

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 16 - Tips

0 8 minutes read

Raena rocked her feet back and forth to make the swing move faster, while Zen's hands gave her a slight push now and then. Her eyes remained on the people that kept coming in and out of the North Palace, throwing glances at her before disappearing into the mansion.

Just a few days had passed since the third prince had visited her and he had already sent all kinds of people to help servants, carpenters, gardeners, labor workers, and even a few guards. It was almost too crowded in and out of the mansion as they diligently did their job.

Somebody had cut the grass in the front yard by the time she woke up today, and the pile of old furniture next to the gate had mysteriously disappeared. Kara had been flying back and forth, commanding the flock of servants or giving directions to the workers. While she looked like she could use a break, her eyes were sparkling with excitement – she had been doing most of the work herself since their current staff was too old, too young, or too inexperienced to be of any use to her.

“And now she is the boss smiling.” Raena thought.

More servants posed more problems, though like spies and assassination attempts. There were quite a few of those in the damn book, and while there was nothing of the sort mentioned in relation to the second wife, Raena wasn't foolish enough to think someone in her position was perfectly safe.

Sending the servants away would bring trouble and raise suspicion. The best option would be to keep them around, and she would just have to be more careful with her behavior and her eating habits. She didn't plan to spend that much time in the North Palace once the restaurant opened, so she just had to hold on for another month or so.

Zen cleared his throat, and she jumped, almost falling off the swing. He caught her as she tilted forward, his arm wrapping around her waist and keeping her in the air, almost as if she weighed nothing. For a moment she could feel his muscles tensing against her back, then he let her stand on her own, his hand lingering for another moment before letting go.

“You should be more careful, Mistress,” he said loud enough for the two maids that were plucking the ivy from the walls nearby to hear. The maids suddenly turned extremely busy, returning to pulling the long vines with double the effort. They weren't particularly subtle in their eavesdropping – be that for their own curiosity or on somebody else's orders – but Raena made sure all they could hear was her laughter and inconsequential ramblings.

Raena sat back in the swing and Zen pushed her again, more gently this time.

"We were being followed last night," Zen said in a low voice as the swing took her closer to him.

Raena turned her head to look at him, then plastered a smile on her face as she locked her eyes on two bulky men that were just carrying a giant bronze bathtub into the mansion. The third prince was sparing no effort – he really seemed to be afraid that she would rat him out to her father.

"Who?" she asked just as quietly the next time the swing took her back to him.

"I don't know, but it's likely your husband's men," Zen replied. "I shook them off before we got to the restaurant, but we should be more careful if you don't want them finding out your secret. It will also help if I am more familiar with the third prince's residence."

"Alright," Raena nodded, kicking with her feet while a few more maids entered through the missing front gate and headed for the mansion. As they saw Raena, they bowed to her, then hurried inside. "We'll go on a walk tomorrow."

He said nothing, just kept pushing her swing with careful movements.

"May I ask a question?" he asked after a while. Raena nodded. "What is the deal with the restaurant? Why are you pretending to be someone else? And why did you have to make a deal with that shady bastard?"

"I have my reasons," Raena shrugged. "Just like I have my reasons for playing a fool here," she said, turning her head and smiling at him. "How about you? How did you and your siblings end up as slaves here in the Capital?"

He was silent for a long time, so she thought she had made him uncomfortable with that question. She didn't really think when she asked, she was just trying to keep the conversation going.

But he had probably seen a lot of death and maybe even fought, considering his country was at war with the Empire and it lost.

"Sorry, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to," she blurted out. "I was just cur.."

"It's alright, Miss Raena," he whispered in her ear, and she felt shivers running down her spine as his breath tickled her skin. She hadn't realized when the swing had stopped moving, nor when her slipper had dropped off a few steps away. Zen circled her and picked up the slipper, then fell to one knee in front of her. "May I?" he asked, nodding to her foot. She shook off her stupor and stretched her bare leg, watching Zen as he caught her ankle between his long fingers and slipped the shoe on.

When he was done, he didn't let go. "We lived in a remote village in North Craidal called Tyne. The fighting didn't reach us until the capital had already fallen, so we didn't even

know what was going on when the soldiers showed up. The few able men we had fought the Empire's soldiers, but there were too many of them. Those who weren't killed were taken to be sold as slaves, and that's how we ended up here."

"But the war was two years ago," Raena said, then quickly lowered her voice. "How remote is that village?"

"Very remote," he scoffed, carefully setting her foot down and getting up. "It's high in the mountains, so we barely had contact with the outside world apart from some of our people going down to the other villages to trade. I don't think those soldiers were even looking for our village, they just stumbled upon it as they were crossing the mountains."

"I see," Raena said awkwardly, not sure what else to say. For her, all of that had been just a boring exposition in an unnecessarily long book, but for him, it was all real. She suddenly felt like one of those people who would purposely pretend not to see someone suffering, just so they were not late for their yoga appointment. "I'm sorry" she mumbled, looking down at her feet.

"Raise your head, Miss Raena," Zen said with a surprisingly commanding voice, and she obeyed without thinking. "People are looking at you, you can't be seen lowering your head to a servant." A playful smile appeared on his lips, but no matter how much she looked at him, she couldn't figure out what was so amusing.

"I appreciate your sentiment, but none of this was your fault. I do not bear any blame toward you. If anything, you gave me an incredible opportunity by allowing me to stay here and serve you. I will make sure to repay you one day."

"Ha, soon enough I'll be so rich, I won't need anything! My biggest problem will be counting my money." she grinned.

"Miss Raena sure has big dreams," Zen chuckled softly, staring at her with his hands behind his back and his head tilted to the side.

"She sure does." A voice spoke from behind him, and both Raena and Zen looked at Kara, who was walking toward them. She had her sleeves rolled to her elbows and there were dust and white stains on the skirts of her dress. "Having fun, Mistress?"

"Hey, don't look at me that way" Raena laughed, raising her hands defensively. "You told me to come here and put on a show, remember" Kara grimaced, turning toward Zen instead.

"Go ahead and make yourself useful. Elene needs help in one of the rooms on the second floor. They are trying to put curtains on, but they need someone taller."

"Sure." Zen nodded with a smile, bowing his head to Raena before walking away. Raena turned to look at her maid.

“Tsk,” Kara clicked her tongue, still staring at the door where Zen had disappeared. “For someone who was a slave until just a few days ago, he sure carries himself like he is someone important.”

“I don’t think they were held as slaves for very long,” Raena shrugged. “But even so, this isn’t a bad thing. It’s better than cowering away when our eyes meet or stuttering out of fear of being beaten.”

“There is a difference between not being afraid and acting confident,” Kara murmured. She then shook her head, turning around with a sigh. “Nevermind him. I wanted to confirm a few things with you regarding the renovations.” Raena nodded, giving her a sign to continue while glancing at the maids that were still fighting with the ivy. They had moved further down the wall, so they were too far away to hear anything.

“The whole place has been cleaned and they will be ready with the flooring by tomorrow. His Highness’s aide came earlier and brought a few payslips for us to purchase any furniture or decorations we like. What do you want to do with the money?”

“Hold on to it for now. I can play the poor, mistreated victim a little longer” Raena said, leaning her head on the rope of the swing. “What about the project in the back?”

“They will begin digging after the work on the house is complete.” Raena nodded. “What do you want to do about the walls?”

“Elene will be painting them,” Raena replied without hesitation. Kara raised her eyebrows, her disapproval more than evident.

“Have you ever seen her paint? Or you’ll just trust her to do a good job?”

“What’s with the negative attitude?” Raena teased her. “It’s just a wall! I’m sure she can paint and I’ll have her paint. If we are lucky, that will make her forget to scowl for two seconds.”

“You sure care a lot about her,” Kara murmured.

“Do whatever you want. At least we’ll save some money if she does it.”

Kara looked around the front yard, her frown slowly disappearing. In comparison with the first time they saw this place, the North Palace now looked great. Still, they couldn’t use all the money they were given or the third prince would stop sending extra. They were going to milk him for as long as they could.

“One more thing,” Raena said, and her maid quickly looked at her. “In my room, under the mattress on the head side, there is a list of store names. I want you to look into them and see what state they are in and if they are willing to sell.”

“We are buying stores now?” Kara raised an eyebrow.

“We’re investing,” Raena corrected her. “Those stores will hit it big really soon.”

“How do you...?” Kara started, but then shook her head. “Let me guess, the stars told you?”

“Trust the stars, Kara, trust the stars!” Raena grinned, pushing with her feet and swinging again.