

War Song 431

Chapter 431

In the sitting room, Barrett and Viola sat facing each other. The latter dabbed at her tears with a handkerchief, avoiding her husband's disappointed gaze.

She choked on her words as she tried to explain, "I was overwhelmed with anger that day. I had just returned from my family's home and saw the Hell Monarch's princess consort's carriage leaving our estate. "Dear, I was just so upset. I suspected that the people who threw dung at our estate were sent by her. I had no proof, so I only said a few words to her. I didn't expect her to insult me in return. When I got back to the estate and saw one of the culprits had been caught, my anger led me to order that his arm be broken. I didn't know the servants would be so harsh and also break his leg."

Barrett seized on one detail from her words, asking, "Carissa came by Valor Estate yesterday?"

"She definitely didn't enter the estate," Viola responded. "But as soon as she left our alley, the person who threw dung was caught. If there had been evidence, I would have exposed her on the spot. Unfortunately, there wasn't."

"You argued with her? What did she say?" Barrett gripped the armrests of his chair tightly, his knuckles turning white.

Viola hesitated for a moment. Had he not heard her clearly?

"Dear, I didn't argue with her; she insulted me."

Barrett remained still, his demeanor cold. "She doesn't easily argue with people. She doesn't even easily speak with others."

Viola suddenly lifted her head in surprise, looking at her husband as if seeing him for the first time. "What did you say?"

Barrett's expression remained frosty. "So, what did you say to her? What did she say in return? Did she mention why she came to Valor Estate?"

"She..." Viola's heart sank upon seeing Barrett's expression.

Her tone suddenly grew angry as she replied, "She insulted both of us, saying I picked up the garbage she discarded. I couldn't take it and argued with her a bit. But that person who threw dung at our estate definitely came with her. Otherwise, why would it be so coincidental that she appeared at the same time as him?"

"Garbage?" Barrett's eyes narrowed, a storm of dark gray swirling within them. "She said that about me?"

Viola nodded. "Yes, she said exactly that. I argued with her in frustration, and her people even tried to hit me."

She stood up and moved in front of Barrett, then knelt and placed her hands on his knees. "Dear, this reaction of yours-could it be that you have feelings for her?"

As far as Viola knew, Aurora had

deceived Barrett into divorcing Carissa. Viola also knew that Carissa Kad asked the king for a divorce edict. How could a woman who wouldn't tolerate her husband taking concubines ever truly be the lady of a household?

So, Viola harbored a deep-seated contempt for Carissa.

Since joining the Warren family, everyone, including her husband, had treated Viola well, with the exception of Aurora. Barrett had shown her warmth and care, making her believe that he loved her, But

now, his demeanor made her

question everything.

Barrett slowly took her hand and gently shook his head. "She despises me deeply. Try to avoid provoking her in the future."

He didn't answer her question.

Did he have feelings for Carissa?

Viola felt she could tolerate Aurora, but she couldn't bear the thought of her husband harboring feelings for Carissa, even though she was now the Hell Monarch's princess consort.

A sudden anxiety gripped Viola. Was her tolerance for Aurora due to her knowledge of her husband's disdain for that woman? If he didn't dislike Aurora, then surely, she would be troubled by it, wouldn't she?

She quickly dismissed the thought. No, she was different from Carissa. She would never be as petty and jealous as her.

"Dear, you truly have no feelings for her, right?" Viola stood up, still holding his hand, and faced him with tears welling up in her eyes.

Barrett repressed his complicated thoughts and replied, "No."

He paused for a moment, then added firmly, "Absolutely none."

Viola threw herself into his embrace, her voice choked with emotion, "Dear, I'm only angry because she views you as garbage. In my heart you are the finest man in the world. No one is better than you. She definitely brought that person who threw dung at our estate. She insulted you! That's why was so enraged when I returned to the estate and had him punished."

Barrett opened his mouth, his expression conflicted.

The finest man?

He wanted to ask about her late husband.

What about Thomas, who sacrificed himself on the battlefield? Did he hold no place in her heart at all?

Chapter 432

Upon hearing Viola's heartfelt declaration, Barrett felt no joy whatsoever. It seemed he had never truly understood her.

Initially, when the Farrell family allowed her to return to the estate without the obligation of remaining a widow, he had assumed it was due to her gentle nature. Now, he found himself perplexed.

The steward did not return, nor did the guards who had accompanied him. The person who had been attacked refused any resolution, demanding that his assailants be severely punished. The steward eventually confessed, admitting it was his order. His action spared Viola.

The Royal Citadel detained all of them. While the criminal aspect was dealt with, the man who had his limbs broken could still claim compensation for medical expenses.

Viola was eager to resolve the issue swiftly, hoping to prevent further complications. To that end, she sent a thousand silver coins to the injured man.

Upon learning of this, Rebecca reprimanded, "Is it true that his limbs were broken? Why haven't you sent someone to check? For all we know, it could be a scam. Is there even a reason for him to throw dung at the gate of our residence?"

"Besides, broken limbs can be treated. It's not as if his limbs have been severed. Even if bones are broken, treatment wouldn't cost more than a hundred silver coins. Yet, you gave him a thousand silver coins -such a profitable scam! Won't this only encourage more extortionists in the future?"

"Mother, please don't be angry. No one will come to extort us again. That person was definitely sent by Carissa. And once Aurora apologizes, this matter will be resolved," Viola replied.

"What?" Rebecca's brows knitted in shock and anger. "The person who threw dung every day was sent by Carissa?"

Once Viola recounted seeing Carissa at the estate gate that day, Rebecca's fury erupted.

"She... she is already a princess consort. Why can't she let go of us? It's as if she wishes for everyone in our house to be completely wiped out."

Seeing her mother-in-law denounce Carissa with such fury, Viola felt a mixture of relief and satisfaction.

"With such a wicked heart, she will surely face retribution," Viola declared.

However, there was an underlying worry in her heart. Since taking over the management of the household, her mother-in-law and sister-in-law had frequently expressed their dissatisfaction with her. Though her husband never voiced his concerns, his occasional contemplative silence left her with a cold and distant feeling.

The servants in the household, including the steward, had never spoken a word against Carissa. Even when Viola attempted to guide the conversation, they seemed oblivious, consistently praising Carissa as a good and kind mistress.

Charlotte, the old lady from the second branch of the family, was even more direct. She praised how well the household had functioned under Carissa. Even Viola's eldest sister-in-law, Amelia, echoed those sentiments.

Before marrying into the Warren family, Viola had expected that everyone would despise Carissa. Given Carissa's narrow-minded and jealous nature, Viola thought she would have been harsh toward the servants, who would then speak ill of her.

Yet, it was only her critical mother-in-law and youngest sister-in-law who harbored such intense hatred towards Carissa.

Viola's anxiety stemmed from the

feeling that she seemed to

understand everything while grasping nothing fully. She vowed to surpass Carissa and to be more accommodating. She especially wanted to prove to the world that even as a woman who had remarried, she could handle the household better and manage the Warren family with exceptional skill.

She also intended to mend her relationship with Aurora. Since Aurora was also a rightful wife,

by the king, Viola believed that

long as she was sufficiently lenient towards the other woman, Aurora would be eternally grateful. After all, she had once been rejected by Carissa.

having been granted this fel

But Viola had miscalculated even that.

Aurora showed no appreciation for her kindness, only a cold indifference that was infuriating. Their disagreements often escalated. Despite Viola's attempts to resolve conflicts, Aurora seemed determined to argue about every little thing, unwilling to settle unless right and wrong were established.

To Aurora, everything she did was right, while everything Viola did was wrong.

That distortion of right and wrong was truly maddening.

Life after marrying into the Warren family had been a mess, completely different from what Viola had previously imagined. Aside from her husband's relatively good treatment, nothing else was going as she had hoped.

Chapter 433

Barrett once again took Aurora to Jadehill Estate. This time, he arrived with a substantial number of gifts and even knelt at the entrance to request an audience.

Fortune was on his side-the Marquis of Jadehill was not at home, and upon learning of their arrival, Mary graciously invited them in.

Aurora maintained a sullen expression throughout, showing no intention of apologizing. However, Mary seemed unbothered and instructed her servants to serve refreshments. Mary's daughter-in-law, granddaughter-in-law, and great-granddaughter-in-law stood to the side, all casting hostile glances at Aurora.

Barrett knelt and greeted, "Good day, Madam Clayton. I am Barrett Warren, and I wish you health and happiness."

Aurora reluctantly followed suit and knelt, but said nothing, her mouth hidden behind her veil as if it were sealed.

Mary dismissed their formalities and invited them to sit.

"Madam Clayton, my wife spoke thoughtlessly and offended you. I hope you can forgive her," Barrett said, clearly anxious.

"Thoughtlessly? She spoke with malice!" snapped Caroline, one of Mary's granddaughters-in-law.

"That's right! We never intended to ask for donations. Grandmother was just tired after our journey and wanted to rest a moment at your family's residence and have a drink of water."

"And yet, upon meeting us, she called us beggars. What have we begged for from you? What have you given us?"

Mary's other granddaughters-in-law voiced their grievances. Mary had been doing a good deed. How could they let Aurora insult the elderly woman like that?

Barrett felt a deep sense of dread, realizing that despite meeting Mary, they might not be forgiven. He glanced at Aurora, signaling for her to apologize, but she seemed to neither see nor hear the complaints from the Clayton family members.

She sat there like a statue. Her presence alone was already the greatest concession she could offer.

"Enough," Mary said slowly. "Our guests are here. We mustn't be rude."

When Mary spoke, everyone fell silent.

The old woman glanced at Aurora before turning her attention back to Barrett.

"I haven't dwelled on this matter. It's the younger generation of my family who are upset. I've told them many times that once a person does

something, people will have bonet

good and bad things to say about it. You can't silence everyone, so just focus on doing your best. As long as your conscience is clear, that's all that matters," said Mary.

Aurora finally spoke up, her tone calm and measured, "It's impressive how open-minded and magnanimous you are, something we can only aspire to. But if you are truly so forgiving and free of resentment, then why were we turned away at the door the last time we came?"

"Aurora!" Barrett broke out in cold sweat, turning sharply to her and warning, "Be quiet."

Mary gave Aurora a meaningful look. "Madam Aurora, I wasn't aware of your previous visit. Had I known, I would have informed you that there was no need to come and apologize. You didn't offend me. You only insulted yourself."

Mary picked up her coffee and took

a slow sip before continuing, "In my lifetime, I have encountered many types of people-capable and incapable, modest and arrogant, the great and the wicked, the kind and the loving. And I have seen quite few like you-twisted and

conflicted."

"You say I am twisted?" Aurora's lips curled into a cold smile, her eyes flashing with anger. "How am I twisted? I would appreciate it if you could enlighten me, Madam Clayton."

"Refusing to acknowledge your own

failures and blaming them on others,

constantly feeling like life hasn't given you a fair chance, carrying a restless resentment, unwilling to accept defeat, hoping to surpass certain people, and trying to find ways to make others see you in a different light-that's what makes you twisted."

Mary shook her head slowly, her voice calm and gentle as she continued, "Why concern yourself with these matters? If you defeat someone, does that mean they will suffer? If you win against them, will you find happiness?"

"No, their joy or sorrow doesn't affect you. They don't care about your happiness or sadness, yet you torment yourself with thoughts of them daily. Now, tell me, isn't that twisted?"

Chapter 434

Aurora's expression shifted dramatically as Mary's words struck at her very core, hitting the mark precisely.

She had been seeking an opportunity to surpass Carissa, to prove that she was superior. This obsession tormented her day and night, robbing her of sleep and appetite, and filling her with a persistent rage. Yet, despite her daily resentment, it seemed as though Carissa paid her no mind?

She couldn't believe it!

Clenching her fists, Aurora said, "Madam Clayton, have you ever encountered someone so deceitful that they practically embody hypocrisy? Have you seen someone climb to the top by stepping on the achievements of others?"

"Someone who feasts on the military honors of their family and is never satisfied? Someone who disregards their comrades' lives, allowing them to be captured and mistreated? And yet, such a person becomes a princess consort. Do you really think the heavens are watching?"

Mary smiled, her wrinkles deepening her expression into a look of gentle kindness. "Such a person exists only in your heart. How could I possibly see her?"

Aurora's expression darkened, her anger evident even through the thin veil. "You don't believe me."

"Whether I believe you or not is of no importance," Mary said calmly. "What matters is that you believe it yourself, and you torment yourself because of it. You are unhappy, consumed by bitterness, and every thought you have is driven by this resentment and anger. In the end, this will only harm you."

Mary waved her hand dismissively. "Enough. I am tired. I don't remember what was said that day, and neither does anyone here. Once you leave today, everyone will see you and know that you came to apologize. I believe the common people will not trouble you further."

Barrett, who had been on edge the entire time, finally began to relax. He had feared that Aurora's indiscreet remarks would provoke Mary's anger.

In the end, Mary was above such pettiness and didn't stoop to Aurora's level.

However, Aurora was not inclined to heed the old woman's heartfelt advice. Her heart was already consumed by bitterness and resentment, leaving no room for any kind of friendly suggestion.

As they left Jadehill Estate, Aurora climbed into the carriage with a cold expression. Barrett stared at the carriage for a long while before finally joining her inside.

The journey was marked by an icy silence, with neither of them willing to exchange a single glance. The couple who once promised to love each other for a lifetime now sat in mutual disdain.

Back at Jadehill Estate, Mary sat in the sitting room, sipping coffee leisurely.

"Grandmother, it was one thing not to say anything earlier, but why bother trying to reason with her? She didn't take your words to heart at all," Caroline said.

Mary responded slowly, "Madam Aurora once reached great heights, with even the queen dowager praising her personally. She was recognized for her achievements, and married with the king's blessing.

"At that time, she thought Lady

Carissa was nothing more than a worm beneath her feet. She looked down on her, thinking that a small gesture of kindness would make Lady Carissa eternally grateful. But she didn't realize that Lady Carissa, rather than being trampled, was simply choosing not to fight back.

"Now, Lady Carissa stands taller than many, far surpassing Madam Aurora, while she herself has fallen from her lofty perch into the mud. Her dissatisfaction with the world stems from this perceived imbalance, as well as her belief that any woman can surpass her, except Lady Carissa. That is Madam

Aurora's current mindset."

"What a madwoman," Caroline commented.

"Greed, anger, ignorance, and desire-such things torment people," Mary said as she slowly stood up. "She obsesses over the Hell Monarch's princess consort, yet the latter doesn't even spare her a glance."

She paused, then addressed the

younger women present in the room with her, "You should learn from Lady Carissa. When you receive something, be willing to give back. Keep your vision broad, have a great outlook, and cultivate a noble character."

"Yes, Grandmother. We will remember your advice," everyone responded in unison.

Chapter 435

The news of Barrett's demotion to a ninth-rank capital guard eventually reached Rebecca, who was devastated upon hearing it. Pounding her chest, she cried bitterly and cursed loudly, blaming Aurora for the misfortune and even accusing her of being the cause of Barrett's ruined future.

Rebecca sent someone to summon Aurora, but her daughter-in-law ignored the call and directly kicked the maid out. That infuriated Rebecca even more.

Tears and snot streaming down her face, she pounded the bed, lamenting, "Barrett, why did you have to marry that useless woman? What a disaster for our family!

"Before she joined our family, she came to see me and flattered me so much. She promised that with both of you in the family, you would rise to great heights. And now? You're reduced to a mere ninth-rank capital guard who patrols the city. What future is there in that?"

Demotions and reductions in rank were not unheard of in court, but to be reduced straight to ninth-rank was a severe blow. In the capital, were there even ninth-rank officials? Even a minor clerk would look down on him.

Barrett sat quietly to the side, feeling as though he had lived a lifetime since the events of the past. He could barely remember the details of the time when he brought Aurora back home.

He only recalled telling Carissa that his mother liked Aurora very much and that any children he and Aurora might have would be entrusted to Carissa to raise. Moreover, the authority over the household would not be taken from her.

At the time, he had believed he was being quite generous.

Now, looking back, it seemed almost laughable. It was as if he had told a wealthy person, "Here's a copper coin. You should be grateful."

Barrett had never truly understood Carissa. He knew she had been sent off to learn martial arts, but had thought that given her noble status, what skills could she possibly learn?

Aurora's remarks about women had completely overturned his perceptions. He had no idea such self-reliant and strong women existed, let alone someone with such exceptional character and resilience.

He thought Carissa couldn't compare, but was unwilling to let her down, which was why he only sought to marry Aurora as a secondary wife. It was only when the situation became unbearable that he decided to get a divorce.

At the time, Barrett had been eager to marry Aurora because, as a man, his career was crucial, especially with the heavy responsibility of revitalizing the Warren family. Beyond his genuine affection for Aurora, he also hoped to gain her support.

But he had never imagined that things would turn out this way.

Faced with his mother's furious reprimands and tears, he felt a bitter lump in his throat, unable to utter a single word.

This mess was indeed his doing.

He and Aurora, once full of self-assured love, had grown to despise each other.

Marrying Viola had been a

calculated decision, made to gain support from the Prince family. Barrett knew very well that the king had given him a chance. But now, due to Aurora's taunts calling Mary an old beggar, he had been reported.

And because of Viola's orders to break the arm of the culprit who had thrown dung at Valor Estate, the king had reproached the Warren family for setting up a private torture chamber. These charges piled up against him, making any hopes of promotion seem bleak.

Feeling disheartened and dejected, Barrett remained silent, unable to argue even a word against his mother's scolding.

He knew that he could have had a promising future. Why had Carissa hidden her true abilities? True, he had promised Melanie that he wouldn't ever take a concubine. But when he made that promise, he had not expected to meet Aurora on the battlefield.

Military life was harsh, difficult, and torturous. He had merely found someone with whom he shared common ideals. They often comforted each other-their bond was not merely a physical one, but a vow under the moon and the heavens.

It was all due to Carissa's lack of tolerance.

Barrett wondered if she would also cause a scene and seek a divorce when Rafael took a concubine. If she didn't, it would only prove that she was greedy for power and looked down on Barrett.

How long would Rafael refrain from taking in a concubine? Helen was already living in his residence, and this year she would surely arrange for Rafael to expand his family. When that happened, Carissa had better be prepared to request another divorce edict.

Chapter 436

At some point, rumors began circulating in the city about Aurora being captured as a prisoner of war and violated by Westhaven soldiers.

Originally, after returning from the Southern Frontier, similar rumors had surfaced, but stated that she had been captured by Sandorian soldiers instead. Back then, the gossip had been quickly suppressed. This time, however, after the apology to the matriarch of the Marquis of Jadehill's family, no more dung was thrown at the Warren family's residence. Yet, the story about Aurora being captured and violated had become increasingly notorious.

The rumor spread with such force that within just a few days, it had swept across the entire city and was sure to spill over beyond its borders.

Even Hell Monarch Estate was abuzz with discussions about the matter. Carissa found it odd that this issue, which had been buried for so long, was suddenly being brought up again and causing such a stir throughout the city.

Could there have been a leak from the military? However, the Mystic Army was well-trained, so such matters should not have leaked out.

When Rafael returned from the Supreme Court, Carissa asked him about it.

Rafael sat down and took a sip of coffee, frowning as he said, "The rumors are being deliberately spread. I received news only yesterday that Westhaven's third prince has been officially declared the crown prince."

"Westhaven's third prince?" Carissa repeated.

She recalled that the third prince, Edmund, had come to the Southern Frontier battlefield seeking revenge for Westhaven's late crown prince, Arthur.

Edmund, who remembered the massacre of Fawnrun City's civilians, harbored a deep hatred for Aurora. While that incident was something both kingdoms had tried hard to conceal, Edmund might not share the same mindset.

"It seems likely that the border situation between the two kingdoms will change sooner or later," Rafael said.

Carissa felt a weight in her heart because her maternal grandfather and his family were stationed at the border.

Her seventh uncle was already dead, and her third uncle had lost an arm. Only the adopted eighth uncle could still assist her grandfather. The entire Sullivan family was enduring hardships at the border. She had not seen them for a long, long time.

If war broke out again...

Carissa shuddered at the thought.

Westhaven was a formidable force. Though Starhaven was not lacking, the Southern Frontier battle had resulted in severe losses and depleted troops.

Moreover, both the Hell Monarch Army and the Sinclair Army were now under Oliver's command. Although he was a competent general, he might struggle with large-scale warfare.

Rafael said, "Previously, Westhaven

was concerned about its reputation and would never publicly reveal the crown prince's disgraceful fate at Fawnrun City. Additionally, they had signed a border and ceasefire

agreement to appease Aurora. For the sake of their national reputation, they wouldn't easily breach the

accord.

"But the problem is, we don't know how long the old king can hold on. If the third prince ascends the throne, it's hard to say he won't disclose the truth, given his feelings about the late crown prince." The situation in Fawnrun City was like a brewing storm, ready to unleash at any moment.

When a new regime begins, the new

king must solidify his power with decisive actions. The demarcation of the border might be a sore spot for the people of Westhaven. Intelligence reports showed that the people of Westhaven harbored resentment towards Westhaven's marshal, Liam, believing he was unworthy of his position.

Carissa pondered, "Why is what happened to Aurora spreading so quickly? Could there be spies from Westhaven in the capital?"

The Westhaven spies had previously revealed themselves and annihilated the Duke of Northwatch's family, after which, most were killed. The Royal Citadel and garrison units in the capital claimed that even if some had escaped, they had returned to Westhaven.

Rafael considered this and said,

"Perhaps Edmund had already made

arrangements against Starhaven. He might have set up a network of spies, As for Aurora's case, it's likely the king will order that it be kept under wraps and prevent further

public speculation."

Carissa nodded. "That must be done."

The world was filled with clever minds. Given the nature of Aurora's capture and humiliation, it was easy to speculate that there might be hidden details in the Victory Pass peace treaty. Salvador's reign was still relatively new, and his foundation wasn't solid. Otherwise, he wouldn't be so wary of his own younger brother. So, if there was any way to suppress dissent, he would use it.

After a moment of silence, Rafael said, "Now, I'm worried that the news might not have come from Westhaven spies."

Carissa looked up sharply. "Are you thinking that Prince Yuvan is behind this? But how could he know the details of what happened in Fawnrun City?"

Their eyes met, and they spoke almost in unison, "He might have someone at Victory Pass."

Chapter 437

Sure enough, within a few days, the rumors about Aurora ceased to spread.

The storytellers in coffeehouses and taverns had quickly changed their tune. They now claimed that while Starhaven soldiers had indeed been captured at the Southern Frontier battle, Starhaven's army had also taken many Sandorian soldiers as prisoners. In the end, both sides exchanged their prisoners, and there were no instances of mistreatment or abuse of the captives.

To outsiders, it might seem like a minor issue. However, those sensitive to the situation could sense that something was off.

The general populace was unaware that Westhaven soldiers had also been sent to assist Sandoria on the battlefield-such military matters were kept confidential. Even if a few knew, it was a minority, and the information would not spread widely unless someone intentionally spread it.

Meanwhile, Rafael's household army had been established, including over two hundred men from the Hell Monarch Army, whom Rafael had recovered from the king. These men had originally been Rafale's personal guards and hadn't received the court's rations, so Salvador granted his approval. And anyway, the two hundred or so men were not considered a significant number.

Additionally, there were over a hundred men from the Sinclair family's army. These hundred or so men had once been personal guards to Carissa's father, Hector, and had been gathered back into service. Jacob and Travis gathered more people and, along with the men already in the estate, assembled a force of five hundred troops.

The quarters for the household soldiers had been established in the open space of the estate, a significant distance away from the main house and the rear courtyard. The patrols and defenses within the estate were organized by Travis.

Apart from the household soldiers on daily duty, all others were required to undergo training with Travis. While referred to as training, it was actually a martial arts instruction. Most of these men had been to battle, but experience in combat did not necessarily mean proficiency in martial arts.

Though five hundred men were not many, they could become elite troops if properly trained, and thus could alleviate immediate difficulties.

As Carissa began taking charge of the household affairs, Luke summoned the heads of various estates and shopkeepers to Hell Monarch Estate to meet the princess consort. From now on, they would be under her management.

Carissa didn't just go through the motions; she asked each person detailed questions. It was clear that Jacob and Luke had chosen their staff well-all of them were skilled and respectful.

After the inquiries, she rewarded them with gifts and instructed them to manage their affairs diligently, promising them rewards at the end of the year. The estate managers and shopkeepers saluted in thanks before streaming out one after another.

Carissa buried herself in the account

books for several days, scrutinizing the records for any discrepancies. She tallied each item of income and expenditure, discovering that the estate was indeed vast and prosperous. The king had previously sought to suppress Rafael, which resulted in substantial rewards and grants of land.

After the battle at the Southern Frontier, additional mountain lands had been acquired. Luke had sent people to inspect these new lands finding that they were suitable only for farming and growing fruit. They had little other use and were situated in rather remote areas, making them difficult to manage.

"By the way, Grand Princess Eleanor suggested exchanging these mountain lands for prime farmland. I reported this to His Highness, but he refused the exchange," said Luke. Carissa looked up. "Exchanging prime farmland for mountain lands?"

"Yes," Luke confirmed. "We asked twice, but His Highness declined both times."

Carissa's lips curved into a thoughtful smile. "How intriguing. What does Grand Princess Eleanor hope to achieve with such a swap?"

"His Highness believes there must be an ulterior motive. He has already dispatched people to keep an eye on the people in Harmony Palace," Luke added.

Carissa nodded. "I got it. Next month is Mother's birthday. It's her first year out of the palace, so she will undoubtedly want to host a grand celebration."

"We've asked Lady Helen about it. She said it was fine to do a small one and invite just a few people," Luke said with a smile.

Carissa chuckled. "That won't do. There must be a proper level of decorum."

Recently, Helen had gone on a

shopping spree, buying expensive flowers and decorating the garden. She even had the theater

refurbished, all in preparation for her birthday celebration. She was intent on making it a grand affair, so how could they only invite a few people?

"Please draft a guest list for me, Luke. I need to review who should be invited and who shouldn't," Carissa instructed. "Certainly," Luke replied respectfully before leaving.

Chapter 438

This was the first banquet Carissa would be organizing since marrying into the royal family.

If it were poorly executed, it could become a laughingstock, especially given how Helen was so concerned about her own birthday banquet. Carissa was certain her mother-in-law wouldn't want any embarrassment to mar the celebration.

Thus, Carissa personally consulted Helen on whether there were any essential guests who needed to be invited.

Helen pretended to ponder for a moment before saying, "If Dakota and Josephine can come out of the palace, then invite them. As for the others, you can decide."

Carissa knew that these two women were indeed necessary guests, especially Dakota.

It was curious, though. The concubines favored by the late king, Sigmund, weren't those two, but rather the deceased Shelby and Wanda. So, why had Helen ended up at odds with Dakota and Josephine? The marriage alliance with the Quinton family had improved Helen's relationship with Josephine, but her interactions with Dakota remained strained.

Carissa couldn't help but ask, "Did Dakota ever offend you?"

Helen snorted. "Don't be fooled by her appearance. She seems straightforward, but she's actually quite scheming. I was frequently fooled by her when the late king was still alive, and often scolded by him for it."

Seeing the anger on Helen's face, it seemed that she was telling the truth. She was the type to be easily provoked by a bit of manipulation-she could be easily defeated by even the smallest amount of scheming.

"And Josephine?" Carissa asked.

Helen made a face. "She's always been good at playing the victim. Before the late king passed away, she was just a low-ranking concubine. After his death, when the new king took the throne and the Quinton family's daughter became queen, her rank was elevated.

"But it's all meaningless. In the harem, neither the honored nor noble concubines have any real power. It's just a matter of receiving a slightly increased monthly stipend."

Though Helen claimed it was all the same, her deep-seated jealousy was evident. Despite her son's victory at the Southern Frontier, Salvador hadn't offered to elevate her status, and she couldn't propose it herself, as it would show how much she cared.

A few days later, Jacob presented a guest list for Carissa to review. Upon inspection, she noticed that Eleanor and the Marquis of Ironridge's family were included, as well as Dakota and Josephine, whom Helen had insisted should be invited.

The list also featured several grand princesses, the Marquis of Jadehill's family, and some noble families, such as the Farrell family, the Quinton family, the Earl of Gracehold's family, and the Earl of Silverstone's family.

Most families of fourth-rank officials and above were invited too, and the Klein family was a must-invite.

After reviewing the list, Carissa said, "Alright, prepare the invitations according to this list and send them out as soon as possible."

Jacob nodded slightly. "Understood. I will prepare the invitations according to the list."

"Thank you, Jacob."

Jacob added, "Now that you're in charge of the household affairs, please be cautious with staffing. We vetted every servant before they were hired. However, His Highness has been away on the battlefield for years, and both Luke and I have been busy with administration and other tasks. Some staff may have formed connections with certain people during this time.

"We conducted a thorough check when His Highness returned, but we're still worried that some individuals may have hidden their true affiliations. Also, we haven't had much interaction with the people around Lady Helen."

Carissa pondered thoughtfully. While the issues within Hell Monarch Estate were manageable since the servants had been screened, she couldn't fully trust all the people Helen had brought with her.

"I understand what to do. Thank you for the reminder, Jacob," Carissa said with a smile.

Jacob nodded respectfully before leaving the room.

Carissa then called for Gillian and requested a list of the people in Helen's entourage. She instructed that the list should not be shared with Helen or anyone else.

Gillian, once away from her mistress, was sharp and vigilant. She immediately understood Carissa's intentions.

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Gillian brought over the list, which was detailed with names, hometowns, ages, years of entry into the palace, and the specific palaces where they had served. On the surface, everything seemed in order. Only three individuals had served in other palaces-Leslie, Janice, and Sonia.

Leslie had previously served Wanda, one of the late king's noble concubines. After Wanda's death, the queen dowager had reassigned Leslie to Helen. Janice and Sonia had originally served Lauren, a concubine the late king had favored. Her death had been sudden, reportedly due to an acute illness.

After Lauren's death, in a fit of anger, the late king sentenced everyone who had served her to death. Janice and Sonia had only been spared because Victoria had transferred them to serve Helen, who had been sick at the time.

Most of the remaining servants had been brought into the palace by Helen from her residence. Gillian, being Helen's wet nurse and having raised her, was not suspected of any issues. The servants Helen brought from her home were unlikely to pose any problems either.

Carissa instructed that extra attention be paid to the three individuals who had previously served in other palaces and to report any irregularities immediately.

As soon as the invitations for the birthday banquet were sent out, a few people immediately began plotting. One such person was Jessica, who specifically invited Serena to Harmony Palace and asked the latter to accompany her to Helen's birthday banquet.

Serena was reluctant to go. She harbored lingering resentment towards Carissa, her former sister-in-law. Why did Carissa get all the luck? How did she end up as the Hell Monarch's princess consort? On the day of the banquet, aside from Helen, Carissa would undoubtedly be the center of attention. Serena had no desire to watch her former sister-in-law bask in the spotlight and flaunt her success. However, she dared not refuse Jessica directly, especially since she had already made a mess of things previously, and was fortunate that Jessica still wished to maintain relations with her.

So, Serena replied diplomatically, "Our family didn't receive an invitation to the banquet, so wouldn't it be a bit inappropriate for me to attend?"

Jessica smiled and said, "The invitation was sent to my mother and also to my in-laws. Since it's an invitation to me, I am free to bring anyone I choose."

Serena forced a smile and replied, "You make a valid point, Lady Jessica. It's just..."

"Do you still want to be Rafael's concubine? Tomorrow, I'll create an opportunity for you. If you fall in front of him and he catches you, he will have no choice but to take you as his concubine," said Jessica, her impatience evident.

Serena's eyes widened in sudden, intense joy. "Really? If I get what I wish for, I'll never forget the assistance you and Grand Princess Eleanor gave me."

"There will be many witnesses

present. As long as he catches you

and holds you in his arms, he will have to take responsibility for ruining your reputation. I know

Rafael well—he is a responsible net

and wouldn't let an innocent woman be mocked and left without being able to marry in the future," Jessica replied.

Serena's excitement was palpable, her mind swirling with thoughts of Rafael's handsome and imposing face. Her heart raced with

anticipation. She knew she was not as beautiful as Carissa, but she was younger and untouched. If her wish came true, Rafael would surely favor and cherish her.

Jessica continued, "When the time comes, I'll make sure you have the right clothes and jewelry. But you have to keep this secret-don't tell anyone. Your household is already known for not keeping things in order. If the servants find out and word gets out, it could ruin your

entire future."

"Yes, I'll definitely keep it a secret," Serena promised, trying to calm her racing heart. The thought of Rafael made her face burn with a deep blush.

After Serena left, Jessica scoffed, "What a fool."

"Does she really think she can join the royal family with her status? It's her own greed that blinds her. She has only herself to blame," Eleanor said with a cold glint in her eyes.

Rafael would never take Serena as a concubine, but if he were to catch her, it could become a scandal that would tarnish his reputation.

"Mom, Serena may be hopeless, but we should still find someone suitable to marry Rafael as a concubine. That way, we will have control over all future actions at his household," said Jessica.

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Eleanor smiled coldly. "Why the hurry? To accomplish that, we still need Helen to step in."

"Aunt Helen?" Jessica's anger flared as she recalled their previous confrontation when Helen and Carissa had demanded money from them. "She's allied with Carissa now. Can she still be of any use to us?" Eleanor slowly picked up her cup and took a sip. "She may not heed our words, but psychological tactics always work on her. There is someone who can handle this matter."

Jessica's eyes brightened. "Psychological tactics? You mean Aunt Dakota?"

She slapped her thigh. "Mom, you think of everything! Aunt Dakota's daughter-in-law, Adelaide, has a daughter. Then, there's Kendrick's concubines too. Inez has a son and a daughter, while Matilda has a daughter and is currently pregnant.

"If Aunt Helen finds out about Matilda's pregnancy, she will undoubtedly be eager to push Rafael to take a concubine. If that sparks a quarrel between them, it will be quite entertaining." Eleanor sipped her coffee leisurely.

When it cooled, she asked for a fresh cup, then said, "They will never be united in purpose-there will always be conflict and friction between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. It's up to us to stir the pot. Helen is easy to manipulate. As long as she and Carissa are at odds, using Helen will be straightforward."

"You're right, Mom," Jessica agreed, nodding.

Eleanor pondered for a moment, then added, "In any case, we should aim to make Rafael's household chaotic and unsettled. Ideally, it will be like the Warren family. That will force Rafael to focus on his household affairs and neglect other matters."

Jessica hummed in agreement. Although she had doubts about focusing on Rafael's household, she trusted that her mother had her reasons.

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Serena returned to her home and sat at her vanity in her bedroom. As she gazed into the mirror, she studied her reflection. Her cheeks were slightly rounded, giving her a full, lustrous appearance that was traditionally associated with great wealth and prosperity.

Her maid, Vivian, asked, "My lady, you've been gazing at the mirror for a while. Has your makeup faded? Would you like me to redo your hair and adjust your accessories?"

"Vivian, do you think I look good?" Serena asked, touching her fair and supple face.

"My lady, you're naturally beautiful," Vivian replied.

"And how do I compare to Carissa?" Serena pressed further.

Vivian hesitated for a moment, then smiled brightly. "My lady, you're naturally livelier and more radiant than her."

Serena felt a surge of pride. "Find that headpiece Carissa gifted me... No, forget it, don't bother with her things."

Jessica would arrange everything

for Serena in due course. When the time came, she couldn't afford to appear shabby. Otherwise, how would she capture the Hell O Monarch's attention?

"Is there something you're particularly happy about, my lady?" Vivian asked.

Serena was brimming with joy and excitement, almost bursting to share the news. But recalling Jessica's instructions, she managed to hold back. The anticipation was nearly unbearable; she wouldn't be able to endure keeping this secret for the next few days.

So, she went to Rebecca's room. She sent away her mother's maid, Jade, leaving just the two of them alone.

Rebecca looked frail, lying in bed with a sickly appearance. She hadn't gotten up for several days. Though she was cleaned daily, there was still a lingering odor.

Serena sat at a distance, trying to contain her excitement. "Mom, Lady Helen's birthday banquet at Hell Monarch Estate is next month, and Lady Jessica said she would take me."

Rebecca's response was curt, "Let

her do her own thing. Why would you go? That woman didn't even send us an invitation. Have you forgotten how she's caused trouble for your brother? Don't go to her celebration!"