

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 81 - Tips

0 12 minutes read

Ka.ssian pulled the reins of his horse, waiting for the animal to settle before jumping off its back. One of the guards was already rushing to take it away and Ka.ssian nodded to him gratefully as he passed him the reins. He looked up at the dark Main Palace, his eyes stopping on the bright windows of his office standing out among all the other dark rooms. He sighed tiredly, then headed up the stairs.

After the hellish five days that he had in the palace with the investigation into the fake attack, the lockdown was finally lifted- mainly because Yulien agreed that they could not delay any more Sarea's funeral and allowed him to rush things along. So the conclusion was that 'enemy insurgents had infiltrated the citadel and attempted to assassinate the crown prince'. The crown prince was 'almost out of danger' and slowly recuperating.

This whole charade had exhausted him far more than a week's worth of fighting. And now he had to finalize the paperwork for the funeral and take care of everything that had piled up in the last week. It was going to be a long night.

Ka.ssian headed directly for his office, rubbing his forehead to disperse the headache that had been living there every second of every day he had spent in that vipers' nest. He stepped through the threshold, squinting his eyes against the bright light coming from the dozen candles set around the room. He had sent word earlier that he was coming back so knowing Blaine, he probably decided to wait for him and give him a rundown of all the things that needed to be done.

He had been surprised his aide didn't wait for him at the gate as he usually did, but he figured he was just working even at this late hour. And he was right – his eyes landed on the smaller desk where his aide usually sat, stopping on Blaine who was leaning his head on his hand, reading through a paper with his glasses balancing on the edge of his nose. His usual neat self had given its place to a person with the top two buttons of his shirt unbuttoned and sleeves rolled to his elbows and stained with ink. He probably got even less sleep than Ka.ssian did for the past week just to keep this place in perfect order.

Ka.ssian was just about to clear his throat to make his presence known when something else caught his attention. His desk was overflowing with piles of documents, just as he expected, but his chair was not empty and waiting for him as he thought it would be. A tiny figure was sitting in it, her head resting on her hands. Her blonde hair was falling in a loose braid over her back and her chest was rising and falling in even intervals, almost as if she was sleeping.

"Your Highness!" Blaine's voice startled him and Ka.ssian turned, looking at his aide, who had just risen to his feet. Ka.ssian glanced back at his wife, but she continued to sleep undisturbed among the paperwork. Blaine opened his mouth to speak again, but

Ka.ssian raised a finger to his lips, pointing at the door. His aide nodded, following him outside. "Your Highness, I can explain!"

"I'm all ears," Ka.ssian replied, crossing his hands.

"Her Highness showed up two days ago while I was working, offering her help with the preparations for the funeral. I politely refused, but she pulled rank on me and she had the main wife's seal, so I had to let her do it. You weren't replying to any of my messages so I thought I could use the help." Blaine said so quickly, Ka.ssian was afraid his tongue might get entangled. "When she was done with the arrangements, she offered to help me with the task I was trying to finish for the Trade Union."

They sent over several contracts that needed to be double-checked before being approved and then there is..." Blaine trailed off, seeing how Ka.ssian's expression turned annoyed. "So I said it wasn't appropriate, but she threatened that she will return to ignoring you if I didn't let her and blame it on so... I accepted her help."

Ka.ssian scoffed, shaking his head.

"She also looked worried... and kept asking when you will be back," Blaine added suddenly.

Ka.ssian's head snapped towards him, his mind still processing the words.

"Say that again?" He frowned.

"She kept asking when you'll be back. She didn't say why but she looked worried." Blaine repeated., looking awkwardly away. "So I wanted to keep an eye on her in case she ran out of patience and decided to tell me what's bothering her. But she just kept working and I think she actually understood all the contracts and documents I was dealing with. I've been going over them since she decided to take a nap. I now understand how she can manage a restaurant so well."

"Is everything for tomorrow prepared?" Ka.ssian interrupted him. Blaine blinked a few times, but nodded. "And the contracts are ready?"

"We revised them to the best of our abilities. They are missing only your signature and seal." Blaine said. "You can go over them if you want to be sure and.."

"I trust you, so I'll just sign them all tomorrow. You can retire for tonight." Ka.ssian said, squeezing his shoulder and preparing to return to his office.

"Then what about.?" He asked, but Ka.ssian ignored him, turning his back on him and opening the office's door carefully, trying to avoid making any noise. "Well, then.." He heard his aide murmur, then his hurried steps echoed through the corridor.

Ka.ssian's eyes immediately searched for his desk, checking on the figure still resting her head on it. Her breathing was so quiet and her movements so small, she looked like a doll that had been left there after a long day of playing. He stopped on the opposite side, looking at the two piles of scrolls and sheets neatly stacked around her. Her fingers were stained with ink as well and one of them was even bandaged, as if she had cut herself.

A quiet squirm came from her body and suddenly she tensed. Ka.ssian watched her, half expecting her to jump scared out of the dream, but she relaxed instead. He sighed, circling the desk.

He bent over her and picked her up effortlessly, adjusting her carefully in his arms so as not to wake her up. Her head bobbed to her chest and her lips moved as if she was whispering something. Ka.ssian lowered his head to see if he could catch a word when she slid her hands around his neck, pulling herself closer and snuggling her face into his neck.

Ka.ssian took a deep breath, closing his eyes before slowly letting it out. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to bring her to his room. Maybe he should just drop her into one of the guestrooms and have a maid watch over her.

Raena's fingers dug painfully into his skin and he looked down at her in confusion, only to realize her eyes were closed and she was shivering.

By the time he had reached his bedroom, she had relaxed again, her face going all serene as if nothing had just happened. He wondered what kind of nightmares plagued her – if it was from that night or if it was something else that she hadn't told him about yet.

He closed the door with his foot, heading towards his bed. This was the second time he brought her here, and it felt so natural that he wondered if he hadn't had it all wrong before.

Feeling someone's body snuggled tightly against yours throughout the night, waking up next to that someone in the morning... that didn't sound like a bad idea now.

He set her down on the bed and tried to break her hold around his neck without waking her, but she turned out to be surprisingly strong.

"For Gods' sake, I'm trying really hard here..." Ka.ssian sighed in defeat, his hands propped by her head.

"Ka.ssian?" A sleepy voice spoke, and he froze, then looked down at Raena only to realize how close her face was. She blinked a few times to wake herself up, then her

eyes widened. She pulled her hands to her chest as if realizing she was the one holding him, but even then his body refused to move.

She continued to stare at him with those blue eyes, wide and expecting and a little tense. Her breath mixed with his, her lips so close he could reach them if he moved just a little more. Kassian forced himself to look away, rolling off of her. She stood still for a moment, then quickly sat up, looking around.

"Is the crown prince alright?" She asked, turning back to him. She didn't ask about the room; she didn't even ask why she was in his bed again.

Kassian looked at her, but she didn't look even the tiniest bit uncomfortable now that her mind seemed to be awake.

"Yes. He's well enough." Kassian mumbled, looking away from her. He didn't like lying, but to the world, Yulien was supposed to be in a bad condition, confined to a bed and unable to move.

"That's a relief." She nodded. "I'm glad you're back, because I have something I need to speak to you about and it can't wait."

"If it's about our conversation, it can wait until morning. You look like you haven't slept much these past few days." He frowned. "We can talk at breakfast before the funeral."

"It's not about our conversation." Raena interrupted him. "Well, it is, but that's not the urgent part. Will you listen to me?" Kassian tensed on his spot, staring at her expectantly before nodding. "I found the cause and the person responsible for Sarea's death."

Kassian's body tensed in surprise, anger flashing at the back of his mind. He had suspected that Sarea hadn't told him the whole truth and her condition wasn't as simple as she made it out to be, with everything going on, he hadn't had the time to look into it properly.

"It's the Amrod tea she has been drinking." Raena continued, and he snapped to attention. "The Amrod root can be a slow-acting poison if taken for extended periods of time. It attacks your reproductive system, causing infertility, then goes for your organs. Once you start coughing blood, it's too late for anything to be done, even if you stop drinking the tea. Have you coughed blood?"

"No." He replied quietly, his heartbeat quickening as he noticed the relief on her face. "Does this mean I can't have...?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "I guess time will tell. But you should definitely stop drinking the tea."

“And the culprit?”

“The Head Maid. I have her locked in the dungeon after one of your soldiers caught her trying to flee. Sarea thought the Empress might have gotten to her, so I figured you might use her as a witness. The soldier said he’ll make sure she stays alive.”

“Good.” Ka.ssian sighed, running a hand over his face. “You did well.”

“Also..” she started hesitantly and Ka.ssian slowly pulled away his hand to look at her. “About my connection to the Empress.” Ka.ssian tensed, but the cold feeling in his stomach slowly turned smaller and smaller as he watched Raena fidget nervously for the first time. Finally, she l!cked her l!ps, moving a bit cioser to him and sitting with her feet underneath her. “It’s not what you think.” She blurted, continuing just as fast. “I actually blackmailed her into supporting my restaurant venture in return for me keeping my mouth shut about her illegal dealings. I agreed to support Rissen’s claim to the throne, but I haven’t actually done anything illegal yet apart from withholding some potentially treasonous information, but I am ready to tell you everything I know right now.”

Ka.ssian stared at her, waiting for the anger and the feeling of betrayal to come. No matter the reasoning, she had gone to the Empress, his biggest enemy, and promised her support to her. To the woman who not only k!lled his mother, but kept trying to murder both him and Yulien again and again for years. The reason he slept with a knife under his pillow and woke up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. He couldn’t remember how many tasters had died working for him, how many soldiers lost their lives in an ambush or straight-out attacks.

But to his surprise, the anger didn’t come. Just an odd feeling of relief.

“Why?” He whispered, staring at her until she finally met his eyes. “Why would you go to her if you did not want to offer your support willingly?”

Why would you risk blackmailing someone so powerful instead of coming to me or even going to Yulien? Is this one of those things you ‘know?’ She nodded again, looking down at her hands. “So what is it? What made you do it? Is everyone else dead?”

Raena’s fingers stopped their little wrestle game, and she slowly looked up at him, a look of resignation in her eyes. Ka.ssian felt the hair on his body rise.

“In the future I know of, you and your brother both die. You get executed for treason and your brother gets poisoned. Rissen and the Empress are the only ones that make it. So I thought I had a better chance of surviving if I was on their side. And once the war started, I planned to leave the Empire and get somewhere far where the Empress can’t reach.” She said in a quiet, careful tone after expecting him to suddenly attack her.

“Then what changed?” He asked, holding his breath. His brother’s words came back to him uninvited, running in his head until he got dizzy. For some reason, he didn’t want to hear her say it, he didn’t want to hear her say she decided to tell him the truth because she had no other choice. But he had to hear it so he knew where they stood. “You got scared after all those attacks?”

“No,” she said to her surprise. “I already have a passage booked and I can leave with just the clothes on my back. And with the trouble you two are causing her, she wouldn’t have the time and resources to send someone after me. I am not that important.”

“Then what?” He asked.

“I’ve decided to save your life.” Ka.ssian almost burst out laughing.

“Is that so?” He asked, rubbing his forehead. “And how are you going to do that?”

“I’m going to help you take down the Empress,” Raena said in a serious tone, entirely unamused by his reaction. “In return, all I want is for you to spare my life. Token or no token.” Ka.ssian’s smile faltered and he looked at her. “I know why you hate the Empress so much and I know that my actions can be unforgivable for you. And I know that your brother will probably call for my head, but despite that ..”

“Ah, this is tiring” Ka.ssian sighed, his anger flaring – anger at her for trying to play him again, anger at himself for sitting like a good puppy and waiting for her to throw him a bone. Waiting for a better time.

Ka.ssian pushed himself off his spot, leaning towards her and pressing his lips against hers. She froze in surprise and he quickly slid his hand behind her neck to stop her from pulling away.

She returned his kiss hesitantly at first, but then her lips parted as if inviting him for more.

He slid his hands down her back, picking her up and setting her in his lap so she was straddling him. She tried to break the kiss, but he pulled her closer, deepening it instead. Her soft lips and hot tongue were making his mind dizzy and the way her body pressed against him made his blood boil. Having her in his arms felt so good that he wanted to cry. Having her respond to him just like he imagined, made him wish he had done it sooner, much sooner.

Ka.ssian broke the kiss for a second and Raena took a sharp breath. Her face was flushed and she continued to pant, eyes staring at him with such a dangerous spark, he had to close his to keep himself under control. He leaned his forehead on hers, hands tightening around her slender frame.

“Stop pretending to be scared of dying by my hand. We both know I don’t have it in me to hurt you.” He opened his eyes, pulling back just enough to meet her gaze. “I don’t care if my brother thinks

I’m an idiot or if you think I have played right into your hands. I am yours. I have been for a while. And you are mine. I don’t care what you have done, even if you were plotting my murder. All I need to know is that you’ll stand on my side. Will you be on my side now, Raena? Till death do us part?” He asked quietly, holding her gaze. She nodded her head readily.

“Yes. But..”

“No buts,” Ka.ssian whispered, kissing her again. She managed to break the kiss this time, turning her face aside. He sighed, trying to hold back his frustration.

“There is one more thing I need to tell you about.” She said quickly, as if sensing that her mouth could be shut out again.

“Tomorrow,” Ka.ssian whispered, brushing his lips over her pale neck.

“There will be a Craidal attack on the Anniversary ball. And the Empress is in on it.” Ka.ssian froze immediately, sensing her tense in his embrace, then he pulled back to look at her. She had a concerned expression on her face, but watched him with unwavering confidence. He was just about to ask her how she knew that when someone banged on the door, making her jump in surprise and almost fall off his lap.

“Your Highness, wake up!” Gerrin’s voice bellowed from the other side. “You need to come with me! Everybody in the dungeon has been murdered.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 82 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

Ka.ssian sighed with frustration as he crouched by the body of Sarea’s Head Maid that was lying on the cold, dirty floor of the dungeon and staring at the bare wall with dead, glassy eyes.

Blood smeared her chin and neck as it seemed she tried to stop the bleeding from the deep cut running through her throat. The others had met the same fate – one slice done by one person. Or maybe there were two of them, judging by the traces of struggle.

“Just like Lady Vega’s residence, although they had tried to vary the manners of killing there,” Gerrin said from behind him. “Same as..”

“...that outpost.” Ka.ssian nodded, getting up. His eyes scanned the rest of the dungeon, stopping on each body lying in its own pool of dark blood. The guards outside had been ambushed, lured away from the door first before being attacked; his men

inside had probably been surprised – one of them had a nasty bruise on the side of the face, probably kicked there before they ended his life. The two prisoners were executed on the spot – forced on the ground, head brought back and throat sliced clean.

“I don’t get it though,” Gerrin murmured. “Even if rebels infiltrated the residence, why would they go after the maid and the masked guy? The guy confessed that Prince Rissen hired him and your wife was convinced the Head Maid was working on the Empress’s orders. The only ones affected by them talking are that woman and your brother. Unless…”

“Unless they are working with the rebels,” Ka.ssian mumbled, his mind going back to what Raena had said just before Gerrin had interrupted them. Ka.ssian had been so consumed by his need to destroy that invisible wall between them, by the desire to finally have all of her, to lay it out in the open, that he had almost lost his mind. But the truth was, she still knew more than she had told him, and her secrets were getting bigger and more dangerous. He needed to know everything, every little and big secret, every white lie. Now.

“Your Highness, we’re out of time.” Blaine’s voice came from the door of the dungeon. Ka.ssian turned to look at him, only to find him wincing while holding a handkerchief to his nose. “We need to go back so you can change for the funeral. You can’t attend looking like this.”

Ka.ssian closed his eyes, sighing. Could the universe take pity on him and send these shitty situations one by one instead of dropping them in his lap all together?

“Gerrin, wrap this up and come find me at the Main Palace after the funeral.” He ordered, receiving a brief salute in return. He left the dungeon behind, wiping his hands on his pants while he moved past the soldiers guarding the entrance. Even before the small, windowless building was out of sight, Gerrin’s voice boomed, calling for his men to get in and help him with the bodies.

By the time he changed and made his way to the East Palace, the rain had started to pour. The morning had come and passed without him knowing since the sun never came out from behind the gray clouds that covered the sky. The atmosphere was heavy and sullen inside, and there were more people than he expected.

Some were servants in mourning attire, rushing to finish last preparations for the procession and the wake afterward.

The others were family. Sarea’s family. Ka.ssian straightened his shoulders, Swallowing the lump in his throat. When he had heard the news of her passing, it hadn’t been unexpected, yet still felt like a punch in the gut.

They had been married for years and even though they weren’t that close, she was a friend to him and a good ally. And he had promised to protect her.

A few of the mourners threw him gloomy glances as he stepped into the anteroom, bowing their heads silently, but he dared not stop to talk to any of them. He wasn't ready to meet eyes full of accusations or watch tears fall when he hadn't shed even one.

Blaine took the lead and made his way to the biggest dining room that had been cleared from all furniture save for a few dozen chairs and a beautiful white coffin lying on a low stand by one of the walls. Hundreds of white roses surrounded the shiny white surface with Sarea's name engraved on top of it, along with the symbol of the Imperial family.

Flowers adorned the rest of the room as well, filling it with a fresh smell and dispersing somewhat the feeling of death and desperation.

Ka.ssian paused at the threshold, looking around. His eyes stopped on Sarea's mother, who was standing by the closed casket, head pressed against the wood while her fingers gently caressed its surface as if it was her daughter's face. She kept whispering her daughter's name between the sobs while Sarea's two youngest sisters were trying to calm her down, all while rubbing off their own endless tears. Sarea's third sister stood a little to the side of them with a sleeping baby in her hands, staring with an empty look at the floor.

Ka.ssian looked away from them, his gaze glazing through the groups of nobles in black attire, their faces grim and somber. It surprised him how many people had attended on such short notice and how many of them actually looked genuinely distraught. He hadn't been to that many official funerals before. Most of his soldiers were usually buried together with a short ceremony, and the next day the army would continue marching or go into battle. But the ones he did attend felt more like tedious social events where everyone went, just for appearance's sake.

Not this time, though.

His eyes stopped on Sarea's father, who was talking to a short woman wearing a simple black dress and a long, black veil falling past her shoulders. Ka.ssian narrowed his eyes at them just as the Duke's bloodshot eyes widened, tears falling down his cheeks as he grabbed the woman's hands and bowed to kiss them. Ka.ssian focused his attention back on her, wondering who she could be to get such a reaction from the Duke.

It took him a second, but he soon recognized the blonde hair under the veil, the familiar frail shoulders covered with black lace.

Ka.ssian headed towards them without thinking and reached them just as the Duke was getting up, lips pursed as if trying to stop back his sobs. Ka.ssian had always been struck by the close relationship and open affection Sarea had with her family, even with her father. Most nobles usually tried to protect their prestigious image, and their public

relations with their children were polite at best. Hell, his own family barely knew how to smile at each other, and in all public places, Ka.ssian had to act all stiff and proper when addressing his brother.

But not Sarea. She turned into a different person when she was among her family, a much happier person.

“Your Highness.” Raena’s voice made him flinch, only to realize he was standing next without saying anything. “You’re just in time. The procession is going to begin any minute.”

“Yes.” Ka.ssian nodded, glancing at the Duke. His expression had stiffened, but tears continued to float in his eyes and his face looked years older than the last time he saw him. “My condolences, Duke. Sarea was a remarkable person and she will be dearly missed.”

“Your wife tells me you have the culprit apprehended.” The Duke said with a raspy voice.

“What.. what are you going to do with her?” Ka.ssian hesitated, then took a deep breath.

“She was executed as a traitor to the Empire this morning. No witnesses, no last will or priest confession.” He said as confidently as possible. “Such a vile betrayal deserves nothing more.”

The Duke stared at him for a while before nodding.

“Thank you for... taking care of it.” He said.

“I probably would have torn her to pieces if I saw her. I’m glad I could keep at least some of my dignity.” He took a step towards Ka.ssian, placing his hand on the prince’s shoulder. “I’ll help you make sure the person who gave her this task shares the same fate. I’ll see you outside, son.”

The Duke squeezed his shoulder and walked away before Ka.ssian could reply. He stood stunned for a few seconds, trying to recall the last time the Duke had been so nice to him or called him ‘son’. For the entire time he was married to Sarea, her old man had always been cold and withdrawn.

Maybe it was the emotions of the occasion messing with his head and making him more mellow. Maybe it was...

He turned his head aside, looking down at Raena, who gave him a small smile. Her veil was up, revealing her pale face and deep circles under her eyes. She almost looked like one of the mourners.

“What did you say to him?” Ka.ssian asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

“Nothing much. Just what a grieving person wanted to hear.” She replied. “I told him now you did your best to find what happened to daughter and catch the guilty party. Knowing that retribution is coming to the ones that caused his pain can help him through this day. It won’t heal the pain, but it’s all we can give.”

Ka.ssian stared at her, wondering what caused that sorrowful look in her eyes. As far as he knew, she and Sarea weren’t that close, so she doubted it was her funeral. Yet she sounded like someone speaking from experience.

“I did none of that,” Ka.ssian said coldly, immediately regretting his tone as he saw her smile falter.

“Yes, you did.” She said, taking a step towards him. “Through me. We are on the same team now, aren’t we? You need his support, and I have no use of recognition for matters that do not concern me directly.” She reached up and caught her veil, letting it fall over her face. “We should get going. They are probably waiting for us.”

“Wait.” Ka.ssian stopped her just as she was about to go past him. He raised his hand and slid it under the veil, gently caressing her cheek.

She stared at him expectantly, but he wasn’t sure why he did it exactly. Just the urge to touch her and steal some of her warmth and confidence made his body move. “It’s raining outside. You should stay here or you might get sick.”

“I’ll be fine, I have an umbrella.” She said, her lips curving into another smile, a less somber one this time. She reached up and placed her hand over his, pulling both of them down. “Let’s go.” She said, dragging him after without letting go of his hand. Ka.ssian squeezed her fingers, catching up to her so they could walk the rest of the way side by side. She let go as they reached the group of men waiting by the door along with the casket, and Ka.ssian hurried to take his place among them.

Sarea’s father rubbed his face one more time before taking his spot in front of Ka.ssian. More of Sarea’s family fell in line around the casket, lifting it up. Royals usually weren’t expected to participate in this ritual, they walked behind the coffin in the procession, but Ka.ssian had insisted on joining. He owned Sarea at least that much.

As they stepped outside, he realized the rain had increased. A few of the mourners were still waiting, some hiding under umbrellas, while others stood under the downpour with puffy eyes and empty expressions.

The cold droplets hit his face first, quickly drenching his clothes. Nobody complained nobody stopped as the six of them moved down the path towards the burial grounds. The soldiers that had served Sarea’s mansion fell in a tight formation in front of them while the rest of the mourners trailed behind. Ka.ssian resisted the urge to look back

and make sure Raena had gotten that umbrella; instead, he focused on the back of Duke's head and the quiet tap-tap-tap of the rain around them.

The coffin wasn't heavy, not with eight people carrying it, but Ka.ssiian felt its weight grow with every step he took. The sound of crying behind him only added to the uneasiness of his heart and brought forth memories from his mother's funeral.

She hadn't been allowed into the tomb in the Imperial palace and the one in his residence didn't exist then, so they had to find somewhere else to bury her. The funeral included just him and a few servants that had remained loyal to her, all gathered quietly around the hole they had dug themselves at the edge of the garden where his mother's favorite spot had been. He wasn't allowed to help carry the simple coffin since he was too weak. They didn't let him help with covering her with earth, since he wasn't big enough to hold the shovel either. So he watched as the others did everything for his mother, vowing to become stronger, bigger, so he could help too.

His mother would have liked Sarea – his first wife had been the perfect lady in every aspect and she did her duties as a wife more than perfectly. She didn't deserve this end.

Ka.ssiian tightened his hold on the handle of the coffin, fingers trembling from the intensity with which he squeezed. His sorrow vanished, devoured by anger and a thirst for violence. He was going to make them pay. He wasn't going to let that vicious woman take anything else away from him.

He didn't realize when they had crossed the burial grounds and reached the building leading to the family crypt. The front doors that led to the ceremonial chamber were wide open, with two priests waiting patiently on either side. The priests entered the building first and Ka.ssiian helped the others set the coffin to the pedestal in the center of the chamber, moving back so the priests could prepare for the last rites.

The mourners came pouring into the spacious room, bringing along the sound of heavy steps, quiet sighs, and muffled crying. Ka.ssiian looked around in confusion, suddenly not sure what he was supposed to do. He looked for Blaine, who would usually quickly remind him of the order of things, but he couldn't spot his aide anywhere.

People started giving him weird glances, so he swallowed loudly, almost cursing out loud.

He couldn't mess up now. He had done everything properly so far. He...

"Ka.ssiian, breathe."

His head snapped towards the voice and for a second he couldn't recognize the face behind the black veil. Raena reached out and caught his arm, gently nudging him towards the empty seats in the first row, next to Sarea's immediate family members.

Ka.ssian dropped in one of them, taking a deep, calming breath. He could still feel her arms squeezing his, grounding him somehow until the noises quieted and his mind cleared. He glanced down at her and she gave him an understanding smile, then looked back forward once one of the priests started singing the familiar mourning melody.

He wasn't going to let them take anything else away from him anymore. He worked for and earned that strength. For this moment.

He was no longer useless and weak.

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 83 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

"Please accept my sincerest condolences, Your Highness." A tall, dark-haired nobleman said with a stony face as he bowed in front of them. His expression didn't change and his words held very little of that sincerity he spoke of. His eyes shot towards Raena standing beside Ka.ssian, but when she met his gaze through the black veil, he quickly looked away. She raised an eyebrow while he was walking away, wondering if he was just a regular creep or Someone sent there to watch her. Every face she couldn't recognize seemed suspicious these days. Not that seeing most of the ones she recognized brought her that much comfort.

Before the procession, only Sarea's closest family was allowed into the East Palace – and of course Raena as Ka.ssian's remaining official wife – but after the burying ceremony and the rites, everyone who came to give their condolences was allowed to enter the former first wife's residence.

Most of the newcomers were nobles who came for appearance's sake – even she could tell they held very little interest in who was lying in that coffin.

The Crown Prince's representative, one of his aides, was in attendance too, and when Raena saw him whisper something in Ka.ssian's ear, it became clear that the funeral was not going to be the main event of the day.

Ka.ssian said nothing to her, though. He kept his hard expression and stiff posture the whole time, receiving the condolences with a nod of the head or a handshake. She noticed that the only ones that received a handshake were people who actually looked like they knew they were attending a funeral and not a fun tea party.

Raena stood quietly next to him, nodding politely when somebody turned to her, but saying nothing. Her presence was a formality, and it was making her feel bad for standing where Sarea used to stand, looking at those broad shoulders and back that seemed to hold more of the weight of the world than she thought. She had tried to excuse herself and leave after receiving a few glares from Sarea's youngest sisters, but Ka.ssian had caught her hand and given her a look that asked her to stay louder than

any words. So she had resumed her position on his left, glancing at Blaine who was standing on his right, pretending to mind his own business.

“Those were the last ones,” Blaine whispered after the last couple of nobles moved away from where they stood and headed towards the table with refreshments prepared for the occasion. The place was buzzing with voices, some whispering among themselves, others laughing and chatting in loud voices. It had stopped raining as well, although the sky was still stormy gray, as if ready to pour hell on them at any second.

“We can go?” Ka.ssian asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You can go.” Blaine nodded. “I’ll go alert the others and we’ll meet you there.” Ka.ssian nodded, then turned to look at her.

Before she could ask what was going on, he grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the stuffy room, leading her towards the wide-open front door. A few nobles were standing outside at the staircase, talking in hushed voices, but they quieted down at their approach. They lowered their heads politely as the two of them passed, but Ka.ssian continued without slowing down, holding her hand just as tightly. Without even looking at them, Ka.ssian made a sign to the guards positioned outside to stay in their spots just as they were about to follow them.

Raena flicked her veil back so she could see the path properly, then let herself be pulled for a few more minutes until the road took a turn and the East Palace disappeared from their sight.

“May I have my hand back now?” She asked, and he finally turned to look at her.

“Why?” He asked, raising an eyebrow. “You don’t like me touching your hand?”

“It’s not that.” Raena sighed. “It’s just that to the outside world, we don’t have a good relationship. And if suddenly we are seen holding hands so casually..” Ka.ssian stopped, allowing her a moment to catch her breath. “By tomorrow all kinds of rumo..”

She didn’t get to finish because he turned around, stepping towards her and cupping her face. His lips covered hers, still cold from the rain and so desperate that she dared not move until he pulled back.

“I don’t give a damn what those people think. As long as you are willing, I’ll touch you whenever and however I want.” He whispered, still holding her face as if to prevent her from looking away. “Do you have a problem with that?” Raena swallowed the butterflies in her stomach, shaking her head. His lips twitched as if he was about to smile, but then he stepped back, intertwining his fingers with hers and pulling her after, gentler this time.

“Can I ask who the others are and where we are going?” She asked in a few minutes when it became clear they were heading towards the Main Palace. He had slowed down to match her pace after she had started panting again, and now they almost looked like a couple out for a stroll in the garden. It was such a weird feeling. Not a bad one, though.

“We’re going to my quarters. We’ll talk here.” Ka.ssiian replied without looking at her.

“Talk?” she asked, raising an eyebrow in confusion. Ka.ssiian finally looked at her, a smug smile appearing on his face.

“Yes, just talk. Since there will be other people there.” He added and for a moment, she just stared at him dumbfounded, until she realized what he meant.

“That’s not what I meant.” She sighed, rolling her eyes.

“You’ll find out shortly,” Ka.ssiian said with his serious tone again and when she looked back at him, he was again staring up at the Main Palace that appeared proudly in front of them. They climbed the steps and walked past the guards that stood on duty. Raena looked around as Ka.ssiian led the way, realizing that this was the first time that she was actually awake on the way there.

The Main Palace was in the same style as the North Palace, but it was obvious the place had never been left to neglect. Even the handles gleamed as if somebody had rubbed them clean few seconds ago. Yet, it still had the cold, empty feel of his bedroom that she remembered.

Raena felt Ka.ssiian let go of her hand, so she tore her eyes from the impressive ceiling and enormous paintings, locking them on the door he had just opened. She paused at the threshold and by the time she entered the familiar bedroom, he was already yanking off his jacket and tossing it on the bed, then stripping his shirt as well.

Raena closed the door, staring at the bulging muscles on his back as he strode to the chair on the other side of the room where a spare shirt was hanging from the backrest.

“Are you wet?” He asked as he slipped the shirt over his head.

“Excuse me?” Raena said, blinking in surprise at the unexpected question.

“Your clothes. Are they wet?” He asked, still with his back to her. Raena closed her eyes, sighing inwardly. This was not the time to be thinking about such things just because they were in a bedroom. They just left the funeral. What was wrong with her?

“No, I’m. they’re fine.” She replied, looking at him again. He had already turned and was watching her while swiftly buttoning his shirt. When he was done, he took a few steps towards her. Raena tensed in anticipation, but he just stopped in front of her, taking her

face into his hands and nudging it upwards so she could look him in the eyes. His expression wasn't one of a man that was about to kiss her though.

"In a few minutes, I'll bring you in front of a group that I trust with my life." He said in a serious voice, holding her gaze. "Allowing you in, to them, it means that I trust you completely. So I need you to answer all questions and let us know everything you know with complete confidence. If you give them something to doubt, they will." Raena swallowed the lump in her throat, but nodded.

Also, you're not going to tell them what you told me. Nothing about reincarnation or past lives or future events. If there is a question you cannot answer, say 'I'd rather not say' instead of talking about knowing the future. I'll take it from there."

"Does that mean you don't believe what I told you?" She asked.

"That's not what I am saying. I am different. I want to keep you alive." He said bluntly. "The others are loyal to me and my brother. They don't know you and until you prove your loyalty. You're a dangerous element and dangerous elements are to be eliminated. So don't give them a reason to suspect you."

"I got it." She nodded, smiling. "Thank you for choosing to believe me." His fingers tightened around her face, and he leaned even closer.

"Then don't lie to me again. Not even for the smallest thing. Once this craziness is over, you're going to tell me every single thing, no matter how small or insignificant." He whispered, staring expectantly. "I don't hide anything. That's the same as lying. If there is any problem, tell me."

Raena smiled, her chest tightening. How stupid. She should have listened to Kara from the start.

"Fine. I have a problem." Raena sighed. Kaessian tensed, his eyebrows creasing.

"What is it"

"You're too tall," Raena shrugged. Kaessian blinked in confusion, then frowned. "I've been standing on my toes for a while now and I still can't reach your face to kiss you. It's kind of annoying."

His confusion disappeared instantly and Raena felt two strong arms slide down to her legs, picking her up. She gasped as Kaessian pressed her back against the wall, keeping her just high enough so she could look him in the eyes. He stared at her expectantly, a smirk making its way to his lips.

"You could have just leaned down, you know." She said, wrapping her hands around his neck.

“But I like this better...” He started but didn’t get to finish as Raena pressed her lips against his.

He responded instantly, sliding his tongue into her mouth and pressing himself harder against her. She could feel his hunger, his desperation and desire every breath they shared, in every touch and every heartbeat. His movements turned almost frantic as he deepened the kiss, like a thirsty man who had finally found a pool of fresh water.

She knew that this wasn’t the right time, but everywhere he touched felt so good, she wanted him to hold her just a bit longer. Zen’s closeness and flirting had been sweet and enjoyable – while she still thought he was just her guard who was in love with her – but Kaessian’s touch was starting a fire with something as simple as a caress on her cheek.

She wasn’t sure when it started exactly, but slowly, surely, she had been falling for that honest face and heart that was ready to forgive and forget anything, despite the wounds from the past.

Kaessian broke the kiss, his lips tracing the line of her jaw until his hot breath tickled her ear. He placed a quick peck on her neck, just below her ear, then another one, lower this time, his tongue tickling the bristling skin. Raena leaned her head back on the wall, giving him full access to the rest of her neck, and he groaned approvingly as his mouth continued to tease her sensitive skin, making her dress suddenly feel extremely uncomfortable.

A loud knock came from the door, and Raena glanced at it with annoyance.

“Ignore it” Kaessian whispered, bringing her attention to himself. “They can wait for a few minutes.” He added, claiming her mouth again.

Another knock followed, but she ignored it like she was told. Just as she thought they had left or were patiently waiting outside, the door abruptly opened and a man barged inside, his hand squeezing the hilt of his sword as if preparing to draw it.

Raena jumped in surprise, staring at the intruder with wide eyes while Kaessian stood frozen next to her. It took her a second, but she recognized the soldier – he was the one that had taken Sarea’s Head Maid into custody. The same big.

Scary-looking guy was now staring at them with a mix of shock, horror, and panic, his expression one of a man that just realized he had stepped on a landmine.

“I thought.” He said, his eyes moving to Kaessian for a split second. “Sorry. Carry on.”

He stepped back and slammed the door shut, a quiet curse coming from the corridor outside.

“That idiot...” Ka.ssian mumbled, and a second later he put her down on her feet. He reached out and pushed a string of hair behind her ear and, as Raena looked up at him, he was wearing a regretful smile. “I’m sorry if that made you uncomfortable. Take a minute. We’ll be right back.”

He stepped away from her, opening the door and leaving the room. The soft whispers in the corridor died down and a few seconds later, a loud grunt broke the silence. Ka.ssian’s muffled voice said something, then a few sets of steps moved together, followed by the door opening.

Ka.ssian shot her another glance before moving inside the room and leaving the door open. Blaine entered first, then Yulien’s aide and the last person was the soldier who had barged in, now rubbing his stomach with a grumpy expression.

When their eyes met, he immediately looked away, busying himself with closing the door and locking it.

“You can go in.” Ka.ssian’s voice made her turn just as he was opening the door leading to the dark room where he had brought the immunity tablet from the other day. He handed Blaine one of the candelabras he had lit and picked up the other one himself while the rest of the group made their way into the room. When Ka.ssian turned to look at her, Raena realized she hadn’t moved from her spot.

“Come on.” He said, beckoning her with his fingers. Raena took a deep breath and crossed the room, taking his hand. He squeezed her fingers for a second as they entered the room, then turned, around and closed the heavy door.

“Well then,” Ka.ssian said as he stepped next to the table in the room, putting the light in the middle of it. “Let’s get started.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 84 - Tips

09 minutes read

“I don’t mean to sound disrespectful, but may I ask why is Her Highness here?” Yulien’s aide, who had introduced himself as Zariel earlier, asked with a forced smile once they were all sitting around the round table. He had kept glancing at Raena as if expecting her to turn and leave, but when Ka.ssian pulled a chair for her to sit, his patience must have run out. “I know she is your wife, but this is not a place for..”

“She is not here as my wife.” Ka.ssian interrupted him. “She is here as a contributor and someone who might have valuable information for us”

“Is that so?” He asked, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. He was the oldest of the group, probably in his mid-forties, with dark blonde hair that barely hid the white that had started to peep out. His eyes were sharp though, not that she expected

anything different from Yulien's aide, and he looked at her with most suspicion. On top of that, the casual way he spoke to Ka.ssiian clearly showed they had a long history.

"Alright, if you say so. Let's hear it." Ka.ssiian gave her an encouraging nod, and Raena turned back towards the three men on the table. She had survived university midterms for four years; she had worked twelve-hour shifts, then pulled all-nighters; she had suffered clients complaining that the ice cream was too cold for their children or the soup was too hot. Not to mention that all of them together weren't nearly as intimidating as the Empress, who Raena was planning to betray.

She wasn't going to be scared of them. She got this.

"A few months ago, shortly after I got married, I was invited to the Imperial Palace to pay my respects to the Empress as the newest member of the Imperial family." She started, feeling her voice grow steadier and her body relax with each passing word. "I went and gave my respects. And then.." she paused for a second, glancing at Ka.ssiian before returning her eyes to the other three. "...I blackmailed the Empress into supporting my restaurant venture and making me her personal vendor for her social parties."

Gerrin, the soldier who was introduced to her as Ka.ssiian's second-in-command and who was just taking a sip from the glass of water he had poured himself, choked on it. Blaine patted his back while he fought to compose himself while Zariel continued to stare at her with narrowed eyes.

"With what?" He finally asked.

"With revealing the names of the nobles from the Empire's regions, who are conspiring with her to make her son the Emperor and get rid of his competition. At least that's what I revealed I know, hinting that there might be more."

Zariel blinked a few times, as if trying to make sure he heard her right. Blaine and Gerrin stared at her as if they were seeing her for the first time.

"And how did you find that information?" Zariel asked, his voice almost breathless.

"I cannot tell you that," Raena replied, glancing at Ka.ssiian again. She returned her eyes back to the table, reaching out towards the stack of blank papers and the inkpot lying in the middle of it.

She opened the latter without hurrying and started writing the names down. "I will provide you with what evidence I have dug up on them. It should be enough to start an investigation into them. I assume you're competent enough to find the rest."

She pulled the quill away, sliding the paper towards them. Zariel's nostrils were flaring at the remark, but he said nothing. Blaine was the first one to move, pulling the list

closer and adjusting his glasses. His eyes slid over the names and he glanced at her before turning towards Zariel.

“Three of them are people we already know to be connected to the Empress.” He said quietly, pushing the paper towards the other aide. “It is worth checking it out.”

“At just her word? We are already stretched thin as it is.” Zariel replied just as quietly as if they were having a private conversation, not minding her presence. “His Highness won’t...”

“May I continue now?” Raena asked louder, making them both turn to look at her. Blaine adjusted in his seat awkwardly, while Zariel slowly leaned back, waving for her to continue. His displeasure was still present on his face, but the look in his eyes was different. “Thank you. While I do believe those connections, if proven, can be enough to implicate her in treason, I have gathered more information recently that will also implicate directly the second prince too.” The three tensed visibly, but nobody interrupted her. She kept her eyes on Zariel, fully aware he was the only one whose trust and approval she actually needed. Both Blaine and Gerrin were Ka.ssian’s men and while he probably did value their opinion, she was sure they would do whatever he told them. While Zariel was Yulien’s and he only had his master’s interests at heart.

Raena took a deep breath and told them about the network she and Marden had created and how they used the workers at the brothel to gather information. She told them about the things they found out through it, watching them carefully as they looked at each other or tried not to react. She told them about Hale often servicing the second prince and everything up until the night of the attack. She dared not glance at Ka.ssian too often, but she hoped he could control his face for once, since, in order for them to trust her, they needed to think he already knew all of that.

“So I went to see Marden after I got word of his condition and he told me that just before dying, Hale hid a note in his room.” She added, shifting slightly when she felt a shiver run down the spine as if someone was staring intently at her. She glanced at Ka.ssian for a split second, finding him standing stiff in his spot with his jaw clenched.

Raena almost sighed, but tried to focus on the matter at hand. “So I went to find the note..”

“By yourself?” Gerrin asked, frowning.

Raena turned her eyes to him.

“Who else can I trust with information that almost got two people killed?” Raena asked, and he quickly looked away from her. “There was a note indeed. In it, Hale said that when he was on his way to his room, he overheard Prince Rissen speaking with

someone about the anniversary ball and how everything was going according to plan and the other party just needed to make sure to kill the own prince that night at all costs, Hale also mentioned that they didn't care if Ka.ssian died or not, since even if he survived, it wouldn't be for long. This leads me to believe they plan to pin, everything on him or have him killed some other way. Madam Lydia's name was mentioned too, so I suspect I will have a role to play too since my people are catering for the occasion along with the Imperial cooks."

She waited for their reaction, but the silence dragged unnaturally long this time.

"Where is that note?" Zariel asked, his expression looking even darker than before.

"Gone," Raena said as confidently as possible. "I couldn't exactly carry it on me and have it fall into the wrong hands."

"So we have just your word for it." He said, holding her gaze. "Why did you have to destroy it exactly?"

"That's because..." Raena started, but noticed Blaine frowning, then leaning forward and raising his hand.

"Were the count, and the worker attacked the same night you were attacked?" He asked.

Raena nodded. "And when did the boy hear this conversation?"

"Marden said Hale has been asking to talk to him for maybe three days so I say four days before the attack? I can go and check with Marden." She sensed Ka.ssian shift next to her and looked at him only to find an almost threatening look on his face. "Or have one of you go to his residence and check with him." She added hesitantly, and Ka.ssian's face relaxed a bit.

"Is that the same count who is rumored to be dead?" Zariel asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That's a ploy." She said quickly. "I spread the rumor to keep him safe since the killer might have gone back to finish the job. It was the only way to make them play by my rules. They might find out the truth, but until then they will think they had been successful, which gives me the time to get Marden proper protection. And if they do go after him, they will not expect resistance which might lead them to them make a mistake."

Another silence followed and the looks that she received made her even more hesitant.

"Ha. Yulien would love this." Ka.ssian scoffed beside her and she gave him a puzzled look. He sat forward, leaning his hands on the table.

"It's true that we don't have any concrete evidence. But there have been way too many coincidences already to ignore it. Yulien already suspects an attack will happen during the Anniversary ball – he just didn't think Craidal will be right in the middle of it. Even I didn't expect the Empress to sink that low." Gerrin nodded in agreement while the other two looked down, unable to refute that simple fact. "We don't have a choice but to assume what Raena says is correct. If it turns out she got the wrong information, we just spent some extra hours in preparation for it. But if we don't take that under account and it happens – then all hell will break loose."

"What about the names?" Zariel asked, glancing towards the list. "Why do we hear about it now? This information, if real, could have been a game-changer. But even if we follow up on those people now, there is no chance we could gather enough evidence before the Anniversary ball."

"That is not something you need to worry about. I've already discussed this with my brother. Just give him the names, he'll decide what to do with them." Ka.ssiian said in such a commanding tone, even Raena tensed in her seat. Ka.ssiian turned to Gerrin, who straightened his shoulders as if expecting an order. "Send someone you trust to the count's residence and have them question him for more details then put a protection detail on him."

"What are we going to do about your situation? If they really plan to pin something on you, it might be better not to attend at all." Blaine said. "This way. you have deniability."

"If they want to have him accused of something he didn't do, they will do it regardless. I doubt their entire plan depends on him attending a ball. His presence there is probably irrelevant to their plan." Zariel frowned. "Better have him there to control the situation from inside. As a royal member, he is allowed to bring a weapon in." His eyes stopped on Raena. "What about Madam Lydia? Will she be in attendance?"

"I wasn't planning to go after the Empress almost had me exposed the last time, but now I think it might be best if I attend," Raena said thoughtfully. "I will have access to the kitchen and the ballroom and I could monitor for any suspicious activity. And make sure none of the food or drinks are being poisoned."

"No." Ka.ssiian interrupted her, making everyone turn his way. "it's too dangerous. You're not going."

"It's not up to you," Raena said, forcing a smile that should have told him that he shouldn't contradict her now that everybody was listening and even involving her in the conversation. It was him who had said she needed their trust and confidence, she couldn't leave something as stupid as his protectiveness to ruin this.

"As much as I don't want to agree with her, she is right. We need eyes everywhere and we don't have people we explicitly trust among the servants." Raena suppressed her smile, but as she met Zariel's gaze, he added quickly. "I still do not trust you fully, but if

your husband trusts you that is enough for now.” He turned back to the others as if nothing happened, his expression just as serious. We also don’t know how they plan to attack exactly, which is a problem since we can’t account for all possibilities.”

“Let’s not make plans before Yulien hears this. Hell just laugh at us again.” Ka.sasian said with a sigh, running a hand through his hair. Blaine and Gerrin both got dark expressions as if knowing exactly what he was talking about. Zariel nodded.

“I think it would be best if you accompany me back to the Imperial Palace. He needs to learn all of this,” he glanced towards Raena again, “and we need to make a plan. We also need to carefully select the guards that will be present there, balancing between His Highness’s and the Empress’s men so it doesn’t look too suspicious.”

Ka.sasian closed his eyes with a tortured expression, moving his neck as if he was preparing to beat someone.

“Fine.” He said with the most annoyed voice, glancing towards Raena. “We should stop here today. If there is anything else…”

“Wait” Raena said just as they were all getting up. She licked her lips, hesitating only for a second. There was a chance what she said next would put her back to square one with them, but at this point, if she didn’t do it, it could be fatal. And she had promised Ka.sasian no more secrets. “I need to add one more thing.” All four of them slowly took back their seats, staring at her expectantly. “I think… I have three Craidal rebels residing in my residence.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 85 - Tips

0 11 minutes read

“What!?” Ka.sasian snapped much louder than the other three did.

Raena took a deep breath, keeping her eyes on Zariel since she wasn’t sure she wanted to meet Ka.sasian’s gaze right now. She tried to smile confidently as she spoke, but the tension in the room was so thick, she could literally feel it pressing on her from all sides.

“A few months ago, on my way home, I happened upon a slave market. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t approve of slavery, but the man that was being auctioned looked so pitiful and yet so full of life that I ended up buying him. Then I bought his two siblings when he asked me and gave them back their freedom. I was told only later that they were from Craidal, and by that time I had already promised them a place to stay and work, so I didn’t want to get back on my word. So..”

“We all know the story.” Zariel interrupted her. “Get to the point where you said they were rebels. I thought you checked them and confirmed they were just regular slaves?” He added, turning towards Blaine.

“We couldn’t find anything – good or bad.” Blaine corrected him. “We couldn’t exclude the possibility of them being spies, so we never stopped monitoring them. But this is new.”

“I don’t have proof or I would have spoken earlier” Raena said, finally glancing at Ka.ssian, who was staring at her with such a hard expression that she felt the lump in her throat growing. She would have preferred it if they had been alone when she dumped all of this on him, but he had forced her hand with this meeting.

“It started with small things – a misunderstanding here, a contradiction there. Even now, I don’t know that much about any of them apart from the fact that they were supposedly from some village in the north so high up the mountains that they didn’t know about the war until a group of soldiers stumbled into the village.”

“And you believed that?” Gerrin asked with a condescending frown.

“I’m nota nosy person and it sounded pretty plausible at the time.” Raena sighed. “And I might have been a bit inattentive when it came to them, but I had a lot of things going on at once and all three of them never gave me a reason to suspect them. But then I started noticing things.” She paused, wondering how to better put it all into words.

It was humiliating to admit even to herself that she had ignored something so important just because she was so focused on the main storyline and believed the main character couldn’t possibly be the bad guy of the story. But then again, if she looked at the situation from Elene’s point of view, she was just fighting for her country. For her and Zen and their people, Ka.ssian and the people of the Empire were the bad guys. Considering everything that Raena had read before she woke up in this place, it made more sense for this to be an adventure story of a slave girl fighting for the freedom of her country than a love story where her love interests just tragically died one after another.

Raena shouldn’t have assumed it was a romance book just because she found it lying in the romance section. But it was too late for regrets now.

She couldn’t let her pride cost the lives of the people at her mansion. It was obvious to everyone with eyes that Zen and Kara didn’t get along, so if anything went wrong in the near future, she might be the first to get hurt. Not to mention Zen clearly resented Ka.ssian and the reason for it now seemed to be deeper than petty jealousy. She couldn’t let him hurt Ka.ssian, either.

“I started noticing the small things first,” she started with a clear voice, “like how I could almost never hear them when they approach, how they were good at things most commoners don’t have a knowledge of – or how they can slip a tail – or four – with frightening ease. Or find the blindspots of this vast residence in just a few weeks.” She looked at Ka.ssian, whose face had hardened. “But when I started to pay closer

attention, things became more obvious. I think they might even be behind Lady Vega's murder. Possibly behind Marden's attack too."

"If they killed Lady Vega and her household, they might have cleaned up the dungeon too," Gerrin murmured as if to himself, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "But they couldn't have been the ones at the Outpost."

"What makes you think they killed Lady Vega?" Blaine asked in his usual calm voice.

"It's something she said to me during the tea party I hosted," Raena said, locking her eyes on Blaine. So far, he was the only one that wasn't looking at her with anger or hostility. "Zen came to bring me a present Lara sent and when he left, Lady Vega asked me about his origins. She said that she was from Craidal too and that his hair color was quite rare, but she had seen a noble lady in her parts who had the same silver hair. And that's when the Craidal girl, who is currently serving as my personal maid, poured tea on her, supposedly by mistake, and interrupted the conversation. Later, that day, I asked Lady Vega to meet so she could tell me more, but I couldn't make our appointment because of the attack. Come morning, she was dead."

Silence reigned for a few seconds, then a chair screeched and Ka.ssian got up.

"Those bastards." he hissed, turning to leave. Raena grabbed his hand with the two of hers, trying to hold him back. He turned and glared at her, but despite the shiver that ran through her body, she didn't let go.

"You can't just storm in there." She insisted. "If you go to arrest them now, not only some of my servants can get hurt, but they will be alerted that you're onto them. Why do you think I haven't chased them away already? Sit down and listen to me." His face hardened, but he slowly lowered himself into his seat. Raena held onto his arm, just in case. "I tried to find the name of the lady Lady Vega was talking about, but with no luck. But it makes sense if his mother was a noble lady. From the start, his manners and speech were not one of a commoner and the way he looks at people – he has pride and carries himself with confidence. I thought that was fine since I didn't want them to get a slave mentality, but thinking back, his demeanor bordered on arrogance."

"I can't let such dangerous people just wander around my residence! If what you are saying is right, those people are murderers!" Ka.ssian snarled. "Worse, they are plotting to kill the next emperor!"

"If they wanted to do something to you or the people here, they would have done it already." Raena said with more confidence than she felt. She didn't like the cold tone of his voice and she was afraid that coldness will affect the others too.

"They did! To Vega!" Ka.ssian said through gritted teeth.

“Only because their cover was about to be blown,” Raena said carefully. “For months, nobody got hurt. They reacted to a threat. If you go after them now, they will react again.” Raena took a deep breath, sending him a pleading look before looking at the others. “I am not defending them and I am not saying they should be left alone. All I am saying is... not now. Not yet.”

“You want to catch them in the act,” Zariel spoke, abruptly leaning forward as if he had figured out what thoughts were running in her head. “You want to catch them as they attack in the Imperial Palace.”

His eyes remained on Raena, who nodded. Then he ran a hand over his mouth as if he was weighing in the options in his head. His expression wasn't as harsh as before, and judging by the spark in his eyes, he didn't hate the idea.

“Most of you know their faces, which means you can easily recognize them even if they are in disguise. I can draw portraits of each of them to show to your soldiers. If you watch them closely, you might find the rest of their conspirators since I doubt just the three of them could infiltrate the Imperial Palace and kill the crown prince.” Raena said with a careful tone, letting her hands slide from Ka.ssiian's arm to his palm. She caught his hand, under the table, intertwining her fingers with his. He didn't react. “We know their goal, their place of attack, the date, and their faces. This is more than enough for Yul.. for the Crown Prince to devise a countermeasure plan. If we can catch them alive and link them to the Empress, it's all over. We can resolve two problems with one swift swoop.”

The room fell into silence again and Raena waited patiently, watching as the light of the candles flickered excitedly between them. The others exchanged a few long, meaningful glances as if understanding each other without words before they all nodded one after another.

“There is one problem though,” Blaine said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “There is still a week until the Anniversary ball. This means you have to stay under the same roof as them for that time and pretend nothing is wrong.”

“Have you forgotten? I am very good at pretending.” Raena smiled even though just the thought of going back to the North Palace and making conversation with them made her stomach turn unpleasantly. It was funny how little it took for a heart to change, but once filled with fear and suspicion, it was just impossible to see things the same again. All those funny moments, laughter, and jokes she shared – even with Elene who seemed like she had a zero sense of humor – all seemed twisted now since she had no idea how much of it was true and how much pretense. The thought that Ka.ssiian might feel the same thing about her with all her lies and deceit made her chest hurt.

“No.” Ka.ssiian sighed tiredly. “That's not, happening.”

“Ka.ssian, it’s a sound plan. We can’t show our cards yet,” Zariel said, but tensed as Ka.ssian looked his way. “At least until His Highness hears about all of this and makes a decision.”

“It’s fine, really.” Raena turned to look at Ka.ssian, squeezing his arm. “They won’t harm me. They might even be the reason I am still alive. Why else would the second prince want me kidnapped, not killed?”

Ka.ssian turned to face her. His angry expression from before was gone, giving place to complete calmness, which looked even scarier.

Raena held her breath, waiting for him to say something, but he just stared at her. When he eventually spoke, it wasn’t to her.

“Blaine, I am going to the Imperial Palace with Zariel. Make sure the wake ends without problems and everybody leaves. The residence is in your hands.” Blaine nodded readily. “Gerrin, wait outside. You’ll escort her back to the North Palace.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” The aide nodded, getting to his feet. The other two followed silently, making their way towards the door. Once the metal screeched, announcing their departure, Raena looked back at Ka.ssian’s whose eyes had remained on her the whole time.

“I know.. I know that what you’re saying makes sense, even more so because Zariel agreed, but.” he took a deep breath, latching his lips before reaching out and catching her other hand. He brought both her hands to his face, leaning his forehead on them. “Now that things are finally out in the open, the idea of something happening to you is driving me insane. I’m fine with me being in danger or surrounded by enemies and death, but I don’t want you anywhere near that ugliness. Not after seeing your expression that night. I never want to see you make that face again.”

Raena smiled, letting out a soft sigh. She reached out and slid her fingers under his chin, making him look up at her. His expression was still stiff, the helpless anger in his eyes more than evident.

“I will be fine, I promise.” She whispered, caressing his cheek with her hand. She pulled her hands away, getting up and sliding into his lap instead. He looked surprised for a second, but his hands quickly wrapped around her waist. “Even after you come back from the Imperial Palace, you can’t come to the North Palace or summon me.”

She added, and he opened his mouth to protest. Ka.ssian, you can’t. I’ve already spent way too much time here and I can tell they are getting suspicious, especially Zen. Hopefully, they still think I plan to leave you and this place so, in order for them to stick to their original plan, we have to make sure nothing else changes.”

"I'm so sick of things getting in the way," Ka.ssian said quietly, burying his face in her neck and tightening his hold on her. "I am so close to just grabbing you and getting out of the Empire- somewhere where no one will find us. Then we might get some damn peace."

"That sounds nice." Raena chuckled.

Ka.ssian pulled back to look at her, his dark eyes staring with such determination, she shifted awkwardly.

"After this stupid ball is over and we have bagged the Empress and those bastards, you're mine. I don't care if the Emperor is dying, or the sun is rising from the west, I will murder everyone that does as much as knocks on our door."

"I thought you said I was already yours?" Raena laughed, enjoying the warm feeling that filled her chest as she held his gaze while his hand rubbed her back.

"Don't get cheeky with me," Ka.ssian whispered in her lips right before kissing her eagerly. He broke the kiss earlier than she expected, and she watched him pull back with regret. "Promise me you'll stay safe. You're not allowed to get hurt, not even a little. And if that bastard touches you with even one finger, I'll cut him to pieces."

"I promise I'll be fine" Raena assured him.

"I am not a damsel in distress that needs to be saved at every turn, Ka.ssian. Have some faith that I can hold my own too."

He sighed in surrender, getting up to his feet and setting her on hers. He leaned down and kissed the top of her head, then grabbed her hand and led her towards the door. He didn't say anything else, but she felt him release her fingers before stepping into the corridor.

Only Zariel and Gerrin were waiting outside, both quiet and lost in their own thoughts, until they saw them.

"You leave first, we'll follow in a few minutes," Ka.ssian said to Gerrin, finally glancing down towards Raena. "Remember your promise."

He whispered barely audible.

Raena nodded, then followed Gerrin, who had already taken the first few steps. They walked in silence, the only sound coming from his boots and the rustling of her dress. When they were almost at the North Palace, Gerrin abruptly stopped and Raena almost ran into him. She stepped away, watching him wearily, but he just stood there with a stiff posture before slowly turning to face her.

“May I ask you a question, Your Highness?” He said suddenly.

“Sure.”

“Do you love him?” Raena blinked in surprise, trying to decide whether she should answer or not. Gerrin watched her with a dark expression, but no hostility. “Actually, that doesn’t really matter since he is already in love with you.”

He answered himself. “I’ll make you a promise, Your Highness, and I hope you won’t take it the wrong way.” He paused, looking down for a second.

“Ka.sasian doesn’t trust people easily, nor does he open his heart to them. So I sincerely hope you’ll be kind enough to return his feelings and give him the happiness he deserves. I hope both of you to be happy, really. But if you break his heart or betray him, I will kill you with my own two hands – even if he kills me after that.”

Raena stared at him with a smile. Not that it was particularly pleasant to be threatened by yet, another person, but it was good to know Ka.sasian had someone like him to watch his back. It made her less worried about what was to come.

Before she could say something, Gerrin bowed and turned his back on her.

“Let’s go, Your Highness.” He said again in his respectful tone. “You look like you could use some rest.”

His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 86 - Tips

0 11 minutes read

Zen leaned his head back on the window frame, keeping his eyes on the figure in a black dress that stepped through the front gate of the North Palace. She headed towards the mansion with a slow, tired pace while fighting to remove the black veil from her hair. Just as she succeeded, another figure dressed in a Head Maid uniform moved to intercept her. The two stopped in the middle of the yard, exchanging a few words before heading towards the building.

Just before she disappeared inside, Raena looked up, her eyes stopping on him. She gave him a small smile – a forced one at that – before following after Kara. A sharp pain spread through his finger and he looked down, eyes stopping on his thumb and the bloody blade of the dagger he had been sharpening for the last half an hour. It was not that the metal needed sharpening, but the sound calmed him and the weight of a weapon in his hand made him feel at ease.

That was until he saw her and the bubble of calm broke almost instantly. It was almost funny how that little fragile thing could stir him up so fast with just one look when the sight of a person choking on his blood or watching their insides spill from their stomach couldn’t even make his stomach turn.

Zen stared at his finger curiously.

It had been a while since he had bled, his skills and his willingness to attack first usually led to him winning any fight before it could become dangerous for him. And here he was now, blood dripping from his finger, because he got distracted looking at that infuriating woman.

Zen brought his finger to his mouth, sucking at it until he could feel the bleeding slowing down.

A loud knock came from the door a few minutes later, then two softer ones at shorter intervals. A second later, Elene let herself in, looking around the dark room. He hadn't bothered to light any candles even though the sun never broke through the clouds and now the numb grayness was about to turn into proper darkness when the Sun set in a few minutes.

"What is it?" He asked after he pulled his thumb out of his mouth and resumed the sharpening. Elene joined him by the window and leaned on the wall, glancing outside. He could see the entire front yard and the gate from his room, including when the guards changed and who came and went by the main path. He had chosen the room for that very reason – and also because it was close to Raena's. Not that he had the chance to that advantage much.

"She's back" Elene said, moving her cold blue eyes on him. Zen glanced at her, but didn't bother to answer. "She left the East Palace before the end of the wake, with her husband, and they went to the Main Palace. By the time I climbed to his bedroom, there was no one inside, but I am sure they went in there. There is a door there that was previously locked. Maybe he took her to that room couldn't hear anything inside though, and it looked like even the walls were fortified." Zen still said nothing, his eyes locked on the sharp blade. When he realized how hard he was squeezing the whetstone, he sheathed the dagger and finally looked at her. "Maybe he has a kink and wanted to share it with his lover."

Zen knew she was just trying to provoke him and he shouldn't respond, but he let out a resentful scoff before he could even think about it.

"That guy is probably more boring than Kara." He murmured, getting off the windowsill. "It doesn't matter, he'll be dead soon." He turned his back to her, walking to the small wardrobe by his bed. He stripped off his white shirt and changed into a black one.

"Do you think she figured it out already? Who we are." Elene asked, her voice taking a concerned undertone for a second. Zen stopped, staring at undone buttons for a second. He resumed buttoning them.

"Yeah. And she probably told him already."

He replied calmly. "it's fine. Do you see any soldiers outside? No. That means that he won't be coming for our heads today" He finished with the shirt and finally looked at the blonde woman – his sister, albeit in name only – who was staring thoughtfully outside. As if sensing his eyes, she looked at him, lips pursing.

"Are we safe?" She asked. "Should we get out of here? There is no point in anything we've been doing if we end up dead before it's over."

"We have a week." He said, sitting on the bed and changing his shoes to the expensive ones he bought himself. The set that the mansion gave to its workers was clunky and hard, making every step he made loud as a gong. "I am pretty sure that male prostitute left some kind of message and she found it when I caught her snooping into his room, so there is a chance she knows about our plans. If that's the case, she will want to catch us in the act. That's probably what she told him."

"How can you be so sure?" Elene asked.

"I've spent the last few months watching her very carefully. I know what she likes and dislikes, I know all her ticks and mannerisms. I know her sleep patterns and her moods. And I know how she thinks." He said with a small smile. "No matter. Even if they know the when, they don't know the how. We proceed with the plan. Meanwhile, you and your brother should go inactive and focus wrapping the work here. I'll take care of the final preparations. They are free to keep sending people to tail me, I'll keep returning them as corpses.

Elene gave him an unamused look, letting out an exasperated sigh.

"I'll let Davin know." She said at the end, pushing herself off the wall and heading towards the door. "Wait for fifteen minutes, I'll make sure there is no one on the west side so you're not spotted when leaving."

She didn't wait for an answer, just left, closing the door with a soft click.

Zen let his confident smirk fall. Everything he had said was true, but that didn't mean he liked it. This could have all been avoided if that idiot of a prince had done his part right. How hard could it be for a group of men to kidnap a feeble woman? Even Davin could have handled that by himself, but Zen didn't want any of their identities exposed to her.

But no. Not only did Rissen's men fail to retrieve her, they dared lay a hand on her. He couldn't let this slide. Raena was his. Everyone who dared lay a finger on her was going to go into an early grave.

His plan was to have her safely tucked away while they completed their mission in the capital and rid the world of that annoying family, and once this was done, they would

have 'saved' her from her captors. He doubted she'd fall completely for such an obvious ploy, but with her other connections cut down and her life in the Empire destroyed, she would have gone with them willingly. What else can she do?

Now, with this unforeseen development, things had become more complicated and she'd probably take much longer to accept that her life at the Empire was over, one way or another.

And that man... he could have killed him so many times, but the others have insisted that if he died, their connection to the Imperial Palace would disappear. They could have figured it out even without him. He wasn't in the original plan, anyway.

And if he had killed him, Raena wouldn't have developed an interest in him. She would have been easier to win, easier to entice, easier to control.

Zen pushed himself off the bed and left his room, listening in for any voices or footsteps. When he was sure there were none, he headed towards the back staircase and to the first floor, not meeting a single soul. He let himself out and sprinted to the old door behind the small cluster of trees, leaving the North Palace and heading towards the woods around the Concubine's Palace.

He noticed the shadow following him almost as soon as he stepped into the forest. This one was good; they took into consideration the direction of the wind as well as the meager light peeking through the branches, moving with such stealthiness that they were barely visible. They were quick on their feet too and they kept a bigger distance than the others. Definitely different from before.

Zen climbed through the wall as usual, jumping on the other side and breaking into a steady sprint until he was safely walking through the busy streets of the capital. There was still light outside, although not much, which meant it would be difficult for his tail to track him by their usual routes. And he was much better than them in blending with the crowd.

He made his way through the people, trying not to push anyone or stand out, only looking back when there was something to hide him from sight.

After leading them through several streets, deeper and deeper into the city, he made a swift turn into one of the alleys between the buildings, hurrying towards the pile of old rotten crates lying next to one of the walls. He glanced behind it, making sure there was enough space for a person to hide, then reached out and pulled up the cowl that was hanging around his neck, then he adjusted his scarf to cover the rest of his face. He turned his back on the crates and jumped, catching himself on the windowsill of the nearest window, then hoisting himself up on the one on top of it. Both of them were boarded with thick planks, but there was still enough space for him to crouch.

He waited for several minutes, his heart racing in anticipation and impatience. He had prepared his dagger already, his other hand resting on the hilt of his sword, ready to unsheathe it immediately.

The stream of people continued, not a soul glancing his way. With the two three-story buildings on each side, the alley had to be drowned in shadows even on a sunny day, and nobody wanted to be involved in any shady business.

That's how it was with those people of the Empire – even if they saw a person being stabbed to death, they would just keep going out of fear they might be next.

Zen's eyes locked on the figure dressed in black clothes and hood falling low over their face just as it took a turn and slipped into the alley. He tried to move into position without making any noise, waiting patiently as the shadow walked soundlessly towards the pile of crates, hands close to their body no doubt ready to take out their weapons.

Zen took a deep breath, pushing with his thumb at the sheath of the sword so the blade could easier slip out when he needed it. Just when the shadow was below him, Zen jumped. The stone under his feet crunched as his feet left it, but it was enough to alert his enemy. They moved surprisingly fast, metal flashing in the dark as they raised two long blades and meet his.

The two fell down to the ground, rolling a couple of times before the shadow jumped back and moved into a crouch, weapons raised in a defensive position. A pair of black eyes locked on Zen with full confidence, not a hint of fear or hesitation.

“Not scared to die, huh?” Zen asked, slowly rising to his feet. The shadow mirrored his movements, not even blinking. “It's a shame you're on the wrong side.” He attacked even before the last word left his mouth, swinging with his sword.

The shadow skillfully diverted the attack past their body, turning sideways to bring themselves closer to him. Their other hand reached out and the long dagger flashed before Zen's eyes. It was just thanks to his quick reflexes that he avoided the blade slicing through his eyeballs, and as he steadied himself, he glared at the enemy.

They exchanged a few more blows, the sound of metal filling the alley after every clash. They were good, really good, but they weren't even trying to attack. Every time they got the chance, they went for his eyes or his legs as if they were told to incapacitate him, not kill.

Foolish. Everyone who went into battle, not ready to kill, was already dead.

Zen allowed himself a look towards the street, then attacked again, pushing them back with swing after swing. The shadow met his last hit with both blades above their head, stopping him from moving his sword.

Zen met their gaze and smiled. For the first time, uncertainty appeared in those confident black eyes. They tried to step back and prepare for another attack when a blade flashed in front of their neck and a second later a tear appeared in the black cloth covering the shadow's pale neck, with blood gushing from it. Zen stepped back to avoid the splatter.

"Forget what I said," he said as he watched the shadow slide sideways to the ground, their body convulsing a few seconds before settling down. "If you are not going to go for the kill, I have no use of you."

Zen looked towards the person who was wiping their blade in a dark handkerchief before sheathing the weapon. His gray hair and wrinkled face looked displeased as he bowed his head, placing his hand on his heart.

"Good timing, Morlag." Zen nodded and the older man gave him a curt look, glancing back towards the street.

"Let's go, sir. One of the others will clean that." The old general murmured, giving him a sign to follow. Zen glanced at the body one more time before adjusting his cowl and following Morlag into the stream of people. They crossed the street and, after making sure there were no more curious eyes, they stepped into another side street. Once they crossed it, Zen turned left, pushing the door of the apothecary open and striding inside. There was a plump woman behind the counter who gave him the same respectful greeting, but Zen just went past her and through the door behind the counter, all the way to the big backroom.

His eyes stopped on the two long lines of barrels set by the wall, each one holding the Imperial seal on them. Two of his men were fussing around them, but when they saw him, they saluted him and quickly left.

Zen turned just as Morlag appeared at the door.

"Is everything ready?" he asked, and the older man nodded.

"We've prepared them all. The boys are finishing their rounds and will meet us at the rendezvous in half an hour. Will there be a change in the plan? Is that why you called for a meeting, sir?"

"No, plan remains the same," Zen said, nodding approvingly. "Just the outcome will be a little different. I'm adding another name to our kill list and this one will be entirely mine to kill."

"Shall we inform our contact at the palace?" Morlag asked, not at all fazed by his words.

"No," Zen said. "They served their purpose. Everyone will get what's coming to them."

Morlag gave him a long look before straightening up and placing his hand over his heart.

“For Craidal.” He said with a voice full of pride and determination.

“For Craidal.” Zen smiled.

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 87 - Tips

0 11 minutes read

“That’s good, move it along.” Raena nodded to the attendants as they waited in line for her to approve the appetizers before sending them out to the guests. She dusted her hands, ignoring the looks the cooks and their assistants gave her when they thought she wasn’t looking. Picking up the skirts of her gown, she stepped out of the way, checking each face as they moved past her.

After she had arrived early and had mingled for a few minutes into the banquet hall, she had slipped into the kitchen and announced she’d be tasting and checking everything that was going out of it. She had to admit that some of her people were cracking under the pressure and the end result was not as good as she knew they could make it, but currently, that was the least of her worries.

It had been over an hour since she had shown up in the kitchen, but nothing unusual had happened. She hadn’t heard of any problems in the hall either, just attendants complaining of this or that noble’s attitude.

“Um, Madam Lydia?” One of her managers, Jaehe, appeared behind her and she jumped. She hadn’t heard or seen him approach and being on edge this whole time, it didn’t take much to spook her. “I apologize. May I suggest you go and enjoy the ball? You’re dressed so beautifully and it’s a shame to spend the night here. I promise everything will be alright. “I’ll taste every plate if necessary, nothing will be below expectations.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Jaene, it’s just..” Raena sighed, trying to put her jumbled thoughts into words. This was her role in the plan, and she couldn’t mess it up.

Raena caught sight of an attendant with long blonde hair heading towards the door and called for them to stop just as Jaehe was saying something. The attendant didn’t stop, nor turned, just continued on as if she hadn’t heard her. Jaehe cleared his throat.

“Fine, I’m going” Raena sighed, glancing towards the door where the attendant had disappeared. “Please keep your eyes open for anything suspicious and report to me immediately if you notice something.”

“Yes, yes.” Jaehe nodded impatiently, ushering her towards the door. “Have a good time and represent us well, Madam.”

Raena pushed the doors open, stepping into the corridor the attendants used to reach the banquet hall. A few of them passed her on their way back to the kitchens, some bowing their heads, others just averting their eyes.

She had done what she could. The food and the drinks were not poisoned and she had checked almost every attendant that was working tonight – as long as they had passed through the kitchen. She had not seen anyone even remotely resembling Zen, Elene, or Davin. If they were here and dressed as servants – or somehow, if they got in as guests, they would be in the hall. So it was time to join the show.

Raena stopped in front of one of the doors leading to the banquet hall, sleeking her hair and making sure her veil was in place before stepping in. It was strange, wearing the veil, when so many people knew her secret now, but it kind of gave her confidence too, like she was wearing a shield. She would have preferred an actual shield tonight, but that would have been awkward and kind of obvious.

She stopped a few steps into the hall, looking around for familiar faces. Her fame still garnered her a lot of attention, but without Marden, she was a bit lost since ‘madam Lydia’ was still a commoner who was only invited to such an auspicious event thanks to the Empress’s grace. If anyone asked the nobles in that room, her place was in the kitchen supervising her work, not mingling with the upper class.

“Are you lost?” A low voice whispered in her ear and Raena jumped, turning around in panic. Her eyes landed on Ka.ssian and relief swept through her body. “Are you alright? You look pale.”

“That’s because you just scared the sh!t out of me,” Raena said through gritted teeth. Ka.ssian raised an eyebrow, probably surprised by the coarse language, and she quickly looked around, making sure nobody else heard her. “Don’t sneak on me again. My heart can’t take it tonight.”

She noticed he was smiling and staring at her, almost as if he didn’t hear her. “What?”

“Sorry, I am imagining k!ssing you right?” He said unexpectedly and Raena laughed before she could stop herself. “Unfortunately, I can’t do it until this is over and it has been over a week since I last saw you.” He tore his eyes away from her, locking them on the people filling the hall that talked in groups, danced, or downed the champagne like it was water. “Were there any problems at.. home?”

“No.” She said quickly. “I mostly did paperwork, so there was no need to meet with Zen. And Elene was quiet and cold as usual.” She glanced at Ka.ssian, only to find his face stiff and jaw tight with annoyance. “What? Did you see something?”

She tried to follow his gaze, but he had – already turned his eyes to her.

“I don’t like how you say his name with such familiarity.” He said in a low, strained voice.

I've spent months wondering if there was anything going on between you two just because of this familiarity. All that touching, the smiles, the way you called his name and dragged him anywhere with you..."

"Well, what else should I call him if not his name?" Raena laughed. "At least I didn't give him an endearing name. Do you want me to give you one? Dear? Darling? Love? Sweetheart? Baby?"

"Why would I want you to call me a baby?" Ka.ssian frowned.

Raena was just about to say it was a joke when a loud crash made them both turn, searching the hall for the source of the noise. When her eyes landed on one of the nobles lying on the ground, her heart skipped a beat in panic, but then the man sat up abruptly, pushing the hands of the people trying to help him. He stumbled to his feet by himself, straightening his clothes and raising his chin as if nothing had happened. A few seconds later, he swayed again, and another man caught him, throwing his hand over his shoulder to keep him upright.

"Idiot" Ka.ssian muttered, his posture relaxing. He pulled his hand away from his sword, looking at the rest of the hall. "Some people just don't know how to pace themselves."

An attendant stopped in front of them with a tray full of champagne glasses, but Raena just waved him away. Her eyes returned to the crowd, gliding over the people laughing or talking in loud voices, over to the dancers swaying in the rhythm of the music – or rather out of it – and to the rest of the guests nursing their glasses or devouring the food. She had been to only one party in the Imperial Palace before, but this one felt different.

Something felt... off.

She looked at the soldiers that were standing still by the open doors leading in and out of the hall, but all of them seemed perfectly focused on their task, watching the guests and looking intimidating. The attendants didn't stand out either, everyone moving quietly with a tray in hand that barely tilted as someone reached out to grab a glass or a plate.

Another crash followed, even louder this time, and Raena's heart did a flip as she searched for the culprit again. To her surprise, it wasn't another guest that had overdone it with the drinking this early, but one of the attendants – a tall, burly man with short black hair and dark complexion. He had fallen on the ground, his tray and everything on it shattering around him. He got on his knees but he was swaying so much, every time he tried to get up, he fell. Two of the guards left their posts by the door and strode to him, grabbing him under the armpits and dragging him out. Just as they passed by Raena and Ka.ssian, she recognized the face of the attendant – she remembered him because earlier he had grumbled loudly about how nobody would dare

poison the food and drinks tonight of all nights she had made him drink a whole glass of champagne just so they were sure there was no poison in it.

“Ka.ssi...” she started, turning towards him just to notice him pinching the bridge of his nose and frowning. “Are you alright?” She asked, stepping towards him and catching his face, and forcing him to look at her. His face looked normal – from his freshly shaven cheeks to the pronoun cheekbones and clean, warm skin. “What is wrong?”

He looked down at her, blinking a few times.

“Nothing. I just felt dizzy for a moment.” He said with a frown. “Maybe I should have eaten earlier, but there was too much to do. And now is not exactly the time to stuff my face with food.”

“Did you drink?” She asked, forcing his face back down towards her when he tried to look around. “Did you drink the champagne?”

“No.” He frowned. “Wait, I drank one glass earlier when I came. Everybody kept raising toasts so it couldn’t be avoided. But I am not lightweight, one glass can’t make me dizzy.”

Raena let go of him and strode to the nearest attendant, grabbing one of the glasses from his tray. He glanced at her with surprise, but quickly composed himself, bowing slightly. Raena raised the glass to her lips, taking a small sip. By the time she swallowed, Ka.ssian was by her side.

“What was that about?” He frowned.

“There is something in the champagne,” Raena whispered, staring at the bubbly glass in her fingers. The liquid looked perfectly normal, and it tasted mostly the same, but she could not mistake the taste of the alcohol her own restaurant had been serving for so long. And this drink was different – it had a sweeter undertone, but as the taste lingered in the mouth it became bitter, almost making you want to wash it down with some more of that delicious sweetness. “It’s not poison, but there is something inside.” She added, looking at Ka.ssian. “That servant just now – he was fine half hour ago when I made him drink a whole glass since he was being a smarta.ss. And look at them,” she continued, glancing around, “don’t they all look a bit too tipsy this early in the evening? There is nothing that special happening yet they are having so much fun.” Raena glanced back at the drink then and put it back on the tray. “Like they are... high.”

“High?” Ka.ssian frowned in confusion.

“Ka.ssian, do you see anything strange?” She asked carefully.

“No, it’s just the spinning.” He said with a sigh, squinting his eyes. “But that might be because of your dress. It’s too bright.” Raena’s blood ran cold as she looked down at her gown, then back up to him.

“Ka.ssian, my dress is black.” She said, holding his gaze. He blinked in confusion. “I think you’ve been drugged. And so are most of the people in here. It had to be the drinks since I ate lot of the food and I am fine. Where is Gerrin? He is here, isn’t he? He is on duty, so he shouldn’t have drunk anything.” She looked around, her uneasiness growing as she noticed more and more people swaying or sitting on the ground and laughing. The music had grown louder so the cacophony was drowned in its sounds, but the whole banquet room looked like some distorted picture of people having a good time right before chaos ensued. “Stay here, I’m going to go find Gerrin and Blaine. Don’t drink anything else.”

“No,” Ka.ssian said, grabbing her hand. “We don’t know what might happen. I am not letting you out of my sight.”

“What if somebody attacks and you can’t protect me because it’s too bright, him?” Raena tried to reason since the hold on her wrist was so strong, she was more likely to break her hand again than to pull it free. “Don’t you want Gerrin to have your back and to help you protect me? I’m just going to find him and come back to you. Look, nothing has happened yet, so we have time. I’ll be really quick.”

Hesitation appeared on Ka.ssian’s face, but in the end he let go of her hand, squinting his eyes as if still blinded by her dress. He rubbed his forehead as if to deal with the dizziness, his body tensing.

“Hurry back up.” He murmured, putting his hand on the sword’s hilt and looking around as if to make sure there was no danger nearby. Raena did the same, taking a deep breath before venturing into the crowd. Her eyes kept checking on the guards that were positioned around the room – she noticed their expressions too, most were trying to hide it but they must have noticed the change in the mood in the room. Tension gripped their shoulders and their eyes kept darting left and right, but nobody moved from their posts.

Raena slowed down as a group of men fell in front of her, clinging to each other and wrestling for something. It took her a second to realize one them was holding a smoking pipe and everyone else was trying to get to it like a bunch of children fighting for a toy.

She circled them quickly, but she had barely taken two steps when her eyes caught the side of a figure dressed in black from head to toe, just as they were slowly stepping through the crowd. Nobody seemed to pay them attention, and the ones that looked at them quickly lost interest.

At first, she thought it was another attendant in their official black attire, but this person didn't have the empire's emblem embroidered in gold on their clothes and they were wearing a mask, too.

Raena locked her gaze on the face of the dark figure – it was mostly covered, save for the stormy gray eyes that stared at her with growing a mix of exasperation and amusement. Raena stopped in her tracks, her breath catching in her throat. No matter how he dressed and what he hid, she could recognize those eyes anywhere.

“Zen.” She gasped. Small wrinkles appeared around his eyes as if he had smiled, and a second later, he raised his hand and pulled his mask back, exposing his familiar face and silver hair.

Raena glanced at the guards, but none of them seemed to be looking in their direction. In fact, none of them seemed to know where to look, with all the shouts and laughter and loud voices coming from everywhere.

“I've been looking all over for you,” Zen said, taking a step towards her. “May I have your first dance?”

As if provoked by his words, the music suddenly cut off and somebody screamed – a long pained shout that made everybody freeze. A second later, the doors started slamming shut one by one, like a drum announcing the beginning of a march.

The sound of glass shattering echoed through the hall and several of the wall-high windows crumbled, showering everyone underneath in glass shards. The evening wind swept into the room, sniffing out the candles from the chandeliers hanging overhead.

Raena looked back at where Zen was standing, only to find the place empty, with people running aimlessly in search of safety. She could hear the guards shouting for everything to stay calm, but that only seem to provoke more screams and shouting.

Raena cursed under her breath, picking up her skirts and preparing to run. She had to get back to Ka.ssian, even if he was affected by the drug, he could still fight. And she had to tell him Zen was here.

She had barely turned when she ran into someone and almost fell back. They caught her by the elbows, fingers digging into her skin painfully.

She looked up, preparing to tell them to let go, but the words died down as she stared at Zen's face inches away from her.

“Time to go, love. You don't want to see what's going to happen next.” He whispered, picking her up and throwing her over his shoulder.

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 88 - Tips

0 13 minutes read

Ka.ssian unsheathed his sword, waiting for his eyes to get accustomed to the sudden darkness. There were several candles burning over the tables, which still stood upright, but not nearly enough to see clearly what was going on. He heard a squirm on his right and looked at the source of the voice, eyes stopping on one of the attendants that had snuck under a table and was standing with an empty tray over his head as if holding a shield.

“Stay down,” Ka.ssian whispered, reaching out and taking the tray from his stiff fingers. The man just stared at him with terrified eyes, but didn’t move from his spot.

A new wave of shouts and screams filled the banquet hall, making him tense in an attempt to differentiate Raena’s voice. He shouldn’t have let her go alone. No matter his condition, he should have gone with her. No, better still, he shouldn’t have drunk that champagne.

What used to be shapeless silhouettes in the gloomy space, started taking form in front of his eyes. He forced himself to ignore the overwhelming noise, focusing on his surroundings instead.

This was nothing.

In battle, it was louder.

In battle, it was more crowded.

In battle, there was death everywhere. Ka.ssian sensed the movement even before he heard the familiar ringing of the metal. He turned, raising the tray as a shield just as a thin, but razor-sharp blade was about to thrust into his back. The metal tray bent, but stopped the advance of the weapon, giving him the perfect opportunity to sink his own sword into the attacker.

Ka.ssian pulled his sword out of the other man’s body, staring with wide eyes as the body tumbled to the ground. He had thought the drug was messing with his head and making him things again, because, from the moment he turned, he thought he was facing a Shadow. But it wasn’t the drug, and it wasn’t a hallucination.

The body in his feet was dressed in the black uniform of a Shadow, almost invisible in the darkness, save for the eyes that stared up with a surprise and fear.

A turncoat? Impossible. The people allowed in the Shadows were vetted more than anyone else in the Empire. They were loyal to death to Yulien, to the point they would kill themselves if so much as asked them to while drinking his tea.

Ka.ssian's head cleared in an instant, anger flooding his mind. His eyes darted around the rest of the room only to notice more people in black walking among the panicking nobles, metal flashing in their hands. His eyes turned up to the shattered windows for a second until he noticed the ropes hanging from the holes.

"Damn it."

They had checked everything – the guests the servants, the guards, even the staff in the kitchen. The only people they had not checked was the backup – the Shadows who were supposed to watch over the place and interfere only as a last resort. They never took off their masks and Ka.ssian didn't know any of their faces – as long as they knew the secret signs and message, he never had a reason to doubt them. No one knew about their existence, anyway. Or at least, that's what he thought.

This was his mistake. His and Yulien's – they shouldn't have been so arrogant.

More screams and shouting ensued, and Ka.ssian glanced around to assess the situation.

Most people were trying to push against the barred doors, with just a few staying away from the panicking crowd and seeking safety under tables or by the walls. Some had just crouched where they stood, covering their heads with their hands as if that was going to protect them from harm. There were even some who were so deep into their own worlds that they hadn't even noticed what was going on around them.

Ka.ssian's eyes stopped on a couple of the guards who were standing with their weapons drawn, but hesitant expressions on their faces, as if they weren't sure what they were supposed to do.

"Snap out of it!" Ka.ssian shouted, and they both jumped. "Protect the people and k!!l anyone with a masked face! Watch your back!"

The two nodded, their shoulders straightening and weapons rising higher as they rushed to the closest group of people and tried to lead them away from the stamping crowd that was getting more and more riled up when the doors wouldn't budge at all.

Ka.ssian turned his back on them, pushing them out of his mind. There was nothing else he could do for those two – for any of them. His job was to k!!l as many enemies as possible... and to keep Raena safe.

"Where the hell are you?" He murmured, breaking into a run in the direction she had disappeared. He had to stop two more times – to help another soldier who was struggling against a tall, lanky shadow with a limp, and then to k!!l another impostor who tried to slice through the back of his knees.

Just as the second body fell to the ground, his eyes caught on a flash of silver hair. Ka.ssian forgot about the people screaming for help and the sounds of metal crashing against metal, running after his target with singular determination. A few people barred his way, including one of the people in black, but Ka.ssian ducked under his blade and sliced with his sword through his chest, not even slowing down to make sure the fake shadow was dead.

The path to the man with the gray hair cleared and Ka.ssian's eyes widened when he realized he was carrying a body with shiny blonde hair over his shoulder.

"Raena!" Ka.ssian shouted without thinking. Her head snapped up, eyes filling with excitement and relief. She resumed her struggle again, hitting and kicking and twisting so much, Zen almost dropped her. Finally, he stopped and turned. He put her on the ground in front of him, turning her around so her back was to him. One of his gloved hands wrapped around her waist while the other grabbed her chin, forcing her face forward. The former slave leaned down, the side of his face brushing against Raena's, and a smile appeared on his lips as his eyes locked with Ka.ssian's.

"Happy now?" Zen asked, clenching her chin tighter. Ka.ssian slowed down a few paces away from them, his hand tightening around his sword. "I didn't want to do this in front of you, but – you just had to throw a fit." Raena winced, trying to shake her head free head, but he didn't let go.

Ka.ssian took a step forward and Zen's hand moved to her neck, his smile growing. "Uh-uh. Don't think about it. I can snap her neck faster than you can reach us."

"Let go of her or I swear I will cut those hands off" Ka.ssian snarled. From the corner of his eyes, he noticed more of the fake shadows materializing as if from thin air. The sound of fighting rang clear in his ears, but he dared not look away from Zen and Raena.

"How valiant." Zen scoffed, turning to look at Raena. "So this is what you like? Honestly, I am disappointed you would have settled for less. No matter. Say goodbye now. We're going."

"No!" Raena shouted, grabbing on the hand that was holding her throat and pulling with all her might. Zen sighed in annoyance, tightening his other arm around her waist and picking her up.

Raena's eyes widened. For a second Ka.ssian thought she'd scream, but then he noticed she had let go of Zen's hand and fumbled with the corset of her dress. A second later, something shiny flashed in her hand and she raised it in the air, jabbing it in the hand holding her throat. Zen's fingers instinctively let go and she wiggled out of his grip while his surprise lasted, stumbling forward.

Ka.ssian moved to catch her, pushing her behind him before she was even up on her feet.

Ka.ssian's eyes returned to Zen, who was just pulling out the long, thick needle stuck in the joint between his thumb and forefinger. His smile was gone, replaced by annoyance.

"I don't have time for this." He sighed, turning his head towards the small group of shadows that had gathered around him. "Kill him and bring her." The smile returned to his face as he pulled his mask to cover his face, leaving only the eyes exposed. "Sorry to cut this short, but I have Someone more important to kll"

He winked at them and turned, walking away as if the chaos surrounding him didn't matter at all. Ka.ssian gritted his teeth, glaring after him. He had to stop him before he got to his brother. Who knew what other tricks that bastard had up his sleeve. But he couldn't leave Raena here, nor these people.

His eyes stopped on the five shadows that moved towards them, all wearing identical clothes, masks, and even the typical short, light weapons most of them yielded, that distinguished them as part of their secret group of warriors. Their movements were slightly different though, and the way they spread to attack had nothing to do with the formations the shadows had when working together.

The rebels must have caught or kllled the real ones and got the uniforms off of them. The clothes were not impossible to fake, but the weapons were custom made and both and Yulien were so familiar with the look of them, they would have noticed the difference.

Ka.ssian reached back, his hand searching for Raena's shoulder. Her body was shaking so hard, he was surprised she was still able to stand on her feet.

"Don't move unless I tell you to." He said, raising his sword in preparation for the inevitable attack. He let go of Raena's shoulder and used his free hand to unbutton his cloak, shrugging it off his shoulders to give his hands more freedom. "Do you see anyone in front of you?"

"Yes, three of them." She replied in a shaky voice. "They are moving closer."

Shit, Ka.ssian thought, gritting his teeth.

"Shout if anyone tries to touch you." He said a second before the ones in front of him attacked. He positioned his sword, so he met two of the weapons at the same time, then pushed with all his might. They stumbled back and so did he, taking a second to steady himself.

"Ka.ssian!" Raena shouted.

Ka.ssian immediately turned, eyes locking on the two shadows that were just reaching out for her. He grabbed Raena's shoulder and pushed her back, swinging with his sword at the same time.

The blade passed through the hand of one of them and the wrist separated from the rest of him, blood splashing over the floor.

"Behind you!" Raena shouted, and he turned again, meeting yet another attack. His blade stopped the first one, but the second weapon flew past his arm, grazing it just as he turned to the side to avoid it.

This wasn't going to work. There were too many of them and he couldn't be in two places at once.

"Ka.ssian!" her panicked voice shouted. He tried to push the guy that was still pressing with the sword, but his foot slipped on the bloody floor and Ka.ssian almost fell to his knee.

Raena called his name again, but there was nothing he could do.

"Hey, asshole, hasn't your mother taught you how to treat a lady?" A familiar voice boomed nearby and Ka.ssian felt relief sweep through his body as he got up on his feet and finally pushed the guy off, swinging with his sword to force him to back up. He glanced over his shoulder just in time to see Gerrin cut down one of the fake shadows, sinking his sword into their chest. He kicked the body to release his blade, then stepped back, glancing towards Raena, who was trembling, her hands covering her mouth. "Are you alright, milady?"

"He asked and she nodded barely noticeably. Gerrin's eyes moved to Ka.ssian as he retreated another step so the two were almost back to back, with Raena between them. "What's with the shabby performance, Your Highness? Don't get all lazy just because you think you got the lady."

"You idiot." Ka.ssian scoffed, a smile forming on his lips. He caught his sword with both hands, moving in a defensive position and raising his blade. His eyes locked on the group of shadows that had started to approach again, this time all at once. "Let's get this over with. We need to get to my brother. He might be in more danger than all of us"

"Yeah, yeah," Gerrin said with his usual aloofness, and a second later he threw himself at his opponents with a growl so loud, the entire hall echoed with his voice. Ka.ssian focused on those on his side, keeping his form tight and his feet moving as he met blade after blade, raising his sword in a wide arch, then parrying a low blow a second later.

They were good – quick and confident, with polished skills and a clear goal. But he had fought bigger, better, stronger opponents since before he could remember, and he had something precious to protect. They had no chance.

Ka.ssian tuned out the noises around him, pushed the pain and the strain of his muscles away, and focused on the flight of his blade, the movements of the opponent. In just a few minutes, he was panting heavily, five corpses lying on his feet, when Gerrin's distant voice finally reached him.

"I'm! Ka.ssian! We need to run!"

Ka.ssian turned, his eyes searching for Raena. She was standing behind Gerrin, who was retreating slowly, eyes locked on the group of dark figures that had surrounded them. Ka.ssian realized that the hall was almost empty. There were several bodies laying on the ground, but not enough to account for all the nobility that had gathered tonight.

"Where is everyone?" He asked, catching Raena's hand and pulling her towards him. He noticed she had stopped shaking so much, but her hand was cold and sweaty. Her face was pale too, eyes darting in panic at the remaining enemy.

"They managed to open one of the doors and everybody fled," Gerrin replied, still moving back. "What do you want to do? Are we going to fight or flee? They are blocking the way to the door though."

Ka.ssian tried to count their opponents, but stopped after reaching ten. In another place and time, he wouldn't have hesitated to jump into the fight, but not tonight.

"Balcony." He said quietly and Gerrin shot him a quick glance.

"It's quite high." His second-in-command said, glancing at Raena. "She can get hurt."

"You'll catch her," Ka.ssian said with confidence he only hoped was not misplaced. For the first time tonight, fear crossed Gerrin's face.

"You must catch her."

"What if I don't?" Gerrin hissed. "I'd rather take my chances with them." He added, nodding towards the fake shadows that had moved closer, cutting off all escape routes apart from the one behind them.

"On three," Ka.ssian whispered, ignoring his last comment. "Make sure to catch her. One, two..."

"I hate you." Gerrin cursed just as Ka.ssian shouted 'Three!'

Gerrin sprinted past them, jumping over a fallen chair and disappearing through the doors of the balcony behind them. Somebody must have tried to flee from there but changed their mind when they saw how high it was. The banquet hall was located on the second floor, so anyone who landed wrong could end up with broken legs, or much worse.

Ka.ssian let go of Raena's hand and picked her up, running after Gerrin. He set her down next to the banister, looking over to check on Gerrin just as his friend was looking up, raising his hands. Ka.ssian looked at Raena, who had lost all the color

"No." She shook her head, glancing back the way they had come from, as if contemplating going back there. Somebody shouted and Ka.ssian's head snapped towards the open door of the balcony just as the first fake shadow stepped through, a knife flashing in his hand. The weapon flew a second later, and to his surprise, it aimed towards Raena. His body moved before his mind had the time to catch up and a second later a blinding pain exploded in his shoulder. Raena's terrified scream chased away the fogginess in his head, and he grabbed the hilt of the knife still sticking out of him, pulling it out. He raised his good hand and threw it towards the shadow, who failed to avoid it and received it in the chest.

Ka.ssian turned and picked Raena up, throwing her over the banister, then jumped himself. Her scream pierced the night again, dying abruptly with Gerrin's loud grunt. Ka.ssian's feet touched the ground, and he rolled forward to soften his landing, looking up to make sure Gerrin had caught her.

He found them both standing on their feet, waiting for him. The shouts coming from above pushed him to his feet despite the pain and the fatigue. He grabbed her hand and pulled her after, with Gerrin quickly catching up to them. Gerrin didn't say anything, which meant either nobody dared jump after them or they had lost them among the endless open corridors and gardens of the castle.

When he felt like his feet might give out, Ka.ssian stopped to catch his breath. Raena crumbled on the ground next to him, leaning on her hands and heaving painfully.

"Where's your sword?" Gerrin asked, and Ka.ssian finally looked up at him.

"I dropped it back there." He hissed as he pressed his hand to his shoulder, feeling the blood seep through his fingers. Gerrin's eyes widened, and he was just about to speak, when Ka.ssian's gaze stopped him. "Take her and leave the Imperial Palace. Don't go back to my residence since they might have sent people there."

"What about you?" Raena's weak voice asked, and he looked at her just as she was getting to her feet. Her eyes lingered on his shoulder, so he gave her a reassuring smile.

"I'm fine." He said, pushing himself up from the wall he was leaning on. "Give me your sword."

He turned to Gerrin, extending his hand. His second-in-command gave him a wary look before handing him his weapon. "Don't let anything happen to her."

"You just dropped her off a balcony for me to catch her. Make up your mind – do you trust me or not?" Gerrin frowned. Ka.sian scoffed, turning Gerrin's sword in his hand. His eyes stopped on Raena, who was staring at him with teary eyes full of anger and concern. Ka.sian stepped towards her, placing a quick kiss on the top of her head.

"Go." He whispered, nudging her towards Gerrin. "I'll see you both later."

He gave them another forced smile, then turned his back on them and set into a run towards the crown prince's quarters.

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 89 - Tips

1 12 minutes read

Zen pushed his sword deeper into the guard's body, twisting it as the eyes of the man widened from the pain and realization of his gruesome fate to follow. Yanking his weapon back, he let the body fall to his feet like the rest of them.

None of this was helping him soothe his anger.

He shook the blade to get rid of the dripping blood, spraying the dark substance over the wall. This was turning into a mess. They should have taken care of everyone in the ballroom by now, but he could still hear the screams and shouts echoing through the corridors, even here.

He should have just knocked her out. If he had done that from the start, he could have passed her to the reserve team and got on with the rest of the plan. But how was he supposed to know she would put up such a fight? She literally got her hand broken from slapping another woman, not to mention her body was usually so frail, just squeezing her arm ended up making a bruise. And that needle... that was no doubt Kara's idea, that damn Woman.

Zen shook his left hand, moving his stiff fingers. It wasn't such a big wound to stop him from completing his mission, but it hurt and it was annoying. He couldn't believe that it was Raena, of all people, that made him bleed after all this time.

He hoped she wouldn't get herself hurt in her stubbornness. He would have wanted to stay behind and kill her stupid husband in front of her, but the mission took priority. And his priority was on the other side of those doors.

Zen looked over his shoulder to the corridor littered with bodies where a few of his shadows were finishing off the soldiers that were still alive. Zen gave them a sign to prepare, and they nodded, moving in formation in front of the double doors leading to the second prince's quarters.

He could hear voices and the sound of feet on the other side. Ten, twenty, maybe more. That little coward had been the first, after his mother, of course, to flee the banquet hall, disappearing through the secret back door the Imperial family used in case of emergencies, and leaving everyone else to their miserable fate. And thanks to Zen's delay, he had gathered a small army of guards and lock himself in his rooms, ready to throw their lives to save his.

What a lovely Emperor he would have become. If only he could follow a simple set of instructions.

Zen sheathed his sword and climbed on the sill of one of the glassless windows in the corridor. He glanced over it, measuring the long way to the ground for a second, then turned around and unbuckled the hook from his belt, tossing it towards the ceiling where the archways supporting the roof looked sturdy enough to hold his weight.

The hook rolled a few times before sinking its edges into the stone, and he pulled at it to make sure the grip was secure. He clicked the clamps on the rope in the clips attached around his waist and looked around.

By the time he was done, two more of his shadows had secured theirs while the rest had joined the group that was trying to take the door down. Zen nodded to the two that were following him and all three of them jumped off the windows, their feet hitting the wall and sending pebbles towards the ground.

The problem with his enemy was that they never took into consideration the things they thought impossible or insane. But Zen had done the impossible and the insane so many times, it felt almost natural hanging a hundred and fifty feet above the ground.

They continued to move parallel to the wall with a few well-measured jumps until they were right under the windows of the second prince's quarters.

Zen found a solid grip and climbed up, ignoring the sharp pain that pierced his left hand.

Once he reached the nearest window, he grabbed onto its stone sill with two hands and pulled himself until he could peek over. The room on the other end looked like a bedroom, spacious and lush with so much decoration and fancy objects, it could probably sustain an entire village for a year or two.

Zen turned towards the others and gave them a sign to proceed, reaching out and opening the window. Just as he was about to jump in, the door of the bedroom opened and a figure stormed in, followed by several soldiers in full gear.

“What is that bastard doing?” Rissen shouted, grabbing one of the chairs lined around a shiny wooden table and sending it flying to the wall.

Zen lowered himself down before somebody noticed him, keeping his eyes on his target as he continued to fume around the room. “He is supposed to go after Yulien, not me! Is this for show? Just to appear like he is after all of us, right? It had to be. He is not stupid enough to break the deal or we’ll destroy him!”

Zen wanted to roll his eyes, but he couldn’t afford to look away from the guards. They had spread through the room and barred the door, none of them making noise while Rissen continued with his angry monologue.

“We never should have gotten involved with the stupid Craidal. All they know is bl00d, bl00d, bl00d, and more bl00d. Stupid barbarians.

Once I am Emperor, I’ll erase them from the face of the world! The gods know “I’ll be doing everyone a favor.”

Zen turned his head towards the others, showing them five fingers. They nodded, preparing themselves. He pulled one of his blades from its sheath on his thigh and placed it between his teeth, making sure his legs had a sturdy platform. One of the other shadows whistled loudly and the voices inside quieted. Zen tensed at the sound of feet nearing his position, and freed his left hand, preparing himself. A second later, a face appeared at the window, looking down. By the time his eyes widened, Zen had grabbed him by the edge of his chest armor, yanking him out of the window. The soldier tried to find something to grab onto, but his weight dragged him down and he flew towards the ground with a scream filled with terror.

By the time Zen pulled himself up and jumped through the window, the other two shadows had engaged the remaining four soldiers. Rissen was standing behind them with wide eyes, holding a short sword with trembling hands. When he met Zen’s, he dropped the sword and dashed towards the door, trying to push away the cabinet the soldiers had pushed behind it. Zen slowly made his way after him, pulling the knife out of his mouth and throwing it at the guard that had tried to block his way. It sunk into his eye with a gruesome noise and the man fell on the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Zen pulled his second weapon out, smiling as he noticed Rissen giving up on opening the door and just curling up in the corner between the cabinet and the wall.

“Please.” He whined, raising his hands in surrender. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry for everything! I didn’t mean it!”

“Oh, the part about the stupid barbarians or about erasing my homeland from the face of the world?” Zen scoffed, stopping in front of him.

Rissen winced, curling up even more. "We all say things in anger that we don't mean. But we all have to own up to our mistakes. Get on your knees and beg for your life and I might forgive you."

Rissen hesitated, the doubt in his eyes growing. Zen gave him a few seconds before turning his weapon between his fingers. By the time the circle of the blade was done, Rissen was kneeling with his head bowed to the floor.

"Please, I beg you to spare me. I am sorry. I will never utter another word against Craidal. I swear to the gods, I swear to everything!" He said with a trembling voice. Zen looked back at the room since the sounds had grown quiet, only to realize his shadows had taken care of the rest of the guards. His eyes returned to Rissen, who was still shaking in his feet.

"Fine. I forgive you for what you said. Get up." Zen said, turning the knife in his hand so he was squeezing the hilt with the blade hanging behind his fingers. Rissen raised his head hesitantly, his face covered in sweat and eyes still full of fear. "There is one more problem, though. I told you to kidnap Raena, unharmed, but your men dared to touch her. I hate other people touching what is in mine almost as much as I hate useless people who can't do anything right."

Rissen's mouth opened as if he planned to continue begging, but all it came out was a surprised gasp as Zen's knife sunk between his neck and shoulder all the way to its hilt. The eyes of the second prince of the Empire widened, pain and fear mixing in a delightful combination.

Zen leaned forward so he could whisper Rissen's ear.

"Where I come from, all mistakes are paid in blood and all failures – with death." He said, yanking his weapon out. The smell of blood intensified as Rissen's body dropped to the ground. Rissen's eyes remained on him, helpless and full of tears. Zen gave him a smile. "Don't worry, your death won't be in vain. Your brothers will join you shortly in hell."

Rissen opened his mouth to say something, but Zen ignored him, raising his hand to his mouth and whistling the signal. A few seconds passed and an identical whistle came from the other side of the door.

"Let's go." He said, turning to the other two. "We're done here. The others should have eliminated their target already. We'll meet them at the rendezvous point."

Yulien growled impatiently, his eyes still glued to the castle grounds surrounding the wing where his quarters were. The banquet hall where the Anniversary ball was held was located on the opposite side of the Imperial Palace, but he could clearly see the main gate from his window and the flickering lights and shadows moving towards it, some not even waiting for their carriages. He had opened the window earlier to confirm

his ears weren't misleading him – the screams and shouting were quite real, and just on time.

His quarters were quiet, eerily quiet. Vyn kept pacing in the room with him, constantly going out to check on the shadows positioned in the other rooms. He didn't share Yulien's confidence in their skills and abilities, but Yulien didn't blame him – he had learned of their existence only a few days ago.

A soft whistle came from the other room, and Yulien immediately looked towards the door. A thud broke the silence, then a crash followed by the distinctive ringing of metal.

So it had begun.

Yulien rose to his feet, glancing at Vyn, who touched his lips with his forefinger and gave him a sign to stay put. He made his way to the door, making no sound whatsoever, his hand slowly reaching for the handle. Just before he could unlock it, the blade of a sword pierced the wood at the level of his chest. Vyn jumped away just in time to avoid it, taking several steps back and positioning himself in front of Yulien.

“Prepare your weapon just in case, Your Highness. And stay behind me.” Vyn said in a quiet, tense tone. Yulien didn't hesitate to do as he was told, picking up the sword that he had been carrying around everywhere for the past few days. He drew the weapon out of its sheath just as the door kicked open, splinters flying in the air.

For a second, all they could see was the darkness from the other room, then suddenly the darkness moved, dividing in two. The shadows made their way into the room, both holding the typical weapons the shadows used – not quite a sword, but longer than knives, too.

“Aren't they supposed to be on our side?”

Vyn asked and his back tensed even more while he tried to keep both shadows in his field of vision despite them going in opposite directions. They could still hear the sound of a struggle in the other chambers, but it was hard to tell how many enemies there were and who was winning.

Especially when enemy and friend now looked the same.

“Those aren't my shadows,” Yulien replied, his eyes narrowing. “I'm taking the one on the left.”

“No! Your Highness, stay back. I'll take care of them.” Vyn growled.

“Weren't you the one who told me that splitting my attention in the middle of a battle would only result in my death?” Yulien smiled, tightening both his hands around the hilt of the sword. It had been a while since he wielded one for anything other than show and

despite Vyn's recent lessons, he didn't feel all that confident about it. He wasn't Kaessian who could cut down an assassin without breaking a sweat or finish a fight without even unsheathing his weapon. But he wasn't useless either. "I promise "I'll scream like a girl if I need your help."

Yulien locked his eyes on the one that had almost reached him and raised his sword. The fake shadow looked him up and down as if assessing his abilities with just one glance, then attacked.

Yulien parried the first blow and the next, but the shadow kept coming, faster and faster, using both hands just as easily and forcing him to jump and duck until he was out of breath.

"Vyn! A hand!" he shouted and a second later he felt something brush past his shoulder. His guard moved in front of him, his sword cutting through the air like a whip. The shadow jumped back to avoid getting their head decapitated, but the tip of Vyn's sword nicked them from their collarbone to the edge of the shoulder, a few drops of blood seeping from the exposed pale skin underneath.

Vyn switched again, meeting the second shadow's swords like he never stopped fighting them. Yulien raised his weapon again, glancing towards the door to make sure they didn't have any more company. The shadow was upon him before he knew it, one of their swords down, thrusting underneath Yulien's weapon. He jumped back to avoid it, lost his balance, and flew forward. The blade aimed for his stomach missed him by chance and the two of them dropped to the ground, with Yulien landing on top. He grabbed their hands in an attempt to stop them from attacking – he had already dropped his sword and the damn thing was just out of reach. The shadow actually struggled to shove him off like he was stronger than the two, and Yulien frowned, eyes lowering to the tear in the black clothing that had slid down, revealing a tight binding running right over their chest.

"Damn it." He grimaced. "I really don't like hitting women."

"Idiot" She said in a clearly female voice right before headbutting him so hard, stars flashed in front of Yulien's eyes as he fell back. By the time his vision cleared, she was already on her feet, raising one of her blades.

"Vyn!" Yulien shouted, his heart beating so fast, he was sure his head was going to explode. He had been in a dangerous situation before, but this felt different. This felt final.

Her blade flew towards Yulien's chest and just before it sunk into it, a sword appeared in his vision, stopping her weapon despite her putting all her strength into pushing down. The prince looked up to find Vyn standing on one knee next to him, his hand trembling from the effort of keeping the dagger off. The second shadow used the

opportunity to attack, aiming for Vyn's head, but he raised his arm and gripped the edge of the blade with his naked hand, his teeth screeching from the pain.

"Run," Vyn said through gritted teeth, his eyes darting between the two shadows. "Run or die, Your Highness."

Yulien hesitated, staring at his guard's bleeding hand, but then tried to get up.

"Yulien!" a familiar voice shouted from the other rooms and a second later Ka.ssian barged into the bedroom with a sword in hand, his eyes stopping on them. He didn't hesitate even for a second before jumping in and attacking the guy on Vyn's side, pushing him back with such strength.

The shadow's hands looked like they were all about to fall off.

Yulien looked at the female shadow just as Vyn was getting to his feet. She hesitated, then bolted towards the window. Yulien's eyes widened as he watched her crash through the glass and drop from it with the confidence of a bird. Even Vyn seemed taken aback for a second, until a pained shout made them both turn.

By the time Yulien turned, the shadow was lying unmoving in Ka.ssian's feet. His brother was breathing heavily, shoulders rising and falling as if he had been running for a long time. As if sensing Yulien's eyes, he turned, giving him a relieved look.

"He is alive," Ka.ssian said tiredly as he noticed Yulien glanced at the body in his feet. "And So are you. Good."

"Are you..?" Yulien started when the sound of feet made them all tense, Vyn moving in front of him and Ka.ssian turning around with his sword raised. A second later, the bedroom was invaded by a group of soldiers in full armor carrying the Imperial seal on their chests. Yulien let out a relieved sigh.

"Took you long enough." Ka.ssian scoffed and their attention moved to him. Yulien tensed as he noticed the hard looks on their faces, a few of them reaching for their swords. The one on the front took a step towards Ka.ssian, a hand resting the hilt of his sword in warning.

"Ka.ssian Etrobia, by the order of the Emperor, you're hereby arrested for treason." He announced with a firm, cold tone.

"Really? What did I do this time?" Ka.ssian sighed. The soldier looked surprised by the lack of interest and fear in his face and voice, but quickly composed himself.

"You're charged with the murder of His imperial Highness, Prince Rissen Etrobia."

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 90 - Tips

1 10 minutes read

“Shouldn’t you be in bed?” Raena sighed as she watched Marden grimace while trying to find a more comfortable position on the sofa next to her.

He just waved his hand dismissively, trying not to show his pain but failing miserably. He looked better than the last time she saw him – some of the color had returned to his face and his cheeks weren’t as hollow. He still needed help standing and walking – which he was advised not to do at all – but it seemed like the danger for his life was over at least.

They had ended up at his mansion after riding out of the Imperial Palace on Gerrin’s horse and contemplating where to go. They couldn’t go back to Ka.ssian’s residency and the Prime Minister’s one was probably being watched. Going to the restaurant was a big no-no and when she suggested renting a room at an inn, Gerrin shook his head like she just offered him poison. At the mention of Marden’s name he perked up and even before she was done, the horse was galloping in the direction of Count Rubick’s house. The fact that it wasn’t a well-known location and there were already soldiers on site to watch over Marden seemed to be a good enough reason for Ka.ssian’s second-in-command.

That was, until Marden decided not to stay in bed and keep her company when she refused to rest. Gerrin almost jumped him when he heard the familiar way he was speaking to her, even calling her by her name, but quickly resorted to sulking and glaring when she threatened to kick him out of the room.

Now the three of them sat in Marden’s parlor – Gerrin in a chair by the door with a weapon in his lap and Raena and Marden in one of the sofas, next to a table the surly butler had loaded with sandwiches, cookies, and “I’m fine.” Marden finally said. “It’s almost dawn, anyway. I’m sure the damn butler will insist on changing my bandages any moment.” As if hearing his words, the door opened, and said butler walked in with a tray holding a load of fresh, clean bandages and two small bowls, one filled with water and the other with some nasty smelling paste. Marden made a disgruntled face.

“I’ll do it,” Raena said readily, getting to her feet and reaching for the tray.

“No way.” Gerrin said at the same time the butler shook his head, pulling the tray out of her reach. Raena frowned with annoyance.

“Do I need to remind all of you who is the highest-ranking person here? Shut up.” She said coldly. The butler’s scowl turned into a hesitant expression, and she took the chance to grab the tray from his hands. She needed something to keep her hands and mind occupied until they got some news. Gerrin had sent someone to the residence to wait for news of Ka.ssian or Blaine’s return – and someone else back to the Imperial Palace to find out what else had happened through the night. None had returned yet.

“Raena, I can’t let you do that,” Marden said awkwardly, glancing nervously towards Gerrin, whose glare had intensified. “As much as I would prefer a woman’s hands touching me than that old fart’s, I value my life more.”

“I won’t kill you. Take your robe off.” She commanded, putting the tray on the table.

“It’s not you I’m worried about.” Marden sighed in defeat and slowly shrugged his robe off, wincing and moaning until he was sitting just in his pajamas pants. Raena took the scissors from the tray and cut the old bandage, swiftly unfurling it.

Gerrin cleared his throat a few times as she leaned closer to Marden so she could unfold it from behind his back, but she ignored it. Once all the cloth was off, she frowned at the sight of the wound. There were a lot of stitches and the skin around them was a mix of purple, black, red, and green. Raena took the wet cloth that was lying in another bowl full of water, and carefully pressed it against Marden’s chest. He winced, gritting his teeth, and for a few minutes, the only sound in the room was Marden’s groaning and more of Gerrin’s throat-clearing.

When Raena finally put the water bowl down and picked the one with the medicine, dipping her fingers in it, both Marden and Gerrin perked up.

“Wait a minute!” Both shouted, with Gerrin going as far as jumping off his seat. “You can’t do that! “H do it! Give me that!” He added angrily, striding to the table and extending his hand.

“Let’s just call the butler…” Marden murmured awkwardly, looking at the door with hope while Raena locked her eyes on Gerrin. He didn’t look like the gentle and caring type, so even if she didn’t want to do it, she wouldn’t have trusted him with it

“What’s the problem now?” She sighed, putting the bowl in her lap.

“The problem is that you’re a married woman who is sitting next to a half-naked man and planning to rub her fingers over his chest. If His Highness was here, he would have killed us all!”

Gerrin said angrily. “Please give me the medicine! I’ll do it. Just go sit somewhere else.”

“No,” Raena said stubbornly, picking up the paste and dipping her fingers in it again. She raised her hand and reached towards Marden’s chest, who gave her a pleading look. “I’m surprised you managed to become a soldier with such terrible eyesight, Gerrin. You miss such simple things like the fact that this half-naked man is a patient with a serious injury, which he received because of me.

This makes me responsible for him. And I am not touching his chest. I am treating his wound like any doctor or nurse would do. It's not like my hands are in his pants or anything"

Raena, please stop talking or I feel like you'll get another wound to treat." Marden squirmed, covering his face with his hands. Gerrin looked so indignant that she was afraid he might actually do something stupid, like picking her up and throwing her in the other room, then locking the door. In the end, he just balled his fists and said: "I'm reporting all of this to His Highness."

"Go ahead." Raena shrugged. "I'll tell him how you sat beside us, watching, and did absolutely nothing to stop me." She looked away from Gerrin, pressing her fingers gently against Marden's wound. The paste was cool to the touch, but the smell was even worse up close. She finished applying it on his front and back without another interruption, but she could feel a pair of eyes following every movement and shooting daggers at her head. Soon after she tightened the new bandage around Marden's chest, finishing her work with a satisfied sigh. She had done it all without – hurting Marden or throwing up – that was definitely a huge accomplishment.

Marden leaned back on the sofa, closing his eyes as if preparing to take a nap. Raena focused on cleaning her hands from the reddish-brown substance using the wet cloth the butler had brought a few minutes prior. She stared down at the white fabric that quickly turned red, memories of last night flashing in front of her eyes.

Despite the confident smile that Kassian gave them, he hadn't looked that well. She was sure he was hurt, his movements had been different from usual, and he held the sword Gerrin gave him with the wrong hand, which meant there was something wrong with the other one.

What if he got hurt? What if he got killed?

The rebels' initial plan might have been to blame everything on him, but they had adjusted their own strategy to make that impossible. Nobody was going to believe Kassian would ever work with the rebels, not even the Emperor. But if Yulien died, there were a thousand ways to twist the truth and make the relationship between the two brothers seem like something that it was not.

Yulien had to live. He was the only one that could save Kassian now.

"Ahem." The butler cleared his throat loudly and Raena snapped to attention, raising her head. "There is a gentleman here to see you," he said, staring at Raena. "He said his name is Blaine Alathic. Should I let him in?"

"Yes, yes, please do," Raena said excitedly, getting to her feet. Gerrin got up as well, his hand still squeezing the sheath of the sword he had borrowed from one of the other soldiers.

The butler returned a couple of minutes later with Blaine in tow. His glasses were missing and he had an ugly, but superficial gash on his forehead. He greeted them with a wary smile and a stiff bow, his eyes glancing at Gerrin before settling on Raena.

“Are you alright? What happened to you?” she asked.

“Nothing serious, just a few minor injuries. I am glad you’re not hurt, Your Highness.” He said with a hoarse voice, as if he had been shouting all night. “We were a bit worried when you didn’t come back to the residence last night, but it might have been for the best since the guards got into a fight with several intruders. All were repelled though, so the residence is now secured.”

“Kara?” Raena asked, her throat tightening.

“She is fine. Nobody in your residence was hurt.” He assured her and Raena gave him a thankful nod. A second later, she tensed again.

“Do you have any news? Is Ka.ssian alright? Is the crown prince alive?” Blaine raised his hand to stop the flow of questions, his eyes stopping on Marden who had twisted himself just enough to see the newcomer.

Blaine’s wary look returned. “I would leave the room, but that might take half an hour...” Marden said awkwardly. “The rest of the house is at your disposal.”

“Just pretend he is not there,” Raena said impatiently. “Marden is not going to tell anyone. He is one of us.”

Blaine didn’t seem entirely convinced of that, but nodded nonetheless, his shoulders slouching as if the weight on them had just doubled. Raena braced herself for the bad news, holding her breath as she waited.

“The Crown Prince is fine, he was not hurt last night. There was an attack on his quarters, but they pushed them off with the help of His Highness.” Blaine reported. “However...” he paused, glancing between the three of them and taking a deep breath, “Prince Rissen was murdered last night and His Highness was arrested for his death.”

“What?” Gerrin shouted while Raena was still searching for her voice. Blaine raised his hands again as if sensing another flood of questions coming.

“They have imprisoned him while the investigation is underway. The problem is, they saying that they found his sword in the second prince’s quarters and that they have witnesses claiming he killed him.”

“This is ridiculous!” Gerrin bellowed, his face turning red. “He dropped his sword in the banquet hall, which is nowhere near that stupid bastard’s room! And what kind of idiot would leave their weapon at the scene of the crime? It’s obvious this is a setup.”

“The Emperor doesn’t need much to lock him up. And he might decide to use this opportunity to get rid of him for good.” Blaine said carefully. “

What worries me are the two witnesses. We can argue that a seasoned soldier like His Highness would never kill in such a sloppy manner, but the witnesses complicate things.”

“What’s the motive?” Raena frowned. “What are they saying – why did he do it?” Blaine hesitated, raising his hand and scratching his forehead around the wound.

“They are saying he was trying to make himself the heir. He always hated Rissen, which is not a secret, so he wanted to get rid of him. And he knew that his brother might die any moment because of his wounds from the attack, so he wanted to make sure he became crown prince instead.” Blaine’s expression was dark and thoughtful, bordering fear for a moment. Raena prepared to laugh at how ridiculous that sounded, but she noticed his serious expression and the smile froze on her lips.

“This is stupid. He never wanted anything to do with the crown.” She said, but even her voice sounded hesitant in her ears. Blaine threw his hands helplessly in the air. “All of this is circumstantial evidence, it can be easily disproved. And we have witnesses too.” She added, pointing at herself and Gerrin. “We were with him and we were fighting those rebels with the masks. We..” Raena paused, closing her eyes. With every next word, Blaine’s expression grew darker and darker. “We can’t testify, can we?”

“Why not?” Gerrin frowned.

“Because you’re His Highness’s most trusted man and anything you say will be considered biased by your loyalty to your commander. And she is...” Blaine glanced at Raena, who opened her eyes slowly. “Madam Lydia who wanted for conspiring with an enemy, crimes against the crown, and treason. If she shows up to testify, she will hang even before His Highness’s sentence is given. And if they find out Madam Lydia is actually His Highness’s wife, nothing we say or do is going to change people’s minds that he is working with the rebels.”

Silence filled the room, heavy and foreboding, like the feeling in her stomach. She had hanged so many things in the storyline, all the events were jumbled or happened earlier. Then why did he have to be charged with treason again? Was this something like a fixed event? Was there really nothing she could do to save him? Was Yulien going to die too?

This was not how things were supposed to go. She had decided to change the story. They had to figure something out.

“Blaine,” she said, straightening her shoulders. “Did you bring me a change of clothes?”

“Yes, Your Highness, we can’t have you recognized.” He said readily. “Once you’re done changing, I’ll take you back to the residence. There is a group of soldiers waiting outside to escort you.

“Then I..”

“I’m not going back there yet.” Raena declared. “We’re going to the Imperial Palace.” Blaine’s face paled and he quickly shook his head.

“Forgive me, but I already spoke with His Highness and he forbade me from bringing you there. He left a list of instructions in case anything happened to him and..”

“Blaine.” Raena interrupted him. “You have to make a choice here. Would you loyally serve a dead master or would you disobey a living one for a chance to save him?”