

My Husband Chose Her Over Me –

Chapter #2 -

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CHAPTER 1

ELARA'S POV

The crystal champagne flute trembled in my hand as I watched my husband of three years move through the crowd like a predator among prey. Polished and pristine in his midnight blue formal attire, Prince Caden Verloren was the picture of royal perfection—a masterpiece I once believed I had some part in creating.

"You've barely touched your drink, Your Highness," Lady Mirabelle whispered, her voice dripping with false concern. "Is something troubling you this evening?"

I forced my lips into the practiced smile that had become as much a part of my royal wardrobe as the heavy crown that often adorned my head.

"Not at all," I lied. "Just savoring the moment."

What a bitter thing to savor. The Grand Hall of Verloren Palace glittered with more jewels and secrets than stars in the night sky. I'd grown accustomed to both during my years as Caden's wife, though neither brought me comfort anymore.

"He looks especially handsome tonight," another courtier remarked, her eyes following my husband's movements with poorly disguised hunger. "The future king in his element."

"Indeed," I replied, the single word nearly choking me.

I remembered a time when Caden's smile had been reserved for me alone. When his hand would find mine beneath the table during tedious state dinners. When his eyes would seek mine across crowded rooms just like this one, a silent promise that we were in this together.

Those days had vanished like morning mist before the summer sun.

"Elara." My mother-in-law's voice cut through my thoughts. Queen Arielle approached with the silent grace of a viper. "Do fix your posture, dear. A queen never slumps."

"I'm not a queen, Your Majesty," I reminded her, though I straightened my spine nonetheless. "Merely a princess."

Her lips thinned to a bloodless line. "For now. But appearances matter at all times. Especially tonight."

The cryptic addition sent a chill down my perfectly straight spine.

"What's special about tonight?" I asked, trying to keep my voice light.

The Queen's smile didn't reach her eyes. "You'll see soon enough."

Before I could press further, she glided away, leaving me with a growing knot of dread in my stomach. I set down my untouched champagne and made my way toward Caden, determined to extract some explanation.

I nearly reached him when the King's steward struck his staff against the marble floor three times. The resounding crack silenced the room immediately.

"His Royal Majesty, King Darius Verloren the Third!"

The crowd parted as my father-in-law entered, Caden immediately moving to stand beside him. My husband's eyes swept the room but passed over me as though I were merely another courtier. I felt my cheeks burn.

"Valued guests and noble friends," the King began, his booming voice filling every corner of the vast hall. "We gather tonight not only to celebrate the prosperity of our kingdom but to share joyous news."

My breath caught in my throat. Could it be the northern treaty? Caden had been working for months to secure peace with our traditional enemies. If successful, it would mean an end to centuries of bloodshed.

The King's hand came to rest on Caden's shoulder with unusual affection. "Prince Caden has secured an alliance that will strengthen our realm for generations to come."

Pride swelled in my chest momentarily. So he had done it. Despite the personal distance between us, I couldn't help but admire his diplomatic skill.

"Through the ancient and honorable practice of royal marriage," the King continued, "we will unite our bloodline with that of the Vassari Empire."

The pride in my chest curdled instantly into something cold and horrifying.

"Marriage?" The word escaped my lips before I could stop it, though thankfully too quietly for anyone but the nearby servants to hear.

From the grand entrance, trumpets sounded. The massive doors swung open to reveal a woman I recognized from diplomatic portraits. Lady Isolde Vassari—tall, statuesque, with hair like spun gold and the confident bearing of someone who had never questioned her place in the world.

"It is my great pleasure," Caden's voice rang out, steady and clear, "to announce my engagement to Lady Isolde Vassari, daughter of Emperor Konstantin. Our union will bring peace to our realms and prosperity to our people."

The room erupted in applause. Glasses raised in celebration. Congratulations echoed from all sides.

And I stood frozen, the world around me blurring as blood rushed in my ears.

"But you're already married," a voice behind me murmured in confusion—some foreign dignitary unaccustomed to our kingdom's traditions.

"The Verloren royal family practices diplomatic polygamy," came the explanation from someone else. "The first wife maintains her position, but second marriages are common for securing alliances."

First wife. The words struck me like physical blows. I was being relegated to a footnote in my own marriage.

Across the room, Caden's eyes finally found mine. For one breathless moment, I thought I saw regret there, perhaps even an apology. Then Lady Isolde touched his arm, and he turned to her with a smile I once believed belonged only to me.

The realization crashed over me like ice water: I had never been a wife to him. I had been a treaty, a signature on parchment, a political arrangement disguised as a love match. And now that a better alliance had presented itself, I was simply being... supplemented.

Swipe up to continue

CHAPTER 2

ELARA'S POV

Queen Arielle appeared at my side, her fingers digging into my arm with surprising strength. "Smile, Elara," she hissed through her teeth. "The entire court is watching."

But I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't force my face into the pleasant mask I'd worn for years.

In that moment, as champagne flowed and music resumed and my husband stood beside his future bride, I finally understood the truth of my gilded cage: the door had never been locked. I had been free to leave at any time.

But where does a discarded princess go when she discovers her entire marriage has been nothing but an elaborate political theatre?

My vision blurred, the glittering lights of the ballroom melting into smears of gold and silver. The triumphant strains of the royal orchestra seemed to mock me, each note piercing like tiny daggers between my ribs. I clutched at my bodice, suddenly certain I would suffocate beneath the weight of my own humiliation.

"I need air," I whispered, yanking my arm from Arielle's talon-like grip.

Her eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. "You will do no such thing. Leaving now would only confirm the rumors that you're unstable."

"Rumors?" The word felt like ash on my tongue. "What rumors?"

A smile like a knife wound split her painted face. "Why, that the reason Prince Caden requires a second wife is your... inadequacy. Your failure to fulfill your royal duties."

The unspoken accusation hung between us. Three years of marriage and no heir. The kingdom's greatest disappointment wrapped in silk and crowned with thorns—that's all I had become.

I drew myself up, summoning the last remnants of dignity from somewhere deep inside. "Excuse me, Your Majesty. I believe I'm needed elsewhere."

Before she could object, I slipped away, threading through the crowd with practiced grace. Eyes followed me, pitying, curious, calculating, but I refused to acknowledge them. The massive arched doorway leading to the eastern terrace beckoned like salvation.

Just three more steps to escape when a voice stopped me.

"Running away so soon, sister dearest?"

Princess Kaela stepped into my path, resplendent in crimson that matched the cruel curve of her lips. Caden's younger sister had despised me from the moment I arrived at court, and tonight she made no effort to hide her delight in my downfall.

"Not running," I replied coolly. "Merely seeking fresher company."

"How unfortunate you won't find it out there," she said, twirling her wine glass. "Everyone worth knowing is in here celebrating Caden's brilliant match. Lady Isolde brings three eastern provinces as her dowry. What did you bring again? A small coastal village and some fishing rights?" Her laugh tinkled like broken glass. "No wonder Mother insisted on securing a more... substantial alliance."

I swallowed hard. "If you'll excuse me—"

"Oh, but you haven't congratulated the happy couple!" She seized my wrist, her nails digging into my flesh. "Come, I'll escort you myself. Family unity is so important at times like these, don't you think?"

"Kaela." My voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "Remove your hand or I swear by all the gods—"

"You'll what?" She leaned closer, her breath hot against my ear. "Cry? Throw a tantrum? Perhaps you could lock yourself in your chambers like you did when Father announced the trade agreement with Nordheim instead of your homeland. Poor little foreign princess, always the afterthought."

I wrenched away from her, but not before she saw the tears threatening to spill from my eyes. Her victorious smile told me she had achieved precisely what she wanted.

"The second wife always outshines the first," she called after me as I finally escaped to the terrace. "Especially when the first was merely... practice."

The night air hit me like a physical blow, cold and sharp in my lungs. I gulped it desperately, bracing myself against the stone balustrade. Below, the royal gardens stretched into darkness, paths lit by paper lanterns swaying in the autumn breeze. How easy it would be to descend those steps, to lose myself among the sculpted hedges and flowering vines, to keep walking until I reached the outer walls.

"Your Highness."

I flinched at the voice. Turning slowly, I found myself face to face with Duke Thorne, my husband's most trusted advisor and my most consistent ally at court.

"They're looking for you inside," he said quietly. "The King wishes all family members present for the formal toast."

I laughed bitterly. "Family? Is that what I am?"

His weathered face creased with genuine concern. "Princess Elara—"

"Did you know?" I demanded, my voice breaking. "Did everyone know except me?"

The hesitation before he answered was all the confirmation I needed.

"It was decided only recently," he offered lamely.

"How recently? When they sent me to oversee the spring planting in the southern province?" Thorne's silence spoke volumes.

"I see." I squared my shoulders, years of royal training automatically correcting my posture even as my world collapsed around me. "Well then. Shall we return to the celebration of my obsolescence?"

He offered his arm with a courtier's precision. "If I may provide an observation, Your Highness—you are far from obsolete. The game of courts has many players, but few true strategists."

Before I could decipher his meaning, we reentered the hall. The crowd had formed a circle around the royal family, where King Darius was raising his glass in a toast. Caden stood at his right hand, with Lady Isolde—no, Princess Isolde now—draped elegantly on his arm. Her alabaster beauty made me acutely aware of my own darker complexion, the southern blood that had always marked me as an outsider here in the north.

Queen Arielle spotted me immediately, her eyes flashing a clear command. I obediently moved to complete the family tableau, taking my position beside Kaela, who smirked as though we shared a private joke.

"To peace between our kingdoms," the King proclaimed. "To new beginnings and stronger alliances!"

"To new beginnings," the court echoed, glasses raised.

Caden's eyes found mine across the circle. Something unreadable flickered there, not quite regret, but perhaps recognition. I held his gaze steadily, refusing to be the first to look away. For three years I had loved this man, had believed in the possibility of a true partnership despite our arranged beginning. I had learned his language, adopted his customs, endured his family's subtle cruelties, all in service to a future that had apparently never been mine to claim.

Finally, after an eternity, he turned away, and my heart sank.

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