

My Husband Chose Her Over Me –

CHAPTER 3

CADEN'S POV

The weight of the crown prince's signet ring felt particularly heavy tonight as I watched the court's reaction to my engagement announcement.

Father's strategy was unfolding perfectly, the Vassari alliance would secure our northern borders without bloodshed for the first time in three generations. Yet my attention kept drifting to the corner of the ballroom where Elara stood, her face a careful mask that I alone could see through.

"Your first wife is taking it rather well," my advisor, Lord Kellen, murmured beside me. "Better than expected, considering she wasn't informed beforehand."

I swirled the dark wine in my glass. "Elara understands duty."

"Does she? Look again, Your Highness."

Across the glittering expanse of the grand hall, my sister, Kaela had cornered Elara near one of the marble columns. Even from this distance, I could read Kaela's predatory stance, the cruel twist of her lips as she leaned close to Elara's ear. My wife, my first wife, stood rigid, her knuckles white around her untouched champagne glass.

"Shouldn't you intervene?" Lord Kellen asked, following my gaze.

"And reveal weakness on the very night I've announced a strategic alliance?" I kept my voice neutral. "The court watches everything."

"Indeed they do," he agreed, nodding toward the royal dais where my mother was holding court with Lady Isolde. "And it seems your mother has her own plans for Princess Elara tonight."

Mother's sharp gesture summoning Elara was impossible to miss. I watched as my wife made her way across the room, navigating the whispers and stares with the precise grace she'd perfected over our three years of marriage. The courtiers parted before her—not out of respect but curiosity, eager to witness her humiliation up close.

I should stop this, I thought. Then immediately: No, this is necessary. She must understand her place in the new arrangement.

I moved closer to the dais, positioning myself within earshot while engaging Ambassador Thorne in conversation about the northern territories. From this vantage point, I could observe without appearing to pay attention.

"Princess Elara!" My mother's voice carried that particular sweetness that always preceded her cruelest moments. "Come join us. Lady Isolde was just sharing the most fascinating insights about Vassari court customs."

Elara curtsayed with flawless precision. "I would be delighted to learn from Lady Isolde."

My future bride—tall, golden, and exactly what the kingdom needed—assessed Elara with the coldness of a collector examining a flawed gem. "We were discussing the role of consorts in diplomatic marriages. In Vassari, second wives take precedence in all public ceremonies, while first wives manage household affairs. I understand things are different here?"

"Traditionally, yes," my mother interjected before Elara could respond. "Though circumstances vary based on... contributions to the royal lineage."

The implication hung in the air like poison. Three years, no heir. My father's greatest disappointment in our union.

"How interesting," Elara replied, her accent—that lilting Sorian cadence I once found so charming—more pronounced under stress. "In my homeland, a marriage is considered sacred between two people. Quite different from northern traditions."

A sharp silence followed her words. Lady Isolde's ladies-in-waiting exchanged scandalized glances.

My mother's smile never faltered. "Lady Isolde, you must try our western vintage. Elara, be a dear and fetch a glass of the Crimson Reserve for our honored guest."

I watched Elara stiffen almost imperceptibly. In three years at court, she had never been asked to serve—not even during the most intimate family gatherings.

"Perhaps one of the servants could bring it," Elara suggested carefully. "I wouldn't want to leave such stimulating conversation."

My mother's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Nonsense. Lady Isolde deserves personal attention from family. Unless you find the task beneath you?"

The trap was perfectly laid. Refuse, and appear petty and resentful. Comply, and be diminished before the entire court.

"I simply thought—" Elara began.

"That is precisely the problem," my mother cut in, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "You were not brought here to think, but to cement an alliance—an alliance now superseded by more advantageous arrangements."

I saw something flicker across Elara's face, hurt quickly masked by the diplomatic neutrality I'd taught her myself during those early months of our marriage. The memory of those private lessons in my study, her eagerness to learn, to adapt, to please, hit me with unexpected force.

"Perhaps Prince Caden should fetch the wine," Elara said suddenly, her eyes finding mine across the space between us. "After all, shouldn't he be eager to serve his bride-to-be?"

The conversation around us stuttered to a halt. Heads turned. My father, deep in conversation with the Vassari ambassador across the room, hadn't noticed the brewing confrontation, but everyone else certainly had.

I felt dozens of eyes upon me, calculating, judging. A test, then. Not just of Elara's compliance but of where my loyalties truly lay.

Without a word, I set down my glass and strode toward the bar. The court's collective intake of breath was audible in the sudden silence. Prince Caden Verloren, heir to the throne, fetching wine like a common steward. The political implications would be parsed in whispers for weeks.

At the bar, I selected the Crimson Reserve—a wine Elara particularly enjoyed, though I doubted anyone remembered that but me. As I turned with the filled glass, she was there, having followed me across the room.

"What game are you playing?" I asked quietly, ensuring no one could overhear.

"Game?" Her eyes flashed with a fire I hadn't seen in months. "Is that what you think this is?"

"Lower your voice," I warned. "The announcement was always inevitable. You knew our marriage was an alliance first."

"An alliance I honored," she hissed. "Every duty, every protocol, every humiliation—I endured it all believing we were building something real beneath the politics."

I felt a flicker of something dangerous—regret, perhaps—and quickly suppressed it. "You know polygamy is legally accepted in Verdana, right? Why then are you making a big deal out of this?"

Her face transformed before me, shock giving way to a cold fury I'd never witnessed in our years together. Something had broken inside her—something beyond repair.

"Choose," she muttered, her voice barely audible.

I leaned closer, certain I'd misheard. "What?"

Elara turned, her gaze moving deliberately to where Lady Isolde sat with my mother and sister, all three watching our exchange with poorly disguised interest.

"Choose between me or her."

"What?!"