

His Highness's Second Wife Chapter 3 - Tips

“She is going all out, isn’t she?” Raena chuckled as she stared at the servants in front of them. They had arrived just after dawn, kneeling quietly in front of the mansion while they waited for someone to come out and allow them to stand.

Raena had expected to get fewer servants than usual, where at least a few of them would spy on her day and night and report to their master. She didn’t expect to get only leftovers, though.

Only three servants had arrived in the morning, whereas she had over a dozen in the Prime Minister’s home tending to her alone. But it wasn’t even their numbers that were the issue. One of them was an old man over sixty, with a deeply lined face and receding hairline. He introduced himself as Karik — a cook, a gardener, a guard, and an all-around worker if his hesitant words were to be believed. The second one was an elderly woman, Portha, who looked even older than Karik. Seeing her frail shoulders and tiny frame made Raena feel horrible for making her wait on her knees outside for even a minute longer. The last servant called herself Nola — a little girl of no more than thirteen years that looked so nervous that she constantly fidgeted and played with the hem of her apron.

“Is anyone else coming?” Kara asked. For a moment, nobody spoke until Portha mustered the courage to raise her head a little.

“Not as far as we know, Head Maid,” she said in a thin, raspy voice. It wasn’t just that they were humiliating Raena, they were also making it very hard for Kara as well. She didn’t officially hold the title of Head Maid of the North Palace, which was the highest position a maid could receive in a household, but Kara was still Raena’s personal servant, so she was the highest-ranking attendant there.

“Rise,” Kara commanded, staring at the three. They did as they were told, eyes still glued to the ground. “There are three rules in this house if you want to keep your job and continue to live a good life,” she said, keeping her voice serious. “First, you are Her Highness Raena’s servants, so her word is the law. Second, whatever you hear or see in this house must not leave this place. There will be no other warning — if I find out one of you ran their mouth to anyone outside this household, I will make sure you can’t find work anywhere, not even as fertilizer!” All of them stiffened, exchanging scared looks. “And third, if anyone asks about your Mistress, you’ll tell them she is a lovely, good-natured child who loves to eat, play in the garden, and sleep a lot.”

A look of confusion passed over their faces, but they all nodded.

“Good.” Kara nodded. “As you can see, this place hasn’t been used in forever, so we’ll have a lot of work in the upcoming weeks. I’ll show you to your rooms and you can take the time to get settled and clean them up while I take our Mistress to give her greetings to the first wife.”

“Yes, Head Maid.”

“There is no need to be formal with me. Call me Kara.” She then turned toward Raena, who was doing her best to look bored. “Mistress, please wait for me at the gate. I’ll be there shortly.”

Raena nodded, moving past the three servants and heading toward the shabby gates, which looked even worse in the daylight.

They had agreed that Kara would do most of the talking and order everyone around, in case there was indeed a spy among the servants. Raena was, after all, supposed to be a helpless idiot, so if she suddenly started giving orders or acting like a proper mistress, people could get curious. Their plan relied on making people think Kara controlled the second wife.

“Let’s go.” Kara’s voice made Raena turn.

“I will make sure you can’t find work anywhere, not even as fertilizer?” Raena chuckled as she changed her voice to sound like the dark-haired woman. “I think you made the old man wet his pants!”

“They have to fear one of us, and since you’ll be playing the happy fool…” Kara sighed. “I don’t think any of them is a spy, but we can’t let our guard down just yet. Let’s go or we’ll be late.”

“Let’s, let’s,” Raena said, still grinning. “You’ll make a fine boss lady one day.”

“If you keep your word, I’ll make sure I won’t disappoint,” Kara replied, eyes glued to the path ahead. Raena smiled.

She had struck gold with Kara, literally. After waking up in the Prime Minister’s mansion, she had been too disoriented and confused to make any sense. She ended up talking a lot of gibberish and asking weird questions like ‘What year is it?’, ‘Who is president?’ and ‘Where is the shower?’ The servants that didn’t avoid or belittle her for her silliness thought she was pulling a prank by talking about another world and a past life, or using words that meant nothing like a blow-dryer. Even though according to their religion rebirth was possible and people went to another place after their death, they didn’t even pause to think about it before telling her to stop her silly games.

All except Kara, who had said she believed her. When Raena asked her why, she had just shrugged and said, ‘Because of my age, I’ve been a playmate and then a maid to Miss Raena for years. I know her better than anyone in the Prime Minister’s household and you’re not her.’

So they had made a deal — Kara’s silence and cooperation in exchange for making her a partner in the business Raena planned to start. And if that didn’t work out, Raena was

supposed to pay her a million golden tharas, which in this world was enough to buy land and a decent house in the suburbs of the capital. Kara had said from the beginning that she preferred the money, but Raena had convinced her that her business would turn much more lucrative and it would provide her with a lifelong profession, so that would be a better choice. So far, her reasoning held.

“We’re almost there. Are you ready?” Kara asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“Piece of cake!” Raena grinned, almost laughing at Kara’s expression.

Raena straightened her posture, adjusting the airy sky-blue dress she was wearing. The fashion in the capital favored the long and capacious, chest-revealing, richly decorated dresses and accessories, but Raena had decided that wasn’t the image she was going for. Before coming to the third prince’s household, she had ordered an assortment of dresses — all in lighter tones, simple and even a bit childish, with ribbons for the waist and cute flowery patterns. Her role was to be an innocent, carefree child that cared only about playing and having fun. She had to look the part too.

Kara fell a step behind her as they entered the East Palace, where the first wife reigned supreme. The place was the opposite of the North Palace — sunny, well-kept, and full of servants who were already hard at work in the lush gardens in front of the mansion. None of them paid them any mind or acknowledged Raena’s presence any further than giving her a passing glance. Her pride wanted her to snarl at them, but she kept her smile on, striding confidently toward the bright white building.

When they reached the wide-open front door, one of the servants finally moved to intercept them. The woman looked to be in her late fifties, with deep wrinkles around her bright blue eyes and a calm expression on her face. She wore a maid’s uniform, but it was clear that it was made of high-quality fabric. Probably the first wife’s Head Maid.

“Welcome, Your Highness,” she said with a slight bow of her head, her voice perfectly neutral. “Have you come to offer your greetings, Your Highness?”

“Yes!” Raena exclaimed, clapping her hands loudly. “How did you know?”

The woman studied her for a second, then glanced toward Kara. Raena kept her smile on, eyes wide with what should have looked like excitement.

“This way, please,” the first wife’s maid finally said, leading them back through the corridor she had come from. Raena looked around curiously. There was no dust or dirt staining the floor and the walls, no broken or old furniture, no mouse droppings. She wondered if it was the first wife that gave her the North Palace, or the prince himself. In the book, Kassian held no love for either of his wives, which wasn’t all that surprising considering that he married both of them for political reasons.

Raena couldn’t really blame him.

His first wife was ten years older than him, and for their six years of marriage, she had been an obnoxious, nagging thorn in his side who couldn't even give him an heir. Then there was his second wife, who was supposed to be mentally challenged. He really was an unlucky guy.

The maid led them inside a huge salon, richly decorated with colorful paintings and intricate objects set on pedestals. Raena kept looking around with a huge grin, ignoring the servants cleaning the space. By the time they crossed the room, soft whispers had filled the air.

The adjoining accommodation was smaller, but just as fancy. The walls were painted in soft, pastel colors and were mostly bare except for a huge family painting. There were only two servants inside — one pouring hot tea from a beautiful teapot decorated with golden lines over its sparkling red surface, while the other stood behind her mistress's chair with her hands behind her back.

"Her Highness Raena is here to give her greetings," the maid that led them in announced, and Raena turned her attention to the woman in the chair.

Sarea, the third prince's first legal wife, was a plain woman who compensated for her appearance with extravagant dresses and jewelry that looked expensive enough to pay the debt Raena owed Kara. Sarea's mud-brown hair was pulled into an intricate hairdo as if she was preparing to attend a ball, and her dark eyes stared with disdain that didn't match her polite expression.

Raena plastered a happy smile on her face, clapping with her hands.

"Sister-wife, I am so happy to finally meet you!" she said cheerfully.

"Mistress, please mind your manners!" Kara said quickly as she leaned forward and spoke just loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Oh!" Raena exclaimed, covering her mouth. She calmed her face, letting her hands drop, then did a low curtsy. Kara had instructed her on it over and over again, but it still looked stiffer than the one the maid did. "Please forgive me! I greet Her Highness Sarea, first wife of Prince Kassian. May you have good health and a prosperous life, Your Highness." Raena looked at Kara as if waiting for approval, and her maid nodded.

"How cute," Sarea chuckled, leaning her pointy chin on her hand. "Have a seat, Raena. Have some tea." She motioned for her maid, and the girl quickly poured another cup.

Raena took a sip and grimaced.

"Oh, this is bitter! I don't like bitter!" She shuddered, leaving the cup on the table.

"This is His Highness's favorite tea," Sarea said with a condescending smile, taking a sip out of her cup. "But I suppose not everyone can appreciate its taste."

"Oh, I see." Raena nodded. "I like sweet things like sugar and chocolate. Kara says that if I eat too much, all my teeth will fall out." Raena sighed, glancing at her maid with a sullen face. "Do you like sweet things, Your Highness?"

"No, I don't."

"How about His Highness?" Raena asked, leaning her chin on both hands in a very unladylike manner. Sarea stared at her with a mix of surprise and shock. "Your face looks strange. Was I not supposed to ask?"

"His Highness doesn't like sweet food or drinks either," she said with a sigh, rubbing her temple. A few seconds later, she returned to her poised pose, plastering a smile on her face. "How is the North Palace? It's the biggest palace in the prince's residence, so you should be very thankful for the gift."

"Is it really?" Raena exclaimed, clapping her hands. "I got the biggest one? I feel so happy! Did you hear, Kara? We got the best palace!" Raena let her smile drop as she turned back to the first wife. "But Your Highness, you're the first wife. Shouldn't you be getting the best things? I am just a second wife and the prince doesn't love me at all! He didn't even come to the bridal chamber!"

"Really?" Sarea raised an eyebrow, and for the first time, curiosity flashed in her eyes. "How horrible! You must have been lonely."

"Well, Kara was there," Raena said with a shrug. "But my mother told me that when I get married, my husband will come to the bridal chamber and we'll play a fun game. But he didn't come, so I was bored."

Sarea choked on her tea, a few drops spilling over her dress. It was getting harder not to laugh.

"Are you alright, Your Highness?" Raena asked, schooling her face into a frown. "Did you play a game on your wedding night? Or did His Highness not come to play with you, either?"

Sarea rubbed her temples, setting her cup down.

"How do you find your servants?" The first wife changed the subject. "I sent you the best maid I could find, the best seamstress and cook as well. They should be able to take care of all of your needs."

“Oh, I don’t know,” Raena murmured, playing with the hem of her sleeve. “We saw them on our way here. Kara is going to deal with them, I don’t like talking to other people. Everybody keeps staring at me like I am an idiot.”

“Nonsense!” The first wife waved her hand after a long pause. “It’s probably because you’re so beautiful! With your blonde hair and rosy cheeks, you’re just like a doll.”

Raena covered her sides, looking down in what should have been perceived as an embarrassment. Despite Sarea’s sly smile, her words were not a lie. Her current body was indeed of a beautiful woman, delicate and pretty, just like a doll. That’s pretty much all of the perks of being Raena ended, though.

“You’re praising me too much, Your Highness,” Raena mumbled.

The first wife just smiled, glancing toward Kara and then back to Raena.

Her questions continued — about the North Palace, about Raena’s wedding night, about the Prime Minister’s family. Raena did her best to give the most shallow and contradictory answers she could think of until the first wife finally got to her feet.

“Thank you for coming to greet me, Raena,” she said, an air of authority lingering around her. “I am glad to have such an amiable girl join the prince’s family. I am afraid I must attend to my duties now, but we should have tea again.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Raena nodded, getting up as well. She did another awkward curtsy, then turned to Kara, who led her back the way they had come. They walked without talking until they were far away from the first wife’s palace, then both let out a sigh of relief.