures did." Ka.ssian tensed on his sp0t, nodding impatiently.

"The next day, a large amount of his personal account was withdrawn, but nothing was purchased or delivered to the palace. I figured he was planning to hire assassins or pay off someone to stir trouble, but I wasn't entirely sure who his target was. With the Emperor still ill and the mood shifting in their favor, the rumors of more rebellions in Craidal and whispers of our inability to handle a bunch of petty troublemakers, this is the right time for them to make a move."

"You thought the Empress or Rissen will try klll you?" Ka.ssian asked.

"Targeting me alone is too risky and I really don't think Rissen is smart enough to pull it off without dragging himself through the mud. So the Empress needs to make it look like the attack on me has nothing to do with the succession of the throne. I think all the attacks that night were orc.hestrated by her and our brother, but their mercenaries were

unable to finish the job where it mattered. Or maybe their job was just to cause a ruckus and make it look like a lot of people are being targeted.”

Updated by Jobnib.com

“But why Raena and the Prime Minister? I thought they have some kind of connection to her with all the favors the Empress was doing for my wife.” Ka.ssian frowned.

“I am pretty sure they do, but I am still assessing the extent of it. I don’t think they are on good terms, though. During the Empress’s birthday party, the Empress was trying to unmask Madam Lydia in front of all of us – likely to destroy her credibility and cause a rift between you two, enough for you to cast her away. Which means she knew Raena and Madam Lydia were the same person. But she also didn’t do it directly by ordering her to take her veil off – instead, she kept praising Madam Lydia and used the Emperor to get what she wanted. This makes me think that whatever cards your wife’s holding, they are a threat to the Empress and Empress wants to get rid of all the evidence.”

“Raena said the men that infiltrated my residence weren’t trying to kill her, but to take her away,” Ka.ssian said thoughtfully. “Is it to torture her? Or to keep her mouth shut? Maybe they thought that by keeping her alive they can keep her quiet – her life for her cooperation.”

“Raena said that? To you?” Yulien asked, raising eyebrow. “Did you..”

“I won’t be answering any of your questions until you tell me what you’re up to.” Ka.ssian interrupted him. Yulien looked annoyed for a second, but then sighed and nodded

“Fair enough.” He murmured, picking up his glass and taking a sip. “So, as I was saying, I knew she was about to make a move, so I wanted it to happen on my terms. So I orchestrated my own attack and spread the rumor about my condition. I bet this threw them all in confusion and disrupted their well-devised strategy, so they were forced to rethink their plans. And when plans change, people tend to rush without careful consideration, especially when they think the chance is too good to miss. And those who rush make mistakes.”

“So you’re waiting for them to attack you mere?” Ka.ssian asked. “With just Vyn?”

“Of course not. There are a dozen Shadows on standby. If whoever she sends can go past them and get to me, then I deserve to die.” Yulien shrugged. “But the point is not the attack. The point is catching them in the act. The Empress is getting impatient and sloppy. The attack on Raena, if it was really to take her, failed. The attack on me failed. If they really wanted to hurt the Prime Minister and his family, that failed too. Too many failures will put more pressure on her.”

“What if she finds out you’re not really that hurt?” Ka.ssian asked.

“She won’t. There are only six people that know the truth – you, Vyn, my two aides, one of the generals who has been helping me keep an eye on their known allies, and the doctor that announced my condition. I am absolutely sure about the others’ loyalty” Yulien said, leaning back in his seat. “But even if she finds out, it doesn’t matter. She still needs to take me out.”

“When do you think she’ll attack you? Is this why you called me here, to protect you?”

“No, it’s only for appearances’ sake. If you didn’t come to my side when I am supposed to be dying, people would start to question how serious condition is.” Yulien sighed. “I think she’ll make her move on the Anniversary banquet while everybody is focused on the ball. The security of such a big event will be tight and most of the guards will be assigned to the gathering, so my protection detail would surely be affected. Or at least, that’s what I want her to think.”

“But that’s just a couple of weeks away.” Ka.ssian frowned.

“Don’t worry, I’m ready.” Yulien smiled. “I am tired of looking over my shoulder and holding my breath every time I walk into a room. And I am sick of seeing her smiling face or listening to Rissen’s insufferable babbling at dinner. The Emperor doesn’t have that long. I need to solidify my position and get rid of my enemies before he dies. I have enough to worry about even without them breathing down my neck. Not to mention, those vultures are not even our biggest problem,”

The two of them kept staring at each other for a long moment and even though he couldn’t see his own face, Ka.ssian could tell he was wearing the same expression as his brother.

Ka.ssian looked away first, lowering his eyes to his hands. He had fresh blisters from the fighting last night, some of them already cracked.

He could barely feel them anymore, the skin over his palms and fingers had hardened so much with the layers upon layers of damaged skin, that he probably needed to get a deep cut or get his fingers chopped off to feel it. Yet, when he held Raena’s hand in his, he could feel how soft her skin was.

“Ka.ssian,” Yulien called, pulling him out of his thoughts. Ka.ssian looked up at his brother, who was sitting tensely at the edge of his seat, fingers tapping impatiently on his knee. “Do you have something to tell me?”

He knows, Ka.ssian thought as he studied face. How does he always know?

“I’m done staying away from Raena,” Ka.ssian said, trying to keep a straight face as Yulien continued to study him. His brother closed his eyes, sighing heavily. “She almost got raped last night, Yulien. And as you said, she might have something on the Empress – enough to make that careful viper get out of her hole and strike. And.” he

hesitated, growing more and more concerned by the lack of reaction. “All those years, I followed your orders and listened to everything you said. I married Sarea as you suggested, I picked up trade once the war was over – just like you suggested. I never wanted or asked for anything, because I never really wanted or needed anything more than what I had. But I am asking you now – trust me and leave Raena to me. She will not hinder your plans and she will not betray me. I’ll make sure of that.”

Yulien rubbed his forehead, an amused smile appearing on his lips.

“You lasted longer than I expected.” Yulien snorted at the end, running a hand through his long hair. “Anyway, do as you wish with her. She is your wife. The recent attack on her only shows that she is not as firmly aligned with the Empress as I thought. And anyone who has once sided with the Empress can be turned into a useful weapon. At best, Raena must have realized that she has a better chance of survival working with us than with the Empress. Why else would she open up now when she has been hiding for so long?”

“So you think it’s all because she thinks I’m her best chance of survival?” Ka.ssiian asked, a chilly feeling spreading through his chest. The thought did cross his mind – or tried to before he briskly brushed it away. The reason didn’t matter, what mattered was that she did.

“Who knows? Maybe she had started falling in love with you and wanted to come clean and make amends in order to start a proper relationship with you.” Yulien shrugged. Ka.ssiian tried not to grimace. He was thankful for his brother trying to cheer him up, but he could have used a little less disbelief in his voice. “Either way, I’ll need you to deal with your problem yourself. Whatever happens, deal with it as you see fit. I trust you know that a relationship without trust cannot last. Not in our world, at least.”

“I know.” Ka.ssiian nodded quietly. “So, what is the plan from here on out? When can I leave?”

“The lockdown won’t be lifted for a few more days at least, so make yourself comfortable here. As military personnel and high-ranking royal, you can take over the investigation easily.” Yulien shifted, his back straightening and his hands moving to the armrests almost as if he was suddenly sitting on a throne and giving orders. “I need you to be my hands and feet while you’re out there. I’ll tell you exactly what to do so we can set up the last pieces on the game board. Once that is done, we put pressure on them until someone breaks.” An excited smile appeared on his face, eyes flashing dangerously. “Are you ready, brother? We have waited almost twenty years for this. One way or another, I am going to take those two down even if that’s the last thing I do.”

“I’m ready.” Ka.ssiian nodded, getting up from the chair. “Let’s do this.”

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09 minutes read

“Be careful,” Kara whispered as she stared at her from the back door of the restaurant. Raena adjusted her hood, giving her an encouraging smile.

“Are you ready to go, Miss?”

Raena turned and smiled at Pen, who looked away awkwardly. When he first saw her without the veil, he had frozen stiff for a minute before shaking his head and asking what she needed. And when she asked him to take her to Marden’s house, he gave her a suspicious look but quickly agreed.

Once she was changed into her maid uniform and dark wig, she followed him outside and the two of them made their way through the busy streets. Few people cast her curious glances, so once she was far enough from the restaurant, she took off her hood. They walked for half an hour before Pen warned her they were veering off the main paths and took her through a labyrinth of streets that eventually brought them to a street with tall, pretty buildings which, unfortunately, seemed to have lost their battle with time. Despite their beautiful design and obviously expensive origin, most looked abandoned or fallen in neglect.

Pen finally stopped in front of the gates of one of them, glancing at her before pushing one of those wings open. The metal screeched mournfully under the pressure, moving just enough for them to slip in. The path to the house was swept and cleared of weeds, but everything beyond it had overgrown and turned into the trees and weed’s undisputed domain.

They walked for a couple of minutes until they finally saw the front door of the building. It reminded her of the brothel – before its renovation.

The coat was falling off in pieces and the color had faded into oblivion; ivy had claimed one of the walls all the way up to the roof and most of the windows had curtains drawn – or maybe the glass was just that dirty since one could not possibly see inside.

“Over here, Miss,” Pen called and she hurried after him just as he was knocking on the door. At first, nothing happened and for a couple of minutes, they just stood there and waited. Then the sound of a door being unlocked reached their ears before someone finally appeared in front of them. A man in his late sixties, tall and gray-haired, frowned at Pen, then his eyes settled on Raena.

“Are you lost?” He asked, his question directed towards Raena.

“We are here to see Master Marden.” Pen said with confidence he didn’t show before. Raena continued to look at the man on the other side of the door – probably a butler or a servant, judging by the attire

“The Master is not accepting any visitors today. Please come another day.” The butler said, trying to close the door on them. Both Raena and Marden reached out and caught the door, forcing the old man to use his entire body to prevent them from coming in.

“We are not here to cause trouble for him,” Raena said quickly. “Please pass this message to him Don’t let the left hand know what the right hand is doing.’ If he doesn’t want to see me after that, we’ll leave.”

The butler gave her another calculating look, then glanced at their hands. Raena pulled hers, and a few seconds later Pen followed her example. The old man slammed the door in their faces, his heavy steps disappearing inside the house.

“Now what?” Pen winced. “Can you climb? I can climb and open a window but you have to climb yourself there.”

“We are going to wait,” Raena said, pulling the cloak off her shoulders before her body melted in the heat. She then tossed it over her hand, stepping away from the door and looking up at the building.

Minutes dragged, and the sun continued to mercilessly shine over them, until finally, the key turned on the door again. Both raised their heads in hope as the door opened and a butler appeared again with an expression not nearly as hostile as before.

“Master will see you now.” He announced in a cold tone, leaving the door open and walking inside. Raena smiled at Pen and the two stepped into the cool hallway, following the butler who had already headed towards the curled staircase at the other end of the anteroom. He didn’t wait for them so they had to hurry before they lost him, stopping only after a few minutes as he waited for them in front of a door. He gave her another appraising look, then glared at the boy before walking away.

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“Pen, wait here.” She told the boy, patting him on the head before slipping through the slightly ajar door. She closed it behind her, giving the big, but poorly furnished room a quick look before proceeding towards the bed. The place smelled of alcohol, blood, and herbs, and the only sound inside came from her steps and somebody’s heavy breathing.

Biting her lip and holding her breath while her heart drummed in her chest, she continued towards the bed with small, hesitant steps.

“Hurry up before die of old age.” A voice said from the bed, and the body that she thought was sleeping, shifted ever so slightly. When she was moved close enough, she recognized him – his eyes were sunken and red, his cheeks were pale and hollow and the way he lay in the bed suggested he was in a lot of pain, but it was really Marden. When their eyes met, he frowned. “Wait who the hell are you?”

Raena smiled, reaching up and pulling off her wig, then shaking her head to let her blonde hair fall around her face. Marden's eyes widened, and he just stared at her with shock until eventually, he composed himself.

"Soo... a person has to be at death's door see your face, huh?" He scoffed, then his scoff turned into a fit of coughing. "Damn, you are pretty. at least. Now I can die in peace."

"Hey, stop with the dying talk" Raena said, walking the last few steps to the bed and taking a seat on its edge. "I'm going to get you a good doctor and somebody to take care of you. But first, tell me what happened. Why was Hale killed, and why did they go after you? Did you see their faces or recognized them?"

"I don't remember much," Marden replied with a grunt, trying to lift himself in a sitting position, but giving up almost immediately as his face drained from all the blood and his eyes filled with tears. He fell back down, sweat dripping from his eyebrow, and stayed like that until his sharp breaths evened out.

"How bad is it?" She asked, her throat tightening as her eyes glided over the thick bandages covering him from his shoulders all the way to his hips. "Are you..."

"I should have been dead, yeah," Marden said in a weak, exhausted voice. "Any normal person would be, that's what happens when a knife goes through your heart. But that bastard that stabbed me didn't account for the fact that apparently, my heart is on the right side.

A smile appeared on his lips as he ran his fingers over the middle of his chest and up to the left side where the heart should be. "I've never been so happy to be a freak of nature.

"Oh, thank god." Raena sighed with relief, feeling her shoulders droop. "So your life is out of danger?"

"Well, to be honest, with a killer on the loose, I am not feeling very safe," Marden murmured, covering his eyes with his hand. "Gods, getting stabbed sucks so much, I'd rather not have sex ever again than getting stabbed again." Raena smiled. If he could still make his lame jokes, this meant he was going to live. That was a big relief.

"I think it's going to be better if you're dead." She mumbled and Marden pulled his hand suddenly, staring at her with wide eyes and a fearful expression. Realizing just then how that sounded, Raena raised her hands in surrender, only to have him flinch in panic. "Sorry, sorry! I didn't mean it like that. Please calm down." Marden gave her a suspicious glance but slowly let his hand down, which he had raised as if to protect himself. "What I mean is, you're right. The person who stabbed you is still out there and if they hear you're alive, they might come after you again. So it might be safer for you if everyone thinks you're dead.

“Your mind must be a scary place,” Marden mumbled with a tense expression. “But if we announce I am dead, there will be a lot of complications. My title and my land and this place.. I don’t have an heir so the crown will take everything and I might not be able to get it back. And the brothel – I have papers that will transfer it to Arissa to manage, but I have not submitted them fully to...”

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll take care of it. You won’t be losing your title, lands, or the brothel.”

She smiled. “You’ll only have to stay hidden for some time.”

Marden gave her a long, thoughtful look, studying her face, then her clothes as if seeing her for the first time.

“Who exactly are you?” He asked at the end.

“Are you sure you want to know? It might put you in even more danger.” Raena asked with a sad smile, getting from the bed and taking a few awkward steps.

“Might as well.” Marden snorted. “Come on, at least tell me your name. You can’t deny such a simple request coming from a mortally wounded person.”

“Fine.” She sighed, turning to face him. “My name is Raena. Raena Magrath.” She said, making a quick curtsy. As she raised her head, he was staring at her with narrowed eyes, as if trying to figure out where he had heard the name. A few seconds later, when the realization hit him, his eyes widened with disbelief.

“A freaking princess?”

He exclaimed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Just kill me now and let’s get this over with.”

“Stop being so overdramatic.” Raena sighed, rolling her eyes. “It’s not like anything to change.”

“Um, yeah. It does, if I want to have a long uncomplicated life.” He snapped. “What if you decide to have me executed tomorrow because of all the stupid sh!t I said and tried to do to you? A princess! A married one at that. Oh gods, if your husband finds out I tried to kiss you, he’ll gut me from top to bottom then left to right, just to be sure.”

“Marden. Calm down.” Raena sighed, coming closer to the bed. “You know who I am better than most people, probably better than my husband. I came here, disguised as a maid and without any protection, to check on you. Do you really think I’ll have you executed? That’s why I didn’t want my identity known. People are always in a rush to assume things and it’s exhausting. You know what that feels like, don’t you?”

He gave her a dry look, then sighed in Surrender.

“Fine.” He said then suddenly covered his eyes. “Gods, this explains so much. The money, the connections, the royal family showing up in your restaurant like it’s the most natural thing in the world.”

“They didn’t know my identity then. And all the money I used was mine – or my brother’s. So don’t you give my credits to the royal family.” She frowned, and he raised his hands in surrender. “Anyway, I need to go back. Are we in agreement about your ‘death’?” She waited for him to nod, then smiled. “Great. I’ll spread the word. I’ll keep the brothel closed for a few days in memory of your death, then I’ll have it reopen and try to do some promotion. I might need to tell Arissa the truth, she was a mess when I was there earlier. You get some proper rest and warn your butler not to let anyone in. And.”

“I.. Raena.” Marden said awkwardly, and she trailed off, looking at him. “There is one thing need you to do.” She frowned a little at the sudden seriousness of his tone, then nodded. “That night when we found Hale stabbed, he said something to me. He was already a goner, but he said a few words. ‘Note’, ‘bed’ and ‘danger’. I was drunk and I couldn’t figure it out then and then I got stabbed and... I think he left a note in his room, somewhere around the bed. And I think that note contained information about something he overheard. He wanted to make a report a few days before his death, but I was busy and I didn’t pay attention. Go and find it. If it’s worth killing over it, it might be worth knowing about it. But be careful since whoever attacked me might be watching the place. You can’t get caught or they might come after you too.”

Raena stared at him for a second, her heart racing like crazy, then she forced a smile on her lips.

“Alright. Which room was his?”

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0 11 minutes read

Raena turned the key twice, glancing over her shoulder to make sure there was nobody in the hallway. Marden had given her his set of keys and since she didn’t want to run into Zen in case he was already back, she had sneaked into the eerily quiet brothel wearing the maid clothes.

She pushed the door at the end of the corridor of the third floor open, wincing as it creaked loudly, and snuck inside. Closing it as quietly as possible, she pressed her ear to the wood and listened for any noise of people coming after her. Not that she wasn’t allowed in the brothel rooms – she doubted anyone would even think to stop her – but if word got out she was snooping in the dead guy’s room, as Marden said, the killer might get a wind of it. Moreover, she wasn’t wearing her disguise, so that could also complicate things.

Raena looked around the room, her eyes stopping on the big dark spot on the floor that, even in the poor light, stood out. The smell of blood had receded, but she could still catch it as she stepped further into the room.

Circling the dark spot, she strode to the window, pulling the curtains to let the last of the daylight in. Once the room basked in sunlight, the feeling of dread and danger subsided a little, but didn't completely disappear. Raena took a deep breath and headed for the bed – the covers were wrinkled and messy, a faint smell of sweat and god knows what else rising from them since nobody must have bothered to change them since the attack. She winced as she pulled them off, shaking them in the air to make sure there was nothing hidden among them. She let them drop to the ground, checking the pillows as well before discarding them.

Raena grabbed the edge of the mattress, pushing it up with a grunt, then bent and looked under it and over the mattress frame, eyes searching for the 'note' Marden had mentioned. She let the mattress drop, then went on the other side, doing the same.

Still, no note.

Raena took a couple of steps back, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at the bed. Hale probably had hidden it well somewhere. If it was indeed holding some sensitive information, he wouldn't have left it where anyone could find it.

Where would I hide it if it were me? She wondered, stepping back to the bed and running a hand over the side of the mattress, looking for any holes or tears. When she found nothing, she dropped to her knees, checking under the bed.

There was just enough space for her to sneak underneath, so she did, twisting her head and looking up at the frame.

Still, no note.

Raena was just crawling backwards when one of the boards creaked loudly under her palm. She froze, listening in for steps or the sound of the door opening. The entire floor remained quiet and somber. This gave her an idea, though.

Raena reached out, sliding her hand over the even surface, ignoring the dust and dirt that gathered under her palm. When her fingers finally hitched on the edge of the board, she slid closer to it, grabbing it with her fingernails and pulling. The wood resisted for a second, then it came up with a creak, revealing a small hole underneath. The light didn't come under the bed, so the hole was entirely dark no matter how long she looked at it. Trying not to imagine all the spiders, cockroaches, and other bugs that could fit in there, she put her hand in, searching the space for any objects. When her finger brushed against something, she squirmed, gritting her teeth and pulling her hand out along – with the object. She looked at it, hoping it's not alive, and let out a relieved sigh as she saw a crumpled piece of paper hanging between her fingers.

She could see the writing on it, but it was too dark to distinguish much – she caught the words ‘anniversary’ and ‘plan’, but the rest was either written too small or covered with a thin layer of dirt that made it unreadable in these conditions.

She was just sliding out when her ears picked up on a noise and she froze, turning her head just in time to see the door opening. Raena gasped in panic, her heart beating like crazy in her chest. A pair of feet slowly walked into the room, turning to face the bed. Whoever that was, there was no way they wouldn’t see her. Half of her feet were sticking out from under the bed, and so did her skirts. But they didn’t pull her out or attacked her, so there was a chance they weren’t going to.

Raena swallowed her fear, sliding the paper in her cleavage and pulling out the massive ring with Marden’s family crest she had borrowed from him. Her excuse in case anyone caught her snooping was that she was looking for Marden’s ring so he could be buried with it as the last of his line- a hollow lie, but it was the best she could come up on the spot.

Updated by Jobnib.com

She tightened her hand around the ring and crawled from under the bed, sitting up and dusting her hands and the top of her dress. The man that had walked in didn’t say a word or made a sound, so she continued to pretend not to notice him, opening her hand to look at the ring. When she was sure they had noticed the jewelry, she pushed herself to her feet, dusting her skirts to the best of her abilities before turning around.

She didn’t even have to fake her surprised scream as she found herself almost face to face with Zen. She hadn’t heard him move closer, and she surely didn’t expect to see him here, of all people. How did he even know she was here?

Unless.

“Holy mother of.” she cursed, but quickly covered her mouth and closed her eyes. “Zen, what the hell? Why are you sneaking on me like that? You almost scared me to death!”

“Why? What were you doing?” He asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I was looking for this piece of crap,” Raena murmured, raising the ring between her thumb and forefinger. “But that’s not the point. We are in a dead guy’s room – you can’t just walk in without making a sound and stand behind people. I thought you were a ghost!”

“The door creaked, I’ll figured you heard,” I said, glancing towards the stripped bed and the sheets lying on the floor by it.

“Well, I didn’t. Goddamn, can this day turn any worse?” She said quickly, letting out a tired sigh. “How did you know I was here?”

“You weren’t at the restaurant so I figured you came here.” He said, returning his eyes back to her. “Arisa told me you’re here. So you heard about Marden?”

Arisa? She doesn’t know I am here. Raena wanted to say, but instead, she let her head drop, nodding

“I heard. I even went to his house to see if there was something I could do, but it turns out he died last night. His butler was arranging for the funeral so he asked me to find his family ring – as last of his bloodline, he is supposed to be buried with it. This happened so fast.. I can’t fathom who would want to kill him.”

“He must have had a lot of enemies with his debts and now his success of this place... He should have been more careful.” Zen said in an entirely unsympathetic voice. Raena glared at him and he sighed. “I’m sorry. He was your friend. I won’t speak ill of the dead. When is the funeral?”

“The butler said he’ll inform me when everything was arranged,” Raena said, looking away and heading towards the door.

“Wait,” Zen called, grabbing her hand.

Raena turned to look at him, raising her eyebrows, when she noticed his hand moving towards the top of her dress – more specifically, towards the edge of her cleavage where she had slipped the paper. Her first instinct was to pull back, but she forced herself to stand still, staring at his face instead. He wasn’t smiling – he was smiling less and less lately, even when they were alone – but there was no dangerous spark in his eyes or that expression that made her afraid even though he had never even squeezed her hand too hard.

Zen’s fingers locked on the embroidered hem of her dress and she held her breath, waiting to see what he will do, when he jerked his hand away.

He raised his hands, holding his thumb and forefinger together as if there was something between them.

“There was a spider.” He said, opening his finger to show the squashed body of the spider in question. Raena made a disgusted face, looking down at her hands and shoulders in search of more. She ran her hands over them, feeling their non-existence presence, shuddering at the thought.

“If you don’t like spiders, don’t push yourself into the spaces where they live. Next time, ask me. I’m here to follow your orders, even if they are to crawl under a bed and scare the spiders. After all, there is no use of a guy who can’t follow orders, right?”

“Zen...” Raena said awkwardly. She didn’t like the look in his eyes, like he was testing her reaction to his self-pity. She had to give him the right answer – at least until she

knew more about him, more about what he was doing. His presence here, in this room, and his lie about Arissa telling him of her whereabouts – it made her even more sure that she should have her guard up every time he was around. “I’m sorry. I was just on edge after the attack and I took it on you. You’re not useless.”

“That’s good to hear” Zen said, smiling for the first time. He took a step towards her, raising his hand and taking something out of her hair, throwing it away. She was just opening her mouth to thank him again when she noticed him leaning down as if planning to kiss her. Her surprise lasted only a second, then her body reacted instinctively, and she turned her head aside. His breath tickled her cheek, but she stood perfectly still, barely breathing.

“Next time,” Zen whispered in her ear, don’t go gallivanting around the city alone, making me search for you. We don’t want you getting kidnapped or anything, do you?”

“Y-yes,” Raena said breathlessly, forcing a smile to her face. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I didn’t think, I just had to see if it was true..”

“That’s unlike you,” Zen said, stepping away from her. “You’ve been doing a lot of ‘not thinking’ these days. I wonder what’s on your mind so much.” Raena was just trying to figure out what to answer when he circled her and headed for the door, opening it. “Let’s go get Kara and I’ll tell you what I found on that way.”

Raena nodded, following him silently in the corridor. He didn’t wait for her, nor did he turn, so she watched his broad back and stiff shoulders for any indication of what he was planning until they finally reached her office. As they reached it and Zen opened the door, they found Kara sitting on one of the couches, reading a book. The documents from earlier were nowhere in sight, and the place looked as tidy and clean as always.

“We’re leaving,” Zen announced, not even bothering to enter the room. Kara got to her feet, setting the book on the sofa.

“I need to use the chamber pot, so can you two wait for me outside?” Raena asked, and the two nodded, stepping out of her office. She waited for their steps to fade away, then pulled the paper out of her bosom, sending a silent prayer for no more spiders. She straightened it as quietly as possible, moving closer to the desk where one of the candles was still flickering on the last of its wax. She brought the paper to the light, narrowing her eyes at the small, uneven letters.

“Sir Marden, if you are reading this, that means something has happened to me. I should have been more careful and insisted on you providing me protection. I know you would have, you are a good person. But I guess it’s too late now.

That is why I want to warn you – DO NOT attend the Empire’s Anniversary ball. A few nights ago, I was heading for my room where I had my usual appointment with Prince

Rissen when I overheard voices. There was someone in the room with the prince and they were talking about the Anniversary ball where the second person was supposed to assassinate the crown prince. They said that even if the third prince lives after the ball, it wouldn't be for long. Madam Lydia's name was mentioned too, but I wasn't able to hear the rest. The second prince mentioned the word 'rebels,' so I think he might be working with them. Also, "the last part looked even more unreadable, as if he added it in a hurry or with a trembling hand. Raena bent down, trying to see the words better."

The voice of the person in the room with the prince sounded very familiar. He had a soft accent, but it wasn't from the Empire, and I am sure I have heard it before. Please watch your back, there may be enemies closer than you think. "Raena covered her mouth, closing her eyes. She knew the Empress was colluding with nobles from the other regions, but Craidal, too? In a way, that made so much sense. They were still disgruntled about the war and they probably wanted the Imperial family dead more than anyone.

This was all so much more complicated than the book suggested.. But it was such a bold move, it could only mean the story was nearing its culmination. But if that was the case, this meant Ka.sasian and Yulien were going to die soon. Even with the changed timeline, this would be the perfect time to..

'They said that even if the third prince lives' the words after the ball, it wouldn't be for long echoed in her head, her chest tightening. They were planning to pin it all on Ka.sasian. In the book, there were surprisingly few details about the charge under which Ka.sasian was found guilty of treason out colluding with the enemy, as stupid as it sounded, was reason enough. This meant...

An impatient knock came from the door and she jumped, looking back to make sure nobody was opening it. She then glanced back at the note and moved its edge towards the flame, watching it as the fire licked the paper and quickly devoured the rest. She let it fall into the metal plate she kept there for this purpose, waiting until the last of it turned to ash before heading back towards the door.

As she stepped outside with her heart still racing in her chest, she noticed Zen standing with his hands crossed by the door and Kara waiting patiently by the opposite wall. Raena frowned, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Don't you know you should never rush a lady when she is doing her business?" She mumbled, closing the door and locking it. "Let's go home. I have some work to do."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 80 - Tips

1 11 minutes read

Raena stepped inside the mansion after Zen and Kara, looking up and down the corridor. They were heading towards the inner staircase when a maid appeared from the stairs, almost bumping into Kara.

“Oh, Head Maid!” she said in surprise. “Thank the Gods you’re back! We didn’t know to do!”

“What happened?” Kara asked in her usual serious tone that she used when talking with the rest of the staff. She often commented on how Raena could switch between personalities so swiftly, but she did the same. She spoke to the maids in one way, to Raena in another, and to anyone higher in the food chain in a completely different way.

“It’s the first wife’s Head Maid. This is the third time she is coming, and she has been waiting in the reception room for the last half an hour. She came to speak with Mistress, but Mistress told us not to bother her and we couldn’t find you anywhere! That woman is refusing to leave, saying it’s urgent!”

“I’ll speak with her” Kara said readily, and the other maid’s face brightened. “Let’s go.”

Kara made them a sign behind her back to go and Raena quickly headed up the stairs with Zen on her heels. They got to her room without meeting anyone else and he opened the door, going in first without saying a word. Raena frowned as she followed, staring after him as he started checking the other rooms and any places big enough for somebody to hide in.

Raena closed the door, starting to undress while he continued with his search. Elene appeared from another one of the doors, heading towards her just as she was struggling to put on the dress that she had left on the bed earlier that day. Zen returned as Elene was buttoning the back of her dress while Raena was discarding her wig and running her fingers through her hair to get it in some semblance of order.

Raena wanted to tell him that his search was unnecessary since Elene had been there the whole time, but she kept her mouth shut. When she was ready, she headed for the door without delay.

jumping as a knock came from it just as she was reaching for the handle. She opened, staring at Kara with raised eyebrows.

“You should go with the Head Maid.” She said with a stiff expression on her face. “Since His Highness is still not back, the first wife requested you went to see her immediately.”

Raena nodded, following Kara outside and making a sign for the others to stay behind. They strode to the first floor where Sarea’s Head Maid was waiting with a grim expression and Raena followed her outside, giving one last look at Kara over her shoulder. The moment they crossed the North Palace’s threshold, the guards fell in formation around Raena. She gave them a surprised look but didn’t protest – after the attack and after promising Kassian to accept his protection, she was in no position to refuse them.

So she let them tag along as they strode to the quiet East Palace.

It didn't escape her notice that there were more guards than servants in the first wife's residence, and even as they stepped inside the bright mansion, the tension remained high. The Head Maid continued to keep quiet, walking just as fast and just as purposefully. When they finally reached Sarea's bedchambers, the older woman stopped in front of her door, hesitating at the handle. She knocked, but let herself in even before she received an answer. Raena followed hesitantly, put off by the darkness and the stuffy air inside.

The smell of tea leaves, medicine, and blood made Raena shudder, but she forced herself to move further into the room, checking the corners and the deep shadows for any threatening presence as Zen had taught her.

"Your Highness, I've brought her." The Head Maid announced, bowing her head.

The blankets on the bed shifted ever so slightly and Raena focused her gaze on the frail human half-sitting, half-lying underneath them with her back resting in a pile of big, fluffy pillows.

"You can go." Sarea's weak, raspy voice filled the room and an icy chill ran down Raena's spine at how hollow and haunting it sounded. The Head Maid hesitated, but then tiptoed around Raena, leaving the room and closing the door."

Come closer, it's not like I can do anything to you in this state."

Raena strode to the bed, locking eyes with the woman in it. Sarea's skin was almost gray and her body had lost so much weight, she looked like a skeleton. Her cheekbones were sticking out and the dark circles around her eyes made them look even more sunken. There were traces of blood on her lips and her nightdress, and her hair was a sad mess sticking to her head.

Raena stopped her gasp from leaving her lips, but she couldn't do the same with the shudder that shook her body. Sarea gave her a tight-lipped smile as if knowing what was going through her head.

"What? You're not going to act all cute and innocent now just because I am dying?" Sarea said with the same tired voice. "You were good, really good. I'll give you that."

"When did you find out?" Raena asked, keeping her eyes on her.

"I am ashamed to say that I didn't. I was totally fooled by your act." Sarea chuckled. "But I might not be the best judge of character, I am a very good judge of rumors. And if you slip once, word gets out. The Raena I saw would never dare punch Lara in the face, let alone ask Kaessian to have her arms broken. Nice one, though. Too bad you chickened out."

“Is this why you called me here?” Raena asked, frowning. Sarea scoffed, pushing herself up with effort until she was sitting more comfortably.

Her hands were so thin and frail, Raena was afraid they would snap if she applied even the tiniest of pressure on them.

“I don’t have enough breaths left to waste them on social calls,” Sarea said, lifting her hand and pointing at the edge of the bed. “I just thought you looked too tense, so I tried to lighten the mood. It seems I never mastered this thing called humor.”

Sarea’s hand fell next to her body as if she had grown tired of keeping it up, but she continued to wait so Raena stepped towards the bed and sat on its edge. The first wife leaned back in her pillows, looking her up and down.

“When I first saw you, I thought that you have no place here and that it would be pretty easy to get rid of you. After all, you were supposed to be a simpleminded girl that is used to being taken care of and to have everything come easy to her,” Sarea said, her eyes fluttering as if she was getting tired of keeping them open. “But I stand corrected. In just a few months, you successfully did what I couldn’t for almost a decade. You weeded out most of the spies from your household; you won over the concubines; you put Lara in her place and isolated her, and the biggest miracle of all – you made our husband fall in love with you. In a way, I wish I had succeeded in chasing you out. You make me look like a little girl that couldn’t do anything but throw tantrums all this time.”

“Yeah,” Raena murmured, leaning on her hand. “Sending me just three servants and leaving me in that dump was quite petty.” Sarea gave her a weird look, then her face smoothed.

“Those three servants I sent you were actually my kindness to you in case you decided to stay” Sarea said and it was Raena’s turn to give her a confused look. “Karik has served my family for over forty years and he is fiercely loyal. Portha was my wet nurse when I was a baby and cared for my sisters later on until she was too old for the task.

And Nola... she is someone I saved from the streets a few years ago. She is pretty clumsy and awkward, but she is an obedient child and she is loyal to me.”

Sarea stopped, staring at her as if waiting for Raena to connect the dots. “I sent people I can trust to you so that I was sure you won’t end up poisoned or with a knife in your back. They might not have been much, but at least they would never try to kill you.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Raena asked.

“What’s the point of me lying now? I’m already dying.” Sarea scoffed. “Have you noticed that the attempts on your life started after you brought in new servants and guards? In this life, it’s hard to find people you trust. And those three, they did spy on you, I am not going to lie, but it was just so that I can keep track of your movements and prevent you

from getting hurt or doing something stupid. Your death was only going to bring trouble to this household and I am responsible for the safety of the people in it”

Raena continued to stare at her, not sure what to say. Sarea kept quiet for a while, her eyes half-closed, almost like she was napping.

“Have you figured what and who poisoned you?” Raena asked, and the first wife’s eyes opened again. She didn’t reply, though. “It’s that bitter tea you like so much. Apparently, it’s a slow-acting poison. It kills your reproductive system first, there goes for the rest of your organs until they are irreversibly damaged. Once you reach the blood coughing stage, it’s already too late.”

“Well, that could have been useful information some time ago. I had always been a healthy person, even as a child. It all started a few years after marrying Ka.ssian. I even brought my own staff, people who I trusted wholeheartedly.”

Sarea smiled. “I figured I was being poisoned, but my tasters were fine when tasting my food and drinks, so I couldn’t figure how I got the poison into my system. I changed my makeup, my clothes, my perfumes, everything. I never figured it was the tea itself.”

“Who gave you that tea?” Raena asked, tensing in her seat. Sarea’s eyes moved away from her and locked on the door just the sound of steps walking away in a hurry reached the two of them.

“My Head Maid brought it one day and told me a medicine woman recommended it, saying it helped with fertility. Both partners needed to drink it, though. It’s ironic, isn’t it?” Sarea leaned her head back, covering her face with her eyes. “I wonder what they have on her. It was probably the Empress she sure tried her best to prevent both Ka.ssian and Yulien from siring children. Yulien’s first wife died while pregnant, did you know?”

Raena barely heard her. She had gotten to her feet, looking at the door where the Head Maid had disappeared earlier.

“Sit down, she already heard us and left,” Sarea said and Raena quickly looked at her. “She can’t go far. Ka.ssian will find her once you tell him. If the Empress doesn’t eliminate her first, that is.”

Raena hesitated, then slowly lowered herself back onto the bed. “My condition is not why I called you here, either. It’s about our husband, sister-wife. Raena tensed, swallowing with difficulty. “I don’t fancy myself a stupid woman, you see, but somehow I believed that I can make Ka.ssian love me if I gave him what he needed. And I thought what he needed was a strong woman to back him up and an uncomplicated relationship, so he didn’t have to waste extra energy on it. I still think he needs those. But Ka.ssian had always gone for the damsel in distress type. He couldn’t save his mother, so he has this idea in his head that he has to save everyone. Especially

beautiful, helpless women like his mother. I assume you figured out that most of his harem is made of such women?

But unfortunately, once the woman is safe and sound, he loses interest. That is why Lara held his interest for so long – she kept playing the weak, needy woman that has to be saved from something. But this is not healthy and it will not make him happy, because, in the end, it just reminds him that he could save others, but couldn't save his mother."

"What's your point?"

"You're both, Raena." Sarea sighed heavily.

"You look weak and defenseless and sometimes, you need him to save you. But you also have a strength within you that is a true match for his. You can be his support and his refuge from the craziness of this place." Sarea let her head fall back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling. "You can, but you don't have to. It's a difficult life full of danger that often ends with death. I know I wouldn't blame you if you choose to leave. But if you choose to stand by him and support him, to help him out of his vicious cycle, I am positive he'll return your love and kindness tenfold."

Raena stared at her for a long time, not sure what to say to that. Sarea, on the other hand, didn't look like she was expecting an answer. She suddenly raised her hand, pointing at the small cabinet by the bed.

"Open it." She whispered. Raena frowned, but the first wife gave her a sign to hurry up. "Inside you'll find the mistress of the house's seal as well as a notebook with everything I have gathered about the nobles in our society – their affiliation, secrets, and weaknesses. Use it... at your own conscience. I hope... you never need... it."

Raena got up from the bed, crouching by the cabinet and opening its lid. She reached through the linen inside, searching until her fingers caught on a small, metal box. She fished it out, setting it in her lap, almost expecting it to be locked, but the top opened easily, revealing a big golden seal and a leather-bound notebook. Raena stared at them for a second before looking back at Sarea.

"What exactly do you want me to." She started when her eyes landed on the first wife's face. Sarea's eyes were half-closed again, head resting on one of the fluffy pillows. Her sour expression from before was gone, giving place to a peaceful calm. "Sarea?" The first wife didn't react, her eyes remaining closed. "Sarea!"

Raena dropped the box in her feet, reaching out for the first wife's hand that was resting on the bed next to her. Even before touching the thin, bony hand, Raena felt a chill run down her spine as if an ice cube had slipped down her back. She pressed her fingers to the first wife's wrist, holding her breath as she searched for a pulse.

Seconds dragged. One, two, five, ten, thirty,... but not a single heartbeat followed.

Raena pulled away, getting to her feet while her body trembled with fear and panic. Her stomach twisted in a knot as she realized that she had just witness yet another person die in front of her.

This didn't feel like a book anymore. It didn't feel like a funny story where she got to do what she wanted without worrying about the consequences. This didn't feel like a fake world. If she wanted to survive and keep the people that had found their way into her heart safe, it was time to part with the idea of going back to the 'real world Because this was the real world now, no matter what the future held.

Raena crouched down by the box, taking he seal and the book with trembling hands. She rose up, glancing at Sarea one more time, trying to keep her breathing under control.

"Rest well. You've earned it." She whispered, looking at the pitiful form lying among the expensive sheets. "I'm make them pay for you."

Raena turned her back on her, heading towards the door she had come from. As she stepped outside the bedroom, she looked around, but the Head Maid was nowhere in sight. Raena gritted her teeth, making her way back the way she had come from, the silence of the place pressing against her ears while the two objects in her hands turned heavier and heavier with each step.