

The Second Queen

By

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Dearest Father,

Planet Olympia – am I letting the name influence me? – truly reminds me of the mythical Mount Olympus you told me about when I was little. Intrigue and power-games abound. My new husband is the firebolt-hurling Zeus, while his first wife fits the slippers of the scorned Hera. I'm not sure what role I'm supposed to play in that metaphor, I, the newcomer of whom everybody is curious yet whom nobody approaches for fear of aligning with the wrong faction.

For factions I do see here, as obvious as I see Olympia's two dying suns. There is the Prince: a ladies' man and a seducer. He has most of the female court wrapped tightly around his little finger (or around his big tool, as rumour would have it). He is the logical heir to the throne, although the way politics work in this place, the Vizier who commands the armies might have a claim to at least half the kingdom should he lead the nation into a successful war.

Speaking of war...no, better not. Not until I have the facts. Such matters are too important to gossip about.

I shall write again when I find my footing. You know I'm no fool, my beloved father, so fear not. The First Queen is treating me with politeness and she ordered my quarters in a far-away wing of the castle to preserve my privacy. Also, she was kind enough to allow me to use her login to write to you and to receive your replies via e-post.

Your devoted servant,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia

In her cold bedroom chamber, Atana re-read her letter, then pressed the send button on her console. The electronic link between Olympia and her treasured Crett was fairly reliable. Her father should receive the message when he awakened. Starship post would have taken weeks.

"Are you quite finished, my dear?" The King's voice was soft, but it echoed like thunder in the almost-empty chamber.

Atana's heart thudded, but she managed to control her voice. "Yes, Sire."

"In that case, perhaps now is the time to go over the reasons I've taken you on as Queen."

"As you wish, Sire." Atana stood up and tugged at the silk ribbon that gathered her night tunic at her throat. She was sure her face revealed nothing.

The king stopped her with a gesture.

"Save that for the Prince, my dear. I'm sure he'll be along by and by. You know, the whole thing would have been a lot less complicated if you'd married him instead. To begin with, the Queen – the First Queen – and I are absolutely devoted to each other - as I'm sure you'll discover." The King paused and rubbed the frown line between his greying eyebrows. "Circumstances forced me into this arrangement quite as much as they undoubtedly forced you. But here we are, and we must make the best of it, don't you think?"

"Sire?"

The King sighed a long, ostentatious sigh. "I've been told that you're beautiful, neat about your affairs, and innocent. I hadn't been informed that you lack intelligence."

Atana kept her thoughts silent.

"Perhaps I should have deduced that myself." The king's amused gaze brushed hers. "Nobody with an ounce of brains would consent to the pre-nuptial agreement that you signed. *What's mine and yours, is now ours*, isn't it how the wording goes?"

"Yes, Sire."

"I see you're not a great conversationalist. But then, I didn't marry you for your verbal skills. What I need is your dowry. All of it. Right now. I have armies to build."

"As you wish, Sire. Of course, you will recall the terms of the dowry arrangement: two coffers every six months for as long as I'm Queen."

Even in the feeble glow of the electric candle, Atana could see the angry purple hue surface on the King's cheeks, then spill all the way to his throat.

"You know, it's not as though I was going to poison you on our wedding night, my dear. There was no need for such a clause. You do trust me, my little dove, don't you?"

Without a word, Atana turned to the computer and logged into her bank vault. Several passwords later, as they both watched the funds flow from the treasury of one planet to the other, a knock reverberated on the door.

"Enter," commanded the king absently. "Ah, here you are, my son. I shall bid the two of you a good night, then. My business here is done."

Dearest Father,

You will have noticed that the first installment of my dowry has already been claimed. The King has put it to a good military use of which, being female, I naturally know little. The Vizier looks mightily pleased though, and, as the Prince told me in an unusual spell of confidence, his – the Vizier's – only problem, now that the armies are strong, is which planet to attack. Olympia doesn't have any natural enemies (those she long ago managed to conquer and swallow) and her neighbours, being so much weaker, endeavour to stay on good terms with her.

Speaking of the Prince, he is indeed a women's man, as I had the honour of discovering first-hand, even if the rumours regarding his tool don't quite reflect reality. As a matter of fact, the boy-man seems a bit overshadowed by the authority of his royal father and would probably welcome a chance to have a say in the planet's affairs. Should one of the

power figures take him under their wing, methinks they would gain a loyal ally.

Your devoted daughter,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia, Concubine to the Prince of Olympia

The Prince's private staircase was winding, gloomy and freezing. Atana couldn't get used to the temperature on Olympia. At home, the single sun was gold-white and the Princess was used to its leisure-inducing heat penetrating the palace walls. Here, however, everybody seemed content with the climate created by the two oranges that masqueraded as suns in the grey firmament. The castle's chambers were as cold as the air outside, yet nobody else seemed to be bothered by it.

Ever since her arrival, Atana had wandered through the castle come dawn, noon and dusk. Nobody forbade it explicitly, and she asked nobody's permission. After a while, her strolls became part of the routine that flowed through the castle's arteries, and even the most diligent of the court's spies could see nothing wrong in the Second Queen's visits to her husband's or her lover's quarters.

She paused outside the room which would have been the Prince's library had he ever bothered to read books. Insulated against noise, it could have been used as an office for a prince more involved in the kingdom's affairs. Instead, the room's bookracks held an extensive collection of wine, ale and spirits.

The door didn't make a single sound when Atana pushed it ajar.

"...dungeon. Third cupboard on the left," she heard the First Queen's smooth intonation. "You will find a leather pouch and the poison within."

A deep voice muttered its consent.

"We must ensure at all cost that the Second Queen doesn't—" continued the Queen.

Atana moved a fraction to peer through the crack. She wanted to see the Queen's interlocutor. She took a small step, then another.

Her slipper squeaked on the stone floor.

Beloved Father,

In your letters, you keep enquiring how I am. Rest assured, I'm treated with politeness if not kindness, and the First Queen goes out of her way to make me feel welcome. Just a couple of days ago, she graciously suggested that I might like to get to know my new planet. Might I!

The excursion was a family affair, with most of the high court participating. I had the pleasure of riding in the same carrier as the Prince and the Vizier. Therein I observed the generosity with which the military man shared his knowledge of the kingdom's politics with the royal successor.

While they talked of the imperative for Olympia to find a new domain to conquer and colonise, and of the shortage of living space, I took the opportunity to look out the window and take in the unfamiliar scenery. Father, this planet has so many people! It's a true blessing to see them

lining the roads shoulder to shoulder. Not a single tree in sight, not a blade of grass, just people: a sea of people wherever you look. How magnificent! When I think back to my adored Crett and its sad shortcoming in that respect, my heart fills with sorrow.

The excursion would have been a huge success, had it not been for an unpleasant episode during our repast.

We had stopped at a roadside inn for a late-morning meal and, just as we were nibbling on the sweet dishes, a household draco burst into the eating chamber through a portal I'd inadvertently left ajar. The King was amused (I don't know much about my husband, but I do believe he is fond of animals) and when the animal begged for a treat, the King splashed the desert wine from his full goblet onto the floor for the draco to lap up. The poor creature took one lick and collapsed.

The King was much distraught, more so, I feel, because of the death he'd caused than because of the death he himself had avoided, and he instigated a regular enquiry. It was easy to establish that we had all left the table after the main repast to stretch our legs in the cement garden, so practically anybody could have tampered with the King's chalice.

In the old days, I suppose, the owner of the inn would have been executed, but now that we need every able male to perform the country's duty, the king was satisfied with a conscription slip from the owner and all his sons.

I'm not sure what to think about the whole affair. Suffice to say, the King now has a Royal Taster whose services he employs at mealtime. It's not one person, but a random selection from the court: somebody different every time. The Vizier was none too pleased when his only daughter was asked to perform the role yesterday morning.

Despite his disturbance, the Vizier was kind enough to lend me his afternoon and educate me in the needs of my new kingdom. He also enlightened me as to the politics of the castle itself and what an easy scapegoat somebody as innocent and oblivious as myself would make.

Take the First Queen, for instance, said the Vizier. Is she jealous of me, her fresher substitute? The Prince, does he feel ousted by his father, not only out of the crown that should have gone from father to son years ago, but also out of the latest bride? And the King himself, how does he feel about his second wife in his son's bed?

The intrigues seem to grow beyond the petty squabbles of the mythical Mount Olympus. Perhaps the comparison would be more fitting to the mythical Earth Rome of the Caesars?

Yours,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia, Concubine to the Prince of Olympia

The Earth Rome of the Caesars indeed, thought Atana as she hurried across the tiny lawn. That means the First Queen is like the dangerously ambitious Livia who had

poisoned her husband and—

"Atana."

The girl stopped mid-stride, turned around and bowed. "Yes, My Queen?"

"I've seen you in these gardens often. Do you fancy them? Or are they just an escape from the activities of the castle?"

"The gardens are very beautiful, Ma'am. I hope it's all right for me to retreat here from time to time?"

The First Queen regarded, as though for the first time, the circle of meagre lawn, bordered by a grey stone wall. "I've never liked them much myself. They terrace over the military enclosure, and I can never rest properly here with all the noise coming from below."

"I, I rather like it myself."

"And so you should. It's your dowry that's paid for the armies." The older woman paused. "I've neglected to give you a wedding present, so let me offer you this garden instead. Would you like that?"

"Oh, thank you, Your Majesty. I'd like that very much."

"Surely you realise, my child, that there is much in this palace that belongs to you now? By signing your prenuptial agreement, the *what's mine and yours is now ours* clause, you've acquired many such gardens already."

Atana curtsied. "I haven't thought of it that way, Ma'am. Besides, I like this garden the best."

The First Queen laughed. "Say, Atana, with all your passion for things military, you haven't fallen in love with our military man, have you? The Vizier?"

Atana scrutinised the First Queen's face, then shook her head firmly.

"That's good. Beware of him, my dear child. Don't spend much time in his company. He may appear helpful enough, but he's no friend of yours."

Beloved Father,

Thank you for the news from home. It's good to hear that Crett's army is taking its well-deserved vacation. If I may say so, it would do you good to take a holiday too, get away from Crett and its heat.

Myself, I am well and making new friends. Just the other day, the Vizier himself forced his sexual favours on me, as, I believe, is the custom of this planet. He says it's an honour to be chosen in such a way. I hope I can count on his support because not everybody is as friendly as I'd initially hoped.

The Vizier may not be the galaxy's greatest lover, but what he lacks in bedding skill, he makes up for with words. And so, after our coupling, he was eager to share the latest gossip with me. Among them is one that upset me: it seems that the whispers around the court have it that I'm to blame for the attacks on the king's life. For it transpires that the attacks have been multiple. In addition to the wine incident I described in an earlier communiqué, there was also a stone sculpture that fell from a great height to miss my husband's head by mere centimetres as he was walking through the halls; also a thin piece of strong string tied to the top of the stairwell leading from his personal chambers; and even a torn stirrup on

his favourite riding horse.

To put the end to any doubt, I've volunteered to take up the role of the King's Personal Taster on a permanent basis.

Your faithful daughter,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia, Concubine to the Prince of Olympia, Personal Taster to His Royal Highness the King of Olympia

The King's private conference chamber had a handsomely decorated fireplace, although no fire had ever been lit in it. Nobody would dream of increasing Olympia's natural icy temperature. Atana shivered on a narrow ledge inside the blind chimney. Her nightgown was insufficient protection from the cold, but at least her hiding place protected her from the draughts that travelled the castle's corridors like ghost warships.

Her stomach was not feeling too great, either. Atana tried to ignore the metallic taste in her throat.

"The choice is obvious," said the Vizier. "Crett will be unprotected while its army is enjoying the hot springs on Rotor. I say, let's attack now before they've had enough of the sulphuric atmosphere."

"But we get Crett anyway," reasoned the King. "What's Atana's is mine as per the nuptials, remember?"

"Except that Crett isn't hers yet. Not as long as her father's alive. And we need to colonise another planet right now."

"So wouldn't it be more logical to get rid of Atana's father and make her Queen of Crett?"

Atana could hear the irritation in the Vizier's voice when he replied. "Yes, it would have been, Your Majesty, if the Second Queen's father hadn't retreated into some vacation hideout himself." The briefest of pauses for effect, then the army man continued. "Look, Olympia's empire is running out of resources. Our rivers are dry and we have no more soil to farm, what with all the land taken up by housing. Crett, on the other hand, is empty and unprotected. Even with its army all in place, it would have been an easy picking. They simply don't have the manpower for a military force."

"I've heard it's very scenic, Crett." Atana suddenly recognised the First Queen's voice. Another wave of nausea hit her. "Green hills, they say, blue seas, fjords and virgin jungles. It would be a shame to spoil its landscape with in-fill dwellings."

"Ma'am, with all due respect, our people -" the Vizier's impatient tone belied the deferential words.

The First Queen sighed so loudly that even Atana's chimney-concealed ears caught the sound. "I know. Do what you must. But remember, you're on probation. This is your last chance to make up for the unfortunate incident with the Second Queen. One wrong step..."

"Yes, Your Majesty. In my defence, may I just say that I never forced—"

"You may not."

"But I stand falsely accused—"

The First Queen's voice whipped the air. "Silence!"

Dearest Father,

I'm glad to hear you're back from your holiday, rested and full of ideas for Crett's future. And what wonderful news that the war left our planet unscathed and enemy-free! I don't know, I'm sure, what motivated Olympia's army to perform its military manoeuvres in Crett's part of the galaxy, but what a fortunate coincidence that they were there to vanquish the hateful Aquariens who were forever threatening our peace. I feel proud to be Queen of the victorious Olympia and proud to have founded its brave army with my dowry. I'm also glad that Olympia decided to colonise the defeated planet Aquarien and that my two planets will thus become neighbours.

The Vizier, I'm sorry to say, did not receive his just reward for leading the army into glory. He was posted to one of Olympia's distant daughter planets. The First Queen says it's better this way. While he was out waging war, she found in his sleeping chamber a leather pouch half-filled with poison. It's not enough to accuse him of any wrongdoing against the King, of course, so his secondment turned out both timely and prudent. Suffice to say, the King feels confident he won't be needing a Royal Taster any longer.

Your faithful daughter,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia, Concubine to the Prince of Olympia

Atana was perfuming her hair with the icy fragrances of Olympia – another gift from the First Queen – when the door to her bedroom chamber flew open. The Prince slammed the door shut behind him.

"It's all your fault!" he hissed. "B-b-b-utter wouldn't melt in your mouth, that's how you act, all in-in-innocence and fluttering eyelashes. B-but you're a scheming, conniving, devious b-b-bitch—"

"Enough." Atana didn't raise her voice at all. She picked up an ebony hairbrush and began to brush her hair, spreading the scent of ice flakes and frost. "'Scheming', 'conniving', and 'devious' are all synonyms. I get the point. As to the butter melting, I've never understood that saying. Nor do I understand *you* right now."

"Don't p-pretend. You got the Vizier b-banned. You and your false accusations about rape."

Atana shrugged. "I thought you'd be glad. With his being a contender for ruling Olympia, surely it's a good thing he's out of your way to the throne?"

"Who cares about ruling Olympia? I would have been happy for him to have the c-crown. He promised that if he became King, I c-could be his harem's Chief Overseer! And now it's all spoilt. Thanks to you."

The door closed behind the Prince with a bang. Atana closed her eyes. She was exhausted.

Dearest Father,

You ask, now that my task here is done, whether I would like you to seek an annulment for my marriage, based on the fact that it's never been consummated. Thank you, Father, but no thank you.

You see, I'm very much in love with my husband the King (in a lot of ways, he reminds me of you, beloved Father). I've loved him ever since we started studying Olympia as our potential partner in the war against Aquarien. That's why I didn't shy from the role that you'd given me, and that's why I insisted it be the King and not the Prince I marry, even though the status of Second Queen is inferior and there are no prospects similar to those for the First Princess.

Matters are much more settled now that the Vizier is gone and the Prince no longer favours me. I would therefore like to spend the foreseeable future on Olympia, despite the climate...the planet's climate, I mean.

Your daughter,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia

It was the first time ever that Atana ventured into the First Queen's apartments. She never dared to trespass here on her nightly wanderings through the castle, but now, she came invited.

The opulence of the First Queen's quarters contrasted with the austere design of the rest of the castle, but even here the silks and the gold were bathed in clouds of chilly air. Ice Queen, thought Atana, she should forego tapestries in favour of icicles and snow sculptures.

"Atana." The voice was clear. Like ice crystal. "I'll come straight to the point. You said in your letter, and I quote, that *the status of Second Queen is inferior and there are no prospects similar to those for the First Princess.*"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Atana.

"Did you mean it as a threat to me, my child?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Why? You can't possibly be in love with the King."

Atana simply stared.

The First Queen raised her eyebrows. "So what do you want?"

"Power," replied Atana.

"In that case, why did you help me get rid of the Vizier? Why did you lie about the forced advances? Surely, with him out of the way, you won't be able to implicate me in the attempts on the King's life."

One corner of Atana's mouth moved up in a quick smile. "I wouldn't want to do that. The King would be quite devastated. He loves you very much, you know."

"How magnanimous of you." The First Queen's mouth mirrored the smile, but the eyes stayed icy. "And of course, it has nothing to do with the fact that the Vizier was interested in the crown? With him gone, who's left as a contender? Not my son, that's for certain. Not the King either. He's old and contented and not interested in ruling the Olympian Empire."

"There's you, Your Majesty," said Atana softly. "You want the crown too. That's why you tried to murder the King."

The First Queen shook her head. "If that were my goal, you could rest assured that I would have succeeded. No, I simply wanted to get rid of the Vizier. He understands, or thinks he understands, the reason for his exile, and he won't try to return. But you're right that I want the power," she regarded Atana quizzically. "So here we are. The two queen bees, duelling for the hive. Fighting to the death. Is that what you want?"

"If need be. Especially as you wouldn't want to kill me, Your Majesty. You need my dowry for many, many years still. But I have a proposition. A compromise."

The First Queen winced. "Co-ruling? It's never worked in the past."

"That's because the co-rulers were men." Atana paused for a second. "What I was thinking was this: the King will need advisers now that the Vizier is gone. The two of us could fulfil that role."

"And if we have incompatible points of view on an issue?"

"Then it's up to the individual queen to manipulate the King in such a way that his decision is to her liking."

The old woman considered for a moment. "All right. You have a deal."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"Don't ma'am me, child. If you want to show your gratitude, tell me this: why did you insist on the *what's mine and yours is now ours* clause in your prenuptial agreement? No, don't open your eyes wide with innocence - tell me. What is it you desire so much of the King that you were willing to sign that? I've been puzzling over it and I can't work it out. It is our son you want? The armies? You can't mean the Empire. That belongs to the people, as you must be well aware."

"It's not what *you* have that I want," grinned Atana. "It's something *I* have—"

"That you want to get rid of?" interrupted the First Queen. "It can't be a financial debt. You're the rich one. So what is it? A cursed jewel? An obligation towards a developing planet?"

Atana placed her hand on her belly. "A child."

"You mean, you're pregnant? That's impossible. The Prince would never allow himself to be compromised in that way. And our diplomats did their research thoroughly: no children, no previous relationships...they guaranteed you were a virgin at the time of conducting the wedding negotiations."

Atana inclined her head. "At the time, yes, I was indeed. But by the time I came to Olympia, I ensured that I carried life within me. I suspected – and rightly so – that I wouldn't be allowed that privilege here."

She could have added, "My baby will be the King's according to the prenuptial agreement, and one day it will inherit the Crown."

But she didn't. She preferred the innocent silence of her victory.