

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 15 - Tips

0 10 minutes read

Marden put out his cigar, his fingers returning to tapping on the table. He had long exhausted his patience, but for some reason, he was still waiting around. For her.

She had said one week. She had said she'd be back to hear his answer. Today marked the seventh day of their first meeting, and he had expected her to show up bright and early in the morning. Just as sure she'd close the deal as she was that day. He wanted to shake her confidence, so he had slept in and got to the brothel around noon, only to be told she hadn't come. Slightly irritated, he had filled his time with drinking and sex, but his mind was too preoccupied and he failed to enjoy either.

He even went as far as checking the ledgers again, only to be reminded how close to bankruptcy they were. They barely had ten customers on a good day, and most of those bastards were too drunk, too high, or too violent to be considered valuable clients. He had lost half a dozen girls over the last two years thanks to them – some beaten, some scarred, some even dead.

Trusting a complete stranger that appeared out of the blue seemed crazy. Not just a stranger, a woman at that. Still, if he did nothing, in six months, probably less, he'd be forced to close the brothel or take another loan. On the other side, if she delivered on her promise, he'd be able to keep the business afloat and maybe even clear his father's debts in a few years.

Marden glanced at the door, but it remained closed. Kicking his chair back, he got to his feet and strode into the poorly lit corridor. He had told Arissa to let him know when that woman showed up, but there was no word from her either. As he descended the stairs, he noticed Arissa's red hair by the front door, the light scent of a cigar hanging in the air. She didn't seem to hear him, so she jumped and dropped her cigar when he spoke.

"What are you doing?"

"Goddamn it, Marden!" the woman cursed, glancing down at her fallen cigar. She decided against picking it up, glaring at him instead. "Are you trying to kill me?" He raised an eyebrow impatiently. "What am I doing? I am watching the damn street like you told me to, waiting to see if your girlfriend is coming! As you can see, she isn't!"

She growled in frustration, glancing outside again.

"Screw this! I need a drink. You can watch for her yourself."

She pushed past him, adjusting her tight dress as she made her way to the small bar in the back.

Marden stepped outside, looking up. The black sky was dotted with stars, the bright moon illuminating the street enough to see there was nobody outside.

He turned to look at the tall, freshly painted restaurant next to his dirty, run-down excuse of a building.

Did she lie to him? Did she change her mind?

Did something happen to her? She had sounded so confident, so eager, that he had wanted to tease her just for the sake of it. But now that he had time to think about it, maybe he should have agreed right on the spot. Such an opportunity was too good to miss, especially in his situation.

“Oh, Marden, you’re here! I hope I haven’t made you wait long.” A gentle female voice rang from behind him, followed by a soft chuckle. Marden turned immediately, staring at the two figures standing a few steps away from him. One of them was of an unfamiliar man – tall and well-built, with pitch-black hair and piercing eyes that stared at with a cold, calculating look. The second one was her.

Her golden hair was pulled back, hiding in the hood of the dark cloak she wore. A veil covered most of her face, just as the last time he saw her – his curiosity was gnawing at him, but he knew better than to force her to show him what behind it. Besides, that guy with her looked ready to cut him in half if Marden so much as breathed in their direction without her permission. He rather hoped she’d come with that timid maid like before.

He hadn’t met a woman that he couldn’t woo yet, and Lydia wasn’t going to be the first.

“I haven’t,” he heard himself reply, wondering where his frustration went. He had planned to give her an earful for making him wait, but now all he felt was relief that she showed up.

“Excellent!” she laughed, moving past him and heading toward her building. “Come on, “I’ll make it up to you.”

Her guard moved like a shadow, one step behind her, matching her stride as if he had been serving her for years. Marden frowned as he observed him, wondering where she had found him.

Despite his youthful appearance, he looked comfortable with the sword that hung from his belt.

Not to mention, his aura definitely wasn’t a peace-loving one.

Marden followed them inside the restaurant, looking around with curiosity. The place was huge- the hall was spacious, with tables and chairs neatly arranged in meticulous lines with enough space between them to have an actual conversation; the ceiling was

painted with pictures that were so lifelike, his neck started to ache before he realized how long he had been staring.

Everything was matched in nuances of red and golden or beige, even the floors and furniture. What was the most surprising of all was the kitchen there was no wall between the kitchen and the dining hall, just a chest-high counter.

“Do you like it?” she asked, shrugging off her cloak and draping it over one of the chairs. Her dress this time was dark green, perfectly matching her veil. It hugged her slim body tightly, leaving her delicate shoulders completely bare. Her hair was pulled into a braid that fell to the middle of the back, revealing her long, thin neck.

“Fancy,” he said, following her to the kitchen.

She stepped into it with the confidence of someone who was used to spending a lot of time there.

Looking at her expensive dress and perfectly smooth hands, he doubted that was the case. Still, as he watched her cut the ingredients, he realized all her movements were full of assurance and care and she was able to even keep up a casual conversation – asking about his week as if they had known each other for years.

She offered him a seat, but he remained by the counter, watching her as she worked. She put some long, thin strands of dough into a pot to be boiled, then dumped minced meat into a pan, adding onions, tomatoes, garlic and a bunch of herbs that made his nose twitch. He decided he'd pretend to like it no matter how bad it tasted, as long as that made her happy. He didn't want to offend her and have her retract her offer when it was almost a done deal.

“Zen, come help me,” she called, and her guard moved into the kitchen. Marden had almost forgotten about him while he stood silently at the threshold as if to stop Marden from getting closer to her. He took the dishes Lydia handed him, setting them on the closest table. Her guard pulled her chair, and Lydia sat down, her eyes stopping on Marden.

“Sit, sit,” she urged him, and if he could see her face, he was sure she'd be smiling. He took a seat across from her, looking down at the dishes. “I apologize for not making anything more elaborate, but it's a bit late, and I was really craving pasta. Marden glanced down at the long, doughy strands covered in red sauce. He had no idea what pasta was – probably the strand-like things – but he smiled with fake enthusiasm.

“It's not every day a beautiful woman makes me dinner,” he said, tilting his head. “Thank you for your effort.” He looked down at his fork, wondering how he should be eating that dish. It didn't look like something you can stab with your fork, and it definitely didn't look like something you can eat with your hands.

"Here, you eat it like this" she said as if reading his thoughts. She picked up her utensils, stabbing her fork in the middle of the dish and twirling it around until some of the threads were rolled around its teeth. She lifted it to her mouth, raising her veil just enough so she could eat it. Marden caught a glimpse of a small chin and full pink lips before she let the veil down again. "I call this spaghetti. This is one of the pasta dishes we'll be putting on our menu. Try it and let me know what you think."

Marden picked up his fork, mimicking her technique. As he brought the food up, he hesitated, taking a deep breath. He closed his mouth around it, trying to control his expression. He had expected it to taste chewy and tasteless, but he was pleasantly surprised, to say the least. The flavor of the tomatoes wasn't as strong as he expected and it went well with the meat and the seasoning.

He didn't realize he had his eyes closed, but when he opened them, he noticed her staring. Her gaze was sparkling as if she was grinning happily behind her veil, but she said nothing.

"It's delicious," Marden said, licking his lips, which is a surprise, I have to admit. I thought it would be terrible."

"Never judge a book by its cover!" She winked at him, looking down at her plate.

"It would seem I found a very interesting book," Marden smirked. Judging by the way her eyes squinted slightly, she seemed amused, but with that stupid veil, it was extremely hard to read her. "What do I have to do to make you take off that thing?"

"All in due time, my dear friend," she chuckled, taking another bite of her food. Marden gritted his teeth at that word. Friend was never a good thing to be called by the woman you were pursuing unless she was famous for sleeping with her friends, of course. But his new 'friend' didn't seem like that type of person.

Marden focused on his plate, and the two of them ate in silence for a few minutes. The portion wasn't big, but it was filling, leaving a hunger for more just as you have finished. Something was telling him that her business would do really well.

"So about your offer.." he said, resting his elbows on the table.

"oh, right," she mumbled, turning around and giving a sign to her guard. He stepped closer, pulling a folded parchment out of his pocket and handing it to Marden. Marden took it with a raised eyebrow, skimming through it. "I prepared the contract and signed it already. All you need is to put your name and signature on it. You can make a copy later if you like."

"You're still sure I'll sign it," Marden scoffed, looking back at the content.

"Please," Lydia laughed. "You were going to sign it even if I hadn't shown up today."

Marden shook his head, smirking. She knew she had him.

The contract stated the same terms she promised an increase in revenue at least two times in the first three months, five times in the next six months; she'd cover the expenses of the renovation, but then she would get twenty percent of the earnings of the brothel.

"You want me to release all slave girls of their slave bonds and anyone who doesn't want to work there, then raise their pay and provide benefits?" He raised his eyebrows, looking at her. "It's a whorehouse, not a bank!"

"Motivated workers do a better job," Lydia shrugged. "And I will not tolerate slaves being used or women being mistreated. This is not negotiable."

"I'm all for it, but I barely have the money to pay them now," he sighed, shaking his head. There was no use lying about the state of the brothel, not if they were to become partners in this.

"I'll cover the first two months' pay and benefits. Then I'll deduct it from the next months' earnings," she said, as if she had already decided.

Marden stared at her, trying to figure out just what kind of woman possessed such a business-oriented mind and had so much money.

Was she a noble? Royalty? Some kind of scholar?

What kind of person opened a restaurant in the most avoided street in the capital, then offered a brothel owner a deal that clearly didn't benefit her or give her any assurance that she'd get her money back? What kind of person demanded equal pay and benefits for whores? Where did she even come from?

All those questions were killing him.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" she asked.

"Are you from this world?" Marden asked, and her eyes widened with shock. "You are just.. I can't put it into words. Are you the Goddess's reincarnation or something?"

She chuckled, quickly composing herself. He could totally see her as the Goddess of Life and Rebirth. That would explain the veil, too. Anyone who would gaze upon a God would have their soul burned to ashes, or so the priests said.

"I'm just an ordinary woman who wants to make a living." she shrugged.

“Why don’t you just find a rich husband?” Marden asked. “It would be much easier. I bet with your otherworldly beauty, as you said yourself, you wouldn’t have a problem with that.”

“Why do I need a rich husband when I can become rich myself?” she laughed. “Sign the contract, Marden. Let’s get rich together.”

Marden bit the inside of his lip, chuckling quietly before taking the quill her guard had produced from somewhere and putting down his signature in broad, excited strokes. When he was done, she stood up, offering him her hand.

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Marden,” she said, pulling her hand away. “Let’s get started!”