

My Husband Chose Her Over Me by Nina Soelian

Description

I thought I was nobody. Turns out, I was royalty. **** Princess Elara grew up believing she was just a pawn in a royal marriage-an orphan sent to wed cold, distant Prince Caden of enemy kingdom Verloren. She was ignored, insulted, and invisible. Until everything changed. Elara discovers she's no ordinary bride, she's the hidden heir to Verdana, Verloren's more powerful neighbour. One moment she's the court's laughingstock. The next, she's its greatest threat. Now back in her rightful place, Elara is finally seen, finally powerful. But just as she begins to claim her crown, war threatens to erupt. To stop it, she must return to the kingdom-and husband, that betrayed her. But things aren't as simple as they seem. Caden isn't the heartless prince she remembers-and he's been searching for her all along. With one week to stop a war, protect her throne, and choose between duty and desire, Elara must decide: Will she follow her heart or her crown?

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.