

## His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 36 - Tips

0 9 minutes read

"You're really popular these days, aren't you?" Zen scoffed under his breath as he closed the door of the carriage and knocked on the wall separating them from the driver. The vehicle started with a jerk, and he finally turned to look at Raena. "We had to shake off four people tonight. We can't go on like this for long, they will find a way to track us. I can't make us invisible."

"I know, I know!" Raena sighed, shrugging off her cloak and getting on with removing her makeup. "I have to be in the restaurant in the beginning, to keep an eye on things, but once the workers settle down into their roles, I'll go only occasionally. Please do your best to get us in and out unseen until then."

Zen sighed even louder, closing his eyes and rubbing his temples. Raena threw the cloth smeared with her makeup back into the bag, then reached behind her back and unfastened the ties of her dress.

"Keep your eyes closed," she said, sliding off the straps of her dress. A small smile appeared on his lips as he leaned his head back on the wall of the carriage, but he didn't disobey her. Raena wiggled out of the fabric, filling the carriage with the sounds of clothes rustling and her grunting while she was trying to keep her balance.

"You really must trust me a lot," Zen said as she was sliding on the other dress she had brought from home. It was a simple, yellow one – easy to put on with just a ribbon tightening it around her waist. There were no buttons or ties, which made it perfect for a quick wardrobe change.

"I already agreed to put my life in your hands, Zen," Raena said, glancing at him. She knew that's not what he meant, but she was too tired for flirting or empty banter. It had been such an exhausting day in the restaurant that even she was forced to help around. She had blisters on her feet and cuts on two of her fingers, which were now bandaged. If she closed her eyes, she could almost believe that she was back in the real world, finishing a double shift and leaving the restaurant in the early hours of the morning.

Raena dropped back in her seat and threw her cloak around her shoulders. Zen's eyes opened the moment she let out a relieved groan. She lifted one of her legs, sliding her shoe off and rubbing the base of her foot.

"You can't work yourself like that," Zen said with a frown, his eyes locked on her swollen ankles.

"You'll collapse. If you do it again, I will tell Kara."

"What kind of threat is that?" Raena laughed.

It's fine. It's nothing a little rest won't heal."

Three knocks came from the side of the driver, which meant they were close. When the carriage stopped, Zen pushed the door open and stepped outside, checking their surroundings. The driver barely waited for them to step away from the carriage before rushing the horses forward swish of his whip.

"We should hurry, it's not that late so there might be people around" Raena whispered. She couldn't see anyone nearby, but Zen seemed on edge and that was never good.

He turned, staring at her. Raena was just about to ask him what was wrong when he bent down and picked her up in his hands like he was carrying a baby. She muffled a panicked shout and glared at him when he started walking.

"Your feet are hurt and you said you're tired," he muttered. "It's a long walk to the North Palace, so we can't have them getting worse. Hold on to me and try not to move too much."

Raena sighed, wrapping her arms around his neck and letting her head rest on his shoulder. It wasn't the most comfortable position, but her feet weren't touching the ground and it required almost no effort on her side, so she had nothing to complain about. Zen walked quietly, his eyes darting everywhere, as if expecting an attack.

Despite the darkness, she recognized the place that veered away from the concubines' residences, past the training grounds and through the main garden. It was too late and too dark for training, so the most dangerous part was that they had to go very close to the Main Palace. Still, if Zen had picked the path crossing the small forest at the edge of the prince's residence, they would have extended their walk with at least ten more minutes. Zen was just making the final sharp turn that was going to take them to the training grounds when they almost ran into someone. Several someones.

They had been walking so quietly that up until they appeared, Raena hadn't heard a single step a word. Zen stepped back to avoid colliding with them, and she could feel his hands squeezing her tighter.

Raena turned to look at the people, hoping they weren't someone she knew. It wasn't like she couldn't go anywhere she wanted in the residence, but considering the hour and the company, they'd probably ask for an explanation. Or rat her out to the third prince.

Her heart dropped when her eyes landed on the dark-haired woman standing in front of the group, staring at them with a smile that sent shivers down Raena's spine. Lara's eyes moved to Zen, and she looked him over from head to toe before her attention switched back to Raena.

“My, my, what are you doing here at this time of night, Raena?” Lara asked. “Where are your escorts? Don’t tell me you’re here just with this man?”

Zen’s hands tightened even more and Raena realized how they must have looked in Lara’s eyes. Raena tapped Zen on the back so the other woman couldn’t see, and he gently lowered her to the ground, letting her stand by herself.

“Lara!” Raena exclaimed with a broad smile as she turned to face the woman. “I’m so glad to see you! We were just on a walk and I twisted my ankle, so Zen was carrying me home. Where are you going?”

“I’m going back to my place to prepare Highness’s visit,” Lara replied politely, but she could barely hide the smugness in her smile. Raena wasn’t sure if it was the darkness or her tiredness, but Lara didn’t look nearly as sweet and composed as before. She was downright gloating, as if something really good had happened. “But dear Raena, I am really concerned. It’s not appropriate for you to be alone like that with other men. I don’t think His Highness will like that.”

Raena bit back a curse. Why her, of all people?

Why did they have to meet her, tonight of all nights, when Raena could barely keep her eyes open?

There was no way the third prince would pass over something like that, especially coming from his favorite concubine.

“But Zen is my guard!” Raena protested, giving her best-confused expression. “Kara says he has to go with me so he can protect me from attackers.”

“still, at this time of night?” Lara asked, raising her eyebrows. “And with the rumors... You really don’t consider how those rumors can hurt His Highness, Raena.”

“What rumors?” Raena frowned.

Lara seemed to hesitate or rather, pretended to hesitate before answering. She looked back at her servants as if concerned they would hear her, but they spoke loud enough to make sure they did.

“People are saying that you and your guard are more than just master and servant, dear Raena,” Lara said in what could have passed for a concerned tone. The concubine’s eyes darted cautiously toward Zen. “That you two are... intimate.”

“Like, carrying me when I’m tired?” Raena asked, raising her eyebrows. Lara stared at her for a few seconds, then her smile widened.

“That and other things. Helping you undress your clothes. Staying in your room at night. Touching parts of you he shouldn’t be touching..” Lara shook her head as if mortified by her own words and Raena had to admit that the concubine really did have an expressive face. Raena could have taken a few lessons in acting from her if the circumstances were different. It felt like she was going to prove more troublesome than Sarea and the other concubines combined.

Still, Raena wasn’t going to lose this. Her shield was her obvious naivety, and so far it had worked like a charm. If she started explaining herself, it was over.

“Oh, really? What places?” she asked, making her eyes widen with curiosity. The two maids and the guards behind Lara exchanged glances, one of the girls muffling a laugh in her hand. “I don’t understand what you mean, Lara. Did I do something wrong?”

Lara’s face tensed, then relaxed as if she had realized she was fighting a losing battle.

“All I’m saying, dear Raena, is that I am concerned for you.” Lara let out a heavy sigh, rubbing her temple. “You should be more careful. You never know...”

“What is going on here?” Raena’s eyes snapped in the direction of the voice, her heart racing even faster as she watched Kaessian step into the light of the near oil lamp. The servants behind Lara bowed at once and Raena noticed that Zen did too. By the time Raena returned her attention to her husband, Lara was already curtsying. Raena followed her example in a hurry, but lost her balance and swayed to the side.

Zen’s hand caught her arm, and steadied her while his head remained bowed the entire time. Lara’s loud sigh filled the silence before she spoke.

“I was just expressing my concern about Her Highness wandering around in the dark in the company of a man that is neither family nor her husband. He was even carrying her in his arms,” Lara said in a hesitant tone, staring down at her feet. “I don’t believe the rumors are true, but I am concerned about both His Highness and Her Highness’s reputations.”

“What?” Kaessian frowned, eyes darting between Lara and Raena. “What rumors?” Lara didn’t reply, but shot Raena a glance that the third prince couldn’t have missed. Raena struggled to keep her face straight, staring back with the confidence of someone who had no idea what was going on.

“I asked a question,” Kaessian insisted, his tone harsher than before.

“There is a rumor that Her Highness and her guard are... lovers,” Lara said with a shaky voice.

Because they are constantly seen together and they seem very close and used to skinship. Seeing them like that in the middle of the forest, alone, I was afraid those rumors would only get worse. So I was giving her a word of advice.”

Ka.ssian’s head slowly turned toward Raena, and she shuddered at the look in his eyes. She had been right. He might not care for his wife all that much, but once his reputation was on the line, things were quite different.

“What does ‘lovers’ mean?” Raena asked, making her most innocent face as she looked between him and Lara. “Zen was just carrying me home because I was tired from playing and I hurt my ankle. I don’t see what is so bad about that.

Ka.ssian sighed, rubbing his temple.

“Starting tomorrow,” he said, letting his hand fall and turning to her with a cold look in his eyes, you’re not allowed to leave the North Palace for a month.”

“What?” Raena frowned. “Why? I didn’t do anything!”

“Don’t argue!” Ka.ssian snapped, and Raena quickly closed her mouth. Judging by the frustration written all over his face, it was probably best not to push her luck. “Go back home! Now!

Raena gritted her teeth in annoyance, biting off a retort. Staying cooped in that place for a month?

That would be problematic with the restaurant. Why didn’t her act work on him again, and why was he annoyed this time? Previously, he would try speak nicely to her, even if he was angry, or try to cheer her up, like on their ride back from the Imperial Palace. Was it because of that woman? Or maybe something else happened.

Either way, she had lost the battle tonight, so she better get out of there as quickly as possible and stay out of his sight until he got back to normal.

“Fine!” Raena snapped, turning toward Zen and raising her arms. He stared at her in surprise, glancing toward the third prince and Lara before picking her up again. He bowed his head as they passed by the group, while Raena tightened her grip around his neck, leaning her chin on his shoulder.

Ka.ssian continued to watch them with a dark expression, but she deliberately turned her head away, ignoring his glare.

She noticed Lara move toward Ka.ssian, whispering something to him and tugging on his arm until he finally followed her down the path. Raena let out an annoyed sigh, dropping her head to rest on Zen’s shoulder.

“Damn it!” she muttered to herself, closing her eyes. This would only make her sneaking out of there so much harder.

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Lara screamed into the pillow, her fingers digging into the sheets as Ka.ssian thrust even harder into her. Sweat was glistening over her back and he could feel her legs shaking from holding out for so long. Usually, he would have finished by now, but for some reason, every time he was close to getting his release, his brain would bring unwanted images of a certain blonde woman and her bodyguard, throwing his mind into disarray.

Ka.ssian pulled back, turning Lara on her back and thrusting into her again. She gasped, arching her body, her hand sliding behind his neck and pulling him down for a k!ss. She tasted of bitter tea and lemon, her tongue trying to wrestle with his, but quickly surrendering to his rhythm. She moved exactly the way he wanted; her hands touched everywhere he liked. She knew exactly how to k!ss, how to touch, how to react to him. After all that time together, they probably knew each other's bodies better than their own. Then why couldn't he get into it? He even considered stopping a few times.

Ka.ssian broke the k!ss, leaning his forehead on her shoulder and focusing on the movements of his h!ps instead. Closing his eyes, he felt her fingernails dig into his back, heard her soft m0ans tickle his ear. The tension in his body rose even higher, and he felt his skin bristle, despite the fire burning inside of him. And then the image of her appeared in front of his eyes, her blue eyes glaring at him as she tightened her delicate arms around another man, who took her further and further away.

Ka.ssian pulled out abruptly, finishing with a grunt. He propped his hands on the bed, giving his body time to catch up as he panted heavily. When his strength returned, he rolled over onto his back and covered his face with his hand. He sensed Lara move next to him, but she didn't say anything or touched him – she knew he didn't like to be touched right after se.x.

A couple of minutes passed in complete silence until finally, Ka.ssian's heartbeat calmed down. He let his hand fall by his side, staring at the ceiling angrily.

He didn't feel relaxed or relieved at all. If anything, he felt even more strung up.

“Is something bothering you?” Lara asked, her voice slightly hoarse and much quieter than usual. “Today was.. different.”

He was glad she phrased it that way since he felt like he might pour his anger on her if she had just told him directly he did a poor job. He was already feeling pathetic about not being able to get that silly girl out of his head. What was he, some kind of l.ust-

driven knucklehead who had nothing else to do with his time? Lara was lying right next to him – beautiful, intelligent, eager. Raena couldn't hold a candle to her.

"Is it that you were thinking about another woman, my love? Your eyes were closed the entire time," Lara asked and Ka.ssian tensed. "You visited Lady Vega a few times in the past weeks. Maybe you're not satisfied with me anymore?" Ka.ssian turned to look at her, only to find her examining her own n.aked body. "Have I gained weight?" she murmured, running a hand over her flat stomach and lean legs. "Or maybe you don't like how I leave my hair down lately?"

"There's nothing wrong with you," Ka.ssian sighed, sitting up. He felt her move, her warm body pressing against his back.

"Then why do you not visit me, my love? I am lonely without you!" she whispered, gliding her arms over his shoulders.

"I have something to do," Ka.ssian said, catching her wrists and gently breaking her hold.

He got to his feet, striding to where he dropped his pants and quickly put them on. He gathered the rest of his clothes while she watched him from the bed.

"What?" he sighed at the end, finally looking at her.

She gave him a sad smile, pulling the sheet to cover her body.

"Nothing," she said, " love you, Your Highness. Please rest well."

Ka.ssian threw her another glance, then left her bedroom without another word. The maids standing outside looked startled as he passed by them, then they hurried to their mistress' room.

Ka.ssian stepped into the clear night, taking a big gulp of fresh air. He made his way back to his mansion, trying to keep his mind empty and his ears open. Apart from the occasional cry of a bird and creaking of b.ranches, the night was completely silent.

He wasn't sure he could fall asleep any time soon, so he decided to go to the office and do some of the work Blaine had been piling up for him. Even going through boring papers sounded like an excellent distraction.

When he stepped into the office, he stopped, surprised to see a second desk standing next to his. Blaine sat hunched back behind it, half-hidden by two neat piles of scrolls. When his aide didn't notice his arrival, Ka.ssian cleared his throat. Blaine lifted his head, blinking in confusion before slowly getting up.

“Your Highness? I didn’t expect you to be back until much later!” he said, frowning. “Is everything alright?”

“Everything is fine,” Ka.ssian sighed, making his way to his own desk. “What is all that?” He nodded oward the papers.

“Well, those needed immediate attention. Since you were really busy, I tried to handle the ones which are nonessential, but I’ve barely started. As I said, I didn’t expect...

“I’ll take over from here,” Ka.ssian said, taking a seat in his chair. “Did you find anything else about that restaurant or that woman?”

“I’m afraid not.” Blaine shook his head, moving one of the piles from his desk to Ka.ssian’s. “I suspect that somebody at the bureau has been bribed to misplace the documents in the main office. They said they will search in the archives for them, but it may take a week or two.”

“The more we dig, the more suspicious it looks,” Ka.ssian murmured, watching as his aide moved the second pile in front of him. He could barely see the door over them and his determination to busy his mind with work abruptly decreased. He was just reaching for one of the papers on the top when his picked up a low whistling sound. It repeated three times, then it disappeared.

He shot Blaine a glance and his aide nodded that he had heard it as well.

“Follow me,” Ka.ssian whispered, hurrying through the door that connected his office to the rest of his living quarters. Their steps were the only sound in the quiet corridor until they reached the bedroom. Ka.ssian picked up one of the lit candelab.ras and headed toward the back room, raising the light higher. A figure shifted in the other corner, stepping forward.

Ka.ssian handed Blaine the candelab.ra and he set it up on the small table in the center so its light spread almost to every corner of the room. The shadow didn’t move until Ka.ssian closed the door and joined them by the table.

“Speak,” Ka.ssian commanded, crossing his arms. He had already received a report last night, which meant that another wasn’t due for two more days. Having a Shadow appear out of the arranged time could mean only one thing.

“There has been another uprising in Craidal,” the man in black said in a hoarse, almost hissing tone. “It started seven days ago, so I traveled as fast as I could to bring you the news.” Ka.ssian felt his anger return. Another one? This was the fourth this year and every time they got squashed without mercy. Why were they stubborn?

“What’s the latest status?” he asked.



“There had been a few skirmishes with the forces staged there and a lot of casualties on the Resistance’s side. It looks like our troops might be able to put it down without the need for reinforcements,” the Shadow continued his report. Ka.ssian frowned, wondering why if everything going their way, his spy was so eager to get to him quickly to report. “Our soldiers captured two of the insurgents alive and they are keeping watch on them around the clock to prevent suicide and assassination attempts.”

“Good. Did they interrogate them?” Ka.ssian asked impatiently, running his hand over his chin. It had been a long while since they had caught one of them alive – all rebels, especially the ones from Craidal, were thoroughly devoted and often ended their own lives before they could be made to speak.

Those who faltered at death’s door always ended up dead at the hands of their comrades or a bribed soldier.

“Yes.” The Shadow nodded impassively, his dark eyes meeting Ka.ssian’s for a moment before he looked away. “One of them isn’t talking while the other one boasted about how they have already infiltrated the Empire deeper than we think, and the day when they will destroy the Imperial family is near. After that, he refused to talk, no matter what kind of torture they put him through.”

“Infiltrated the Empire?” Blaine frowned. “Why would he reveal that if they really do plan to do something? Are they that confident they would succeed?”

“If his words are to be believed, their goal is no longer to secure Craidal’s separation from the Empire, but to take down the Imperial family.” Ka.ssian said thoughtfully. “This changes things.

We’re not talking about troublesome rebels on the outskirts of the Empire. We are talking about an enemy in our own house.” He looked back up at Shadow, who stood perfectly still on his spot. Anything else?”

“This is all the information I had gathered before I left” he replied.

“You can go back.” Ka.ssian nodded and the Shadow moved past them without delay, disappearing through the door. Ka.ssian turned to Blaine, who was staring after the spy with a thoughtful expression. “I’m leaving for Craidal. I need to interrogate those two if they are still alive.”

“But Your Highness’s, your birthday celebration...” Blaine argued, following him as Ka.ssian strode into his bedroom, pulling his shirt off to change.

“I’ll be back before it.”

“When would you like to leave?”

"I'm leaving after I dress. Have someone prepare provisions for the journey." Ka.ssiian strode to one of his wardrobes, staring at the clothes inside before grabbing one of the shirts and slipping it on. "I'll be traveling by horse, so tell Gerrin to get ready to leave in half an hour with his squad."

"Yes, Your Highness!" Blaine replied from the door. "Shall I tell lady Lara to prepare to leave as well?" Ka.ssiian paused, staring inside the wardrobe for a moment before closing it.

"No, I'm leaving alone," he replied, turning to look at his aide. "Craidal is no place for a woman, she'll only be a hindrance."

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"Tell me this is the last one!" Raena groaned as Kara piled up the papers she had been signing for the past hour and a half. She had ink stains all over her hands and her eyes were tearing from staring at the small letters without a break. Her maid had used her 'grounding' as an excuse to make her catch up on all the paperwork for the North Palace, and now that Raena looked at her, she seemed quite pleased with herself.

"This is the last one." Kara nodded, setting the neat pile back on the desk.

"Can I go now?" Raena sighed, straightening up in the chair.

"Go where?" Kara asked, crossing her arms. You can't leave the North Palace, remember? Just so you know, I didn't want to interrupt your work earlier, but I got the news that the third prince left for Craidal last night, but he will probably be back for his birthday celebration in nine days." Raena's face brightened, but when she saw Kara's expression, she sank back in her chair. "There are guards outside the mansion's door. You're not going anywhere soon. If you need to send a message to the restaurant, I can arrange as much"

"Where is Zen, by the way? I haven't seen him around," Raena asked. She had thought it weird earlier when he didn't wait in front of her room in the morning, but decided that since she wasn't leaving the North Palace anyway, he probably decided to catch up on his sleep. Still, it was now past noon and he still hadn't appeared.

"I sent him on errands outside the North Palace," Kara replied, raising an eyebrow and plastering an annoyed smile on her face. "His Highness sent his Head Maid to educate me on how to make sure I protect you from any ill rumors and inappropriate behavior. Her lecture lasted an hour. Her first advice – removing his constant presence from your side." Kara sighed. "It doesn't matter if the rumors are true or not. I already told you about them. Or at least I tried to."

"When?" Raena grimaced.

“Before leaving for the Imperial Palace. I was trying to tell you, but you kept getting distracted, and then so much happened. I thought you knew, considering how calm you were.” Kara ranted as she gathered the papers from the desk and hugged them.

“Anyway, stay home and make sure to play your role if you run into any maids.”

“Hey, I’m your boss. Stop micromanaging me!” Raena murmured, getting to her feet.

“Micro-what?” Kara grimaced. “Oh, nevermind.”

“I’ll go carry those to the Grand Chamberlain and be back. Don’t..” she hesitated as to what she planned to say, then her expression changed and so did her train of thought.

“Take this time to rest properly” Raena scoffed as Kara left the room, looking around her office.

Everything was so neat and clean and now that her work was done, she really didn’t know what to do. There were too many people to go into the kitchen and cook something delicious and with Zen and Kara out of the picture, she had no one to talk to. All that remained was... to rest, really.

“Rest it is,” she sighed, heading toward the door. The corridor was quiet as usual, with occasional laughter or cries coming from downstairs. With the new maids, workers and guards, the quiet North Palace had become a lively place. Even though everyone walked on eggshells around her for some reason – maybe Kara gave them the same threat about the fertilizer – it was somehow nice to not live alone in this abandoned Corner.

She was on her way to her bedroom when a low hum coming from one of the empty rooms caught her attention. She stopped, listening in until she heard it again – a soft, mournful melody sung by someone distracted by their own thoughts. It had no words, and the notes didn’t really repeat like the singer was making it on the go.

Raena stepped closer to the door, peeking inside. The room was mostly empty, with just a few pieces of furniture covered with a white cloth lying around. The smell of paint was really strong and after a look around, Raena realized that half of the walls were already decorated while the other half stood bare.

At first, she couldn’t figure out where the sound was coming from, since it didn’t seem like there was anyone inside. Then a figure rose from behind one of the couches, brush in hand. Her blonde hair was pulled into a bun on the back of her head and she was wearing a maid’s uniform with her sleeves rolled to her elbows.

Raena hesitated – Elene hadn’t noticed her yet – but then she stepped inside, looking at the walls.

This room had to be a bedroom, judging by the size and the placement of the windows. The base color was dark blue for the lower part of the walls and sky blue for the top section. Soft, pale clouds and colorful birds dotted the painted sky, spread around as if in joyful chase of one another. The detail on their plumage was so striking, Raena instinctively reached out to touch one of them, to make sure it wasn't real.

"Don't touch!" Elene's startled voice echoed through the room. Raena's fingers froze just an inch away, and she quickly let her hand drop. Elene's face relaxed. "The paint is wet, you'll smear it."

"Sorry" Raena mumbled, taking a step away from the wall and looking around again. "This is amazing! Great job!"

"Thank you," Elene muttered and for a second, Raena thought she saw her blushing. Then the girl returned to painting the body of a bird with bright red, orange and yellow colors, her attention completely taken by the task.

Raena studied her work for a while and soon she got a better sense of her style of drawing and the way she liked to mix her colors. It had been so long since she had watched other people paint – or did it herself – that she felt the sudden urge to join. She glanced toward the brushes lying in a jar by Elene's feet and hesitated.

"Do you mind if I paint one as well?" she asked "Why are you asking me? It's your house." and Elene froze with her thin brush still touching the wall. She slowly turned to look at Raena and her expression clearly said she definitely minded, but in the end, she lowered her head and returned to her work.

Raena stepped next to the brushes and picked the one she liked, then she went over to the paints.

She could feel Elene's eyes watching her, but she pretended not to notice until she gathered what she needed and moved on to the next wall, where she assumed the bed would be put on later. This way, if she messed up, it would be easy to hide.

She raised the brush, moving it toward the wall, but hesitated just before the tip touched the smooth blue surface. Taking a deep breath, she pressed down. Her hand continued to move on its own and she focused on her colors as she carefully blended them together.

"I didn't know you could paint." Elene's voice took her out of her stupor and she pulled her hand back, only to notice she was finished. "What kind of bird is that?"

"It's called a hummingbird," Raena replied, glancing at the other woman who had moved next to her and was observing her creation. "It's a very small bird, smaller than what I have drawn."

"It's pretty." Elene said thoughtfully, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. "Where is it from?"

"Erm, I don't know," Raena replied quickly. had no idea if there were hummingbirds in this world, let alone where they might live. She went with the safest explanation. "I just saw it in a book."

Elene seemed to accept the answer, because she nodded and headed back to her space, preparing to return to her drawing. Raena turned around and put the paints and the brush down – she wanted to draw some more, but her hands were trembling from holding them up for so long. She still had muscle strain from working at the restaurant, so this was only adding to the pain.

"Say, Elene, can I ask you a question?" she said instead, rubbing her fingers on the cloth covering the furniture in order to wipe away the smudges of paint that had gotten on them.

"Sure."

"What do you think of the third prince?" Elene's hand froze for a second and a bit of paint dripped on the wall under her bird. She cursed, raising a piece of cloth hanging from her belt and gently wiping it away. When she was done and she returned to her drawing, her voice was as disinterested as usual.

"I don't think anything. Why?"

"No reason." Raena shrugged, even though the other woman couldn't see her. "Don't you think he is good-looking?"

Elene stopped again, turning to look at her with a confused expression.

"Well, he is not bad looking," she said as if picking her words with effort. "He is tall and well-built and his face is alright. Is that a sufficient answer?"

"What about his character? Do you think he is a strong, assertive man with integrity and charm? Or you're more into different kinds of men?" Raena asked again, leaning on the doorframe. Elene completely gave up on her drawing, turning to face her instead.

"I am really confused" she said, frowning. "Are you trying to advertise your husband to me for some strange reason, or are you looking for confirmation that he is good enough for your feelings?"

"I don't have any feelings for him." Raena laughed. Elene snorted, turning her back to Raena and locking her eyes on her fat, green bird that was still missing its head.

"What's with that reaction?"

"I don't want to meddle in other people's business, Mistress," Elene said pointedly.

“Answer!” Raena insisted, her voice sounding harsher than she intended. Elene sighed, then returned to her drawing.

“I don’t know why you’re doing all this pretending and games, but from where I stand, the way you act may be perceived as childish... but also as seducing. If a person hasn’t heard about your condition’, then they’ll think you’re trying to make your husband fall in love with you. Or at least want you in his bed. All the smiles, the affectionate words, and you calling him boldly ‘husband’ instead of using his title. Even innocent acts like touching his hand or laughing at his jokes or even raising your skirts without second thoughts – some men are into that. And you actually look like you’re enjoying yourself while you do that, which makes me think you enjoy playing with him. If you didn’t like him, you couldn’t have acted so well.

Raena stared at Elene as she continued to draw with a steady, confident hand. She opened her mouth to reply, when the other woman spoke again.

“I have no interest in your husband. And even if I did, I am a servant and a former slave. This kind of status difference can only be overcome in romance books ladies like you like to read” Raena barely held back her scoff. Elene paused for a second, as if wondering if she should say something more, then sighed. “Instead of asking other women for their opinion, why not get the answer to that question for yourself? He is a good-looking, strong, assertive man with integrity and charm. Even more, you’re already married to him. Why are you trying so hard to keep him away?”

“For you, dumbass,” Raena wanted to say, staring at the back of Elene’s head. She couldn’t understand why the main character was more cold and aloof now than she was in the book. In the original storyline she smiled, she laughed, she talked a lot and liked to spend time with Kassian – and later with his brothers. Yet, here she was, content to stay in the mansion all day and paint.

Was it because she was not abused as a slave? Because she didn’t meet Kassian and he didn’t save her from slavery?

Raena had thought that those minor changes she had made to the plot wouldn’t affect the storyline that much, but just like ripples in the water, she could feel their waves getting bigger and bigger. If this continued, her knowledge of the future was going to be useless, and her safety would be in jeopardy. Even if she decided to come clean about the lies now, there was a big chance this wouldn’t end well. And what was worse, Kara would be dragged into it as an accomplice.

No. Coming clean now wasn’t an option. She wasn’t powerful enough to protect herself and those she cared about. There was only one option remaining.

She had to get the original storyline back on track.

## **His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 39 - Tips**

0 10 minutes read

“Kara, I think I have a slight problem.” Raena sighed from her seat behind her desk, pushing away a strand of hair that had fallen in front of her face. They had quickly finished with work for the day -there hadn’t been that much to sign or go over since she had been diligently forced to do it every single day for the last week – and now Kara was preparing tea for them to enjoy before she had to go back to her maid duties.

“Oh, really? What is it now?” Kara asked as she took a seat on one of the couches by the table, pouring tea into two of the cups and then picking up one of them. Raena pushed herself up and strode to the couch opposite of her, sliding down until she was half-lying, half-sitting in her seat.

Kara lifted an eyebrow, taking a sip out of her tea.

“I think I like my husband,” Raena murmured, staring at the ceiling. Elene’s words wouldn’t leave her alone and with nothing else to do all day, she had been going over their conversation over and over again.

A choked sound came from where Kara sat, and Raena focused her gaze on the maid just in time to see her spitting her tea and coughing. Kara put down the cup, taking one of the napkins to dry her face and her dress while her teary eyes turned to Raena. Kara opened her mouth to say something, out started coughing again, hitting her chest.

“Come on, it’s not like I said I’m going to have his babies,” Raena laughed, picking up her own cup while waiting for the other woman to get a hold of herself. “It just occurred to me – well, not exactly, but anyway. I’ve been acting a bit too cute these past weeks. It’s one thing to act like a child, but some people are into young, innocent faces. I don’t think Kassian is one of those, but you never know. I feel like he was definitely checking me out a few times. And I don’t need that kind of attention from him.”

“Wait, wait, stop!” Kara said when she finally got back to breathing. “You can’t just skip over something like that! What do you mean, you like him? Isn’t your entire plan relying on the idea that you’d be divorcing him? If you like him, you have to tell him the truth and if you do that you. no, we will be in a lot of trouble! Lying and deceiving a member of the Imperial family is no small transgression! They might even.”

“Calm down, the plan remains the same,” Raena said with a sigh, putting her tea down. “The fact that I realized I liked him doesn’t mean I will stay married to him. It just means that now I can watch myself better and not say or do something stupid. Besides, it’s kinda hard not to like him, isn’t it? He is strong, tall, handsome, and he is really bad at scheming. I hate scheming people and ones that only look out for themselves. I think that’s why I started liking him..”

“That’s funny, considering you’re such a schemer,” Kara murmured.

“Hey! None of my plans are hurting anybody, alright?” Raena frowned, pointing a finger at her. “We are just trying to make a living here! Nobody is going to get hurt from me running a restaurant!”

“So.. what are you saying, then?” Kara frowned, confusion taking over her face.

“I’m saying that I’ll have to speed up the timeline. I can’t wait for half a year for them to fall in love. I’ve already meddled enough, I should fix what I broke! If it’s possible at all. If not, well, I’ll think of something else,” Raena replied, meeting Kara’s eyes which were overflowing with confusion.

“Basically, I’ll make him divorce me faster before either of us catches some troublesome feelings. I have to distance myself from all those troublesome characters before we get hurt.”

“I swear, sometimes it feels like you’re speaking a different language.” Kara shook her head.

“Never mind that, you already have a lot on your plate!” Raena smiled, straightening in her seat. “I’ll take care of it. I need you to do something for me. Actually, two things.” Kara sighed heavily, her eyelids fluttering as if she was trying not to roll her eyes. “First, find a girl about my size and with blonde hair and have her stay in my room when I’m not here. Pay her well to keep her mouth shut.” Kara frowned, but nodded. “Second, add a new name to the servant’s registry for a girl my size, black hair, no relatives. You can figure out her background.”

“How many more identities do you need?” Kara asked, eyes widening. “And why do you need this? Just sneak out like the last time! Or even better – don’t sneak out! We have a lot of eyes on us.”

“Exactly!” Raena nodded. “Last time I was out, before we ran into Lara and Ka.ssian, Zen said we were followed by four people. Even if Ka.ss... What? What’s with that weird look?”

“It’s nothing.” Kara shook her head. “It’s just strange how you’re using the prince’s name so casually, as if you’ve been close for years.”

“It’s just a name, go with it.” Raena sighed. “So even if Ka.ssian is thorough, he wouldn’t assign four different people to tail me. This means more than one person is watching me. The Empress is definitely watching me. Maybe someone who wants to know Madam Lydia’s identity or how the restaurant is doing so well. Until I am sure, I have to be extra careful. Going out as Raena and changing along the way is too risky already. So Raena must stay home like a good girl while a servant” she paused, pointing at herself, “can go basically unnoticed wherever her mistress sends her. So as long as I



have a solid backstory to rely on, they can't make the connection. Unless, you know, I take off my wig."

"How do you even come up with these plans of yours?" Kara sighed, shaking her head. "Well, if that's what you want. It's a good plan. But are you going to go out alone? Princess or a maid, a lone woman is... especially at night. Zen isn't.."

"I'm not taking him," Raena said quickly. "Currently, he is a liability. Everyone in the third prince's palace knows him or of him and if he goes out with me, even if I am in a servant's uniform, will raise unnecessary questions. So far he has been glued to Raena, so to have him suddenly escort someone else... it will blow my cover. Also, he is well known around the restaurant as Madam Lydia's bodyguard, so that's no good either."

Raena bit her lip, tapping with her finger on the armrest of the sofa. "I'll take Davin. He hasn't been to the restaurant and we have previously sent him out on errands for the North Palace, so it wouldn't raise suspicion. I can have him help me with the ledgers at the restaurant. Who knew running a business requires so much math?" Raena shook herself out of her distraction, looking back at Kara. "How fast can you do it?"

"I'll need at least a day or two to submit the documents for two new employees and find a girl," Kara said, rising to her feet. "Stay put until then. Be the good girl everyone expects you to be for at least a few days. Can you do that?"

"Of course I can. I have an intervention to plot." Raena grinned.

"I have no idea what that means, but as long as it makes you happy and it doesn't get me killed, do what you want." Kara sighed, heading to the door.

She stopped at the threshold, looking at Raena over her shoulder. "Oh, by the way. The first wife sent a gown for you to wear to the banquet. Your presence is mandatory."

"Gotcha." Raena smiled, saluting her in a mocking gesture. Kara narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to speak, but then just shook her head and walked out.

"You can go," the guard said after inspecting them from head to toe. Davin gave him a slight bow, turning around and joining Raena, who stood a few steps away while waiting. The two guards at the gate gave her a long look, but neither of them said anything or asked her questions. She turned her back on them, following Davin down the path that led away from the third prince's manor.

"I'm sorry we had to walk, Mistress, but there was no way two servants could ride in a carriage," Davin said quietly, adjusting the bag on his shoulder. Their cover was that they were sent to buy some specific products the second wife wanted, and it worked like a charm since she made Kara often send servants out for that when Raena was trying to cook a new dish.

"It's fine" Raena smiled. "And don't call me Mistress. Right now, I am also a servant. Call me... what's my name again?"

"Roza," he said with an amused expression. "Don't you have too many names already, Mis.. Roza? The more you add, the heavier the load gets. Eventually, you'll get tired and you might put on the Wrong one." Raena stared at him with surprise before forcing a laugh.

"I'll keep that in mind, thank you," she said, turning forward instead. "Let's hurry up. The city was as lively as always, with people crowding the streets and advertising their things by yelling out at the top of their voices. Carriages forced their way through the sea of bodies, with their drivers shouting angrily and even using their whips when somebody wouldn't move fast enough.

When the two of them finally reached Ruby. Street, Raena's feet were pulsating. They were just a few feet away from the restaurant when her eyes stopped on the brothel's front door. Marden was standing at the entrance with his back to the street, talking to somebody inside.

"Hurry up, hurry up!" Raena whispered just loud enough for Davin to hear, and the two of them started walking faster. Raena lowered her head, turning slightly to the side as she noticed Marden finally walking down the stairs with a mild frown on his face. He passed right by her, but fortunately, he didn't even glance at her. He continued with a heavy step down the street, disappearing around the Corner.

Raena let out a sigh of relief, then puled Davin toward the alley between the restaurant and the brothel. The place was empty and quiet, the lamps stood cold and dark in their b.rackets.

"Go inside and call the manager. Tell him The hen is in the coop" she told Davin, pushing him gently toward the door. "Hurry!"

Davin gave her a strange look, but did as he was told, disappearing through the door. Soon after, the door opened again and Jaehe, the man she hired as a manager and one of the two people who knew her face, stuck his head outside. When he noticed her, his eyes widened, and he opened the door, making her a sign to go in. He glanced over his shoulder for a second, raising his hand to stop her from proceeding, and waited. A few seconds later, he caught her shoulder and guided her through the back of the kitchen and into the corridor leading to her office. Davin was already waiting there, looking around awkwardly. The manager glanced at her hair, then his eyes returned to hers.

"Is everything alright?"

"All good," she nodded. "I'm going to change, and then you can brief me."

“Do it quickly.” Jaehe said, licking his lips nervously. “There is someone from the Imperial Palace here to see Madam Lydia. They have been waiting for a while. I tried sending you a message through that bird earlier when they arrived, but no answer came. Thank god you are here now or I had to tell an Imperial messenger to come back another time “

“Alright, I’ll be right out!” Raena nodded. “I’ll receive them in the main hall. I want everyone to hear.”

Jaehe grimaced, his nervousness turning to suspicion.

“Did you expect him to come?” Raena just gave him a smile, then hurried to her office, undressing even before she closed the door.

She grabbed the dress easiest to put on by herself and changed into it, taking her time to put her veil on properly since that was her most important accessory. When she stepped out of the office, the manager looked even more impatient. He turned around and walked toward the kitchen without a word and she followed, giving a sign to Davin to stay there. As she stepped into the kitchen, a few heads turned to look at her in surprise, and most of them greeted her happily before returning to their work.

The hall on the first floor was almost full of both commoners and nobles, who threw them curious glances as she and Jaehe passed by them. Raena spotted the messenger almost immediately – he was sitting alone at one of the tables, nursing a glass of coffee with an empty place in front of him. He looked mildly bored, but not unhappy. He continued to look around until he spotted her, and then he jumped to his feet.

“I apologize for making you wait, sir!” she said as she stopped in front of him. “I heard you have a message for me?” She added, a bit louder than before.

“Uh, yes,” he said, clearing his throat. He searched his jacket gingerly before taking out a small scroll with the Empire’s seal on top of it. “I am carrying a decree from Her Majesty, the Empress,” the messenger said, raising the scroll for Raena to take. “Her Majesty bestows you and your establishment the great honor of preparing the dinner for her birthday banquet.”

A few gasps escaped from the people sitting closest to them and in just a few seconds, the hall was buzzing with whispers. Raena tried to keep her smile contained as she took the scroll.

“Her Majesty honors us,” she said, her heart beating so fast, her head spun. “We humbly accept.”

## **His Highness’s Second Wife Chapter 40 - Tips**

0 10 minutes read

Raena reached for her coffee cup, raising it to her lips only to realize there was nothing inside. She stared at the empty bottom with betrayal before setting it down and glancing back at the mountain of papers on her desk. If she hadn't been convinced about the realness of this world, she was now. There was no way a fictional world existed where someone had to do so much paperwork.

She got up and stretched her arms, glancing toward Davin, who was sitting in Zen's usual place, frowning at a piece of paper he was reading.

"So what's the verdict? How bad am I at math?" She smiled, stepping toward him. She had been hesitant at first, giving Davin access to both the North Palace and restaurant's finances, but she needed the help and she'd rather receive it from someone that already knew her secret than a total stranger. Besides, Davin was tight-lipped and very good with numbers, so she wasn't worried he'd make a mistake. What worried her was herself – she had become too reliant on other people. First Kara, then Zen, Marden and even the Empress. Now Davin. If one of them made a mistake or did something they shouldn't do, they'd be dragging her right down with them.

Still, the same thing would happen if she messed up. So messing up was not an option.

"Your math is mostly fine," he finally spoke when she thought he wouldn't. "But the numbers don't add up. I think I saw a few purchase slips that weren't put in the ledger, which may explain why your expenses don't match the amount paid for products and services." Raena stared at his face as he spoke, and when he realized that, he shifted uncomfortably. "Mistress, is something wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm concerned and impressed." Raena said. "How does a village boy know so much about accounting? Didn't you live in a village high in the mountains? Why would you need to know all of that there?"

"Ah, well" Davin chuckled, putting the paper down on his lap. He didn't reply right away, staring at his fingers that played with the edge of the paper.

"Our father was a merchant and he taught me all those things. He realized that Zender doesn't have the mind for these things, so he wanted me to learn and take over when he grows old and was unable to go up and down the mountain again. And I was always good with numbers, so I picked things quickly."

"I see." Raena nodded, stepping toward her desk and picking up her veil. "Well then, that's good for me. Let's look into those discrepancies once I am back." She added, putting the veil on and carefully adjusting it to cover her face well. "I need to go and meet with my business partner, so I will be upstairs for a while."

"Yes, Mistress." Davin nodded, adjusting himself on the couch. "What do you want me to do with these documents?"

“Gather them and put them on my desk. I’ll lock them up once I’m back,” Raena said on her way to the door. She stepped outside in the quiet corridor, heading for the back door. She made her way to the brothel’s back entrance. Only two of the lamps were lit, giving the small space an eerie look.

Despite being an early afternoon, the reception room was half full of men nursing a drink or talking to the girls that were moving from table to table, laughing and conversing while sitting on their laps or having their hair played with.

Raena frowned, looking around until her eyes stopped on Arissa, who was sitting with a half empty glass in front of her. Raena headed toward her.

“Where is everyone? Why are there only two girls here?” she asked, and Arissa finally looked up.

“Well, they are all working, obviously,” the older woman replied with a smirk. “Some have even been putting in overtime. Thanks to your tricks, we have all been as busy as bees. Even I had to give a few sessions since the customers were getting impatient.”

“Marden will have to get more people,” Raena mumbled, glancing over her shoulder as the men on one of the tables erupted in laughter. “Where is he, by the way?”

“His office,” Arissa said with a sigh, raising the cup to her lips and taking a big gulp.

“Hey, don’t drink so much. Somebody needs to keep an eye on this place.” Raena frowned as she prepared to leave. Arissa gave her a salute without even looking at her, putting down her empty glass and turning in her seat. Raena sighed as she made her way to Marden’s office – he had moved it to a smaller room on the first floor so his room could be given to one of the workers. She hesitated at the door, then knocked.

His voice prompted her to enter, and as she did, she allowed herself a quick look around. The place was even smaller, with a compact desk by the only window and two lamps on the walls – one by the door and one on the opposite side above the small one-person bed. Marden was sitting behind his desk with his eyes closed. A mess of ink bottles, crumpled papers and two empty plates covered every inch of the surface in front of him.

“Would you look at that?” Raena smiled, closing the door. “He is working! And here I thought you’d be banging one of the girls over your desk.”

“I am offended!” he said, opening his eyes and smirking. “I love money almost as much as I love se\*x. Of course, I’m taking this opportunity seriously.

“Well, if you’re finished, how about having lunch with me? I have something to talk to you about.” Raena offered, putting her hand back on the handle.

He didn’t move, so she raised an eyebrow. “Give me just a minute,” he said then, looking down. “Hurry up, will you?” Raena frowned in confusion and just as the realization hit her, Marden grunted, closing his eyes and letting out a long breath. A few seconds later, a tiny blonde girl with her hair pulled into two braids rose from between his legs, wiping her mouth and heading for the door. Her eyes stopped on Raena for a second and she blinked awkwardly, as if wondering if she should greet her.

Raena stepped back, opening the door for the girl. She received a grateful nod in return, and after a few seconds, the girl disappeared into the corridor. Raena turned back toward Marden, who was already on his feet and buckling his belt.

“Really?” she scoffed, raising her eyebrows as he glanced at her.

“What? Are you jealous? Wanna take her place next time?” he smirked, fixing the collar of his red shirt and unfolding his sleeves.

“No, thank you.” Raena smiled, shaking her head. “Finished now?”

“Finished!” He grinned, joining her by the door and waiting for her to go first. “Let’s go eat.” Raena scoffed again, leading him back the way she had come from. Arissa was no longer at the bar when they passed through the reception room, but instead, she had joined one of the remaining tables with men and was laughing at their jokes, stroking the shoulder of one of them.

“Arissa said you don’t have enough people,” Raena mentioned as they stepped into the back alley.

“Already ahead of you,” Marden said as he opened the door of the restaurant for her. “It has been like this for the last week, so I went ahead and found more yesterday. They’ll be starting tomorrow.” The two of them swiftly stepped inside when one of the waitresses almost ran into them while carrying a tray full of empty plates.

“Easy there!” Raena said with her hands raised in case any of the dishes moved to fall. “Watch where you are going or we might have an accident. And when you have a minute, bring us something to eat on the third floor.”

The girl’s eyes lingered on Marden before she nodded, hurrying toward the kitchen.

“And something strong to drink!” Marden shouted after her.

As they settled on one of the empty tables on the last floor, Raena made a sign for the guard standing there to leave. They made some small talk while waiting for their food,

and as the waitress left, Raena gave Marden an impatient look. He pretended not to notice, digging into his food like a starving wolf.

“So” she said when his plate was licked clean.

“What do you have for me?”

He took his time to wipe his mouth and sip from his wine, then pushed his plate away and crossed his hands on the table.

“They are still new at this, but a couple of them found something interesting. Apparently, thanks to the troubles in Caen, the Gossa region is pushing to take over yet another trade route and strengthen its position as a supplier. They are planning on raising the prices of a few of their export products so that could get a lot of businesses out of the game,” he said with a serious expression, studying her face.

Raena nodded for him to continue. “One of the girls was taking care of a guy in the third prince’s employ and it seems that our youngest prince is back out there fighting.”

Raena raised an eyebrow, and he smirked.

“There is another uprising in that damn Craidal. We won with very few casualties, but something must have happened for the third prince to leave for Craidal in the middle of the night.” He reached out and rubbed his chin where a few days’ old stubble was already forming. “I wonder if they caught somebody. Or maybe somebody important died. This uprising makes no sense. They were outnumbered and out geared. It’s like they were begging to die or something.”

“So the girl couldn’t find the reason?” Raena asked, picking up her cup of water.

“Hey, their job is to listen and remember. Asking too many questions will get them in trouble,” Marden said with a frown. “Still, you were right.”

People are more talkative when they are high on pleasure. It was a good idea to make them gather information while doing their jobs. This will be useful. Imagine how much secrets like these cost”

“For now, just record it and keep it safe.” Raena nodded. “And you’re sure they will keep quiet?”

“Well, it’s in their best interest. The better information they bring me, the better bonuses they get. Not to mention they know that if they open their mouths and say something they shouldn’t, they are out. They are not stupid, they can see where the winds are blowing. They can’t find another brothel that has this much work and pays this well. At least, not right now. Not to mention, the ones that they got this information from might go after them and without my protection..”

Raena nodded again, her mind going back to what he had told her. It wasn't much for starters, but it was helpful. So that's how some of those businesses were going to go bankrupt – and the ones that rose up were the ones somehow unaffected by the price change. She had to act faster and invest now, before they learned of this.

“You said you have something to talk to me about?” Marden's voice pulled her back to the present. “What is it? You changed your mind and want me to take you as my lover?”

“I think you have your hands full already.” Raena pointed out. “I want to ask first, though. You're a noble, right?” sighed.

Marden tensed in his seat, his smile faltering. He narrowed his eyes at her for a moment, then just end.

“How did you find out?” he asked at the.. “The ring you're wearing has a crest on it,” Raena said, nodding toward his hand. He looked down, as if surprised to see the ring there. “And Arissa told me when I asked her. Is it supposed to be a secret?”

“What? No. It's just not that important to me,” Marden said with a sour expression. Raena watched him for a few seconds longer, then leaned back in her chair.

“Well, it's important for what I am about to ask,” she said, receiving a confused look in return. “As you probably heard, we are providing the food for the Empress's birthday celebration. As the caterer, I got a special invitation to attend the ball, but I don't feel good about going alone. And since you are a noble, you will receive an invitation. So, Your Grace, would you want to be my escort?”

The surprise on Marden's face was more than evident. A moment later, a smile blossomed on his face, but then suddenly, he frowned.

“Wait, what about your guard? I don't want my neck broken just because I took your hand. Where is he, by the way? | haven't seen him around.”

“The banquet is for nobles only and personal servants or guards are not allowed,” Raena explained. “So will you do it?”

The smile returned to Marden's face.

“Aren't you afraid to be alone with me?” he smirked, moving his hands behind his neck with a smug expression. “I might take my chance to make you mine while your good puppy is not around.”

“I sincerely hope you have more business sense than that,” Raena scoffed. “You shouldn't bite the hand that feeds you, as they say. Or you might find yourself in even more debt than before.”



“You are one tough woman to woo, my lovely Lydia!” Marden chuckled, shaking his head. “Alright, I’ll be your perfect gentleman escort. But what would I get out of it? I don’t really like to go to those events.”

Raena licked her lips, her finger tapping on the edge of the table.

“How about a new source of income for the brothel, then?”

“Oh?” Marden grinned. “That sounds promising. What is it?”

“It’s a secret,” Raena replied, her eyes going to Davin who had appeared at the door with a nervous expression on his face. She frowned, giving him a sign to get closer. He made his way to the table, glancing at Marden before leaning down and whispering in her ear.

“We have to go back immediately. The girl that is pretending to be you – she is dead.”