

War Song 451

Chapter 451

Zoey sighed.

"Viola wasn't invited to this banquet. She insisted on coming along. When she married into the Farrell family, after your son died in battle, you returned all the dowry and even gave her Thomas' pension. You even gave her two more shops. Now, everything has been moved to the Warren family. On her wedding day, she even compared her dowry to Lady Carissa's.

"This isn't something I should be telling you, but I couldn't bear to see you worrying about her. You shouldn't concern yourself with her matters. It's more important to take care of your own health. If Thomas' spirit sees you constantly unhappy, he might not rest in peace."

Alice was shocked beyond measure upon hearing this.

Viola wasn't someone Alice would have imagined being like this. She understood propriety and respected her elders, but how had she become this way?

Had Viola always been hypocritical, or had she changed?

Zoey looked at Alice, a phrase stuck in her throat but left unsaid.

"Thank you for informing me, Zoey," Alice said, her voice tinged with bitterness. "I once considered her like a daughter, and wasn't willing to let her live as a widow in my family. Actually, she hasn't visited me even once over the past few years. I should have known then. Well, since she has made her choice, whether it's fortune or misfortune, it's for her to bear."

Zoey bowed. "Please take care, Madam Alice."

There was nothing more to say. If she continued, she might end up revealing things that were meant to be kept hidden.

Alice was too distressed!

Opal, who had been accompanying Alice, remained silent throughout. She sensed Zoey was hiding something, but felt it inappropriate to press further since the matter concerned Viola herself. What good would it do to ask more?

Alice said to Opal, "Go accompany them for the flower viewing. I want to stay here alone for a while. The bougainvillea here is truly beautiful."

The bougainvillea in the corner was blooming vibrantly, contrasting with the pallor in her heart.

Alice needed some time to calm down. With the banquet still to begin, leaving the scene would seem like a slight to Helen and Carissa. However, it was hard for her to compose herself quickly.

She understood Zoey's intentions

and Carissa's kindness. She

accepted them all, and realized that Viola had no connection to the Farrell family anymore. Now that

Viola had a husband, any further hate net

conversation with her might lead to reproach from her husband's family if others saw.

After calming down for a while, as Alice was about to return to the theater area, she saw Viola approaching her alone. Viola moved quickly and then swiftly hid behind a tree, as if afraid of being seen. Viola hesitantly called out, her voice barely above a whisper, "Mother."

Alice said quietly, "At this point, calling me 'madam' would be more appropriate. It's not right to call me that anymore."

Viola had just seen Zoey talking to Alice and was concerned about what might have been said, so she came over. Seeing Alice's attitude so aloof and distant, she felt a pang of anxiety and asked, "What did my sister-in-law say to you?"

"Nothing much. She just advised me not to worry about you anymore," Alice said, her heart aching as she looked at Viola's face.

It felt like her heart was breaking inside her. In the letters Thomas had written from the battlefield, he had always reminded Alice to take good care of Viola and not to make things difficult for her.

Knowing her son's deep affection for

Viola, Alice had never imposed the strict rules that other mothers-in-law might. She had always considered Viola like a daughter, but how could she have fallen for someone like Barrett, who had abandoned his legitimate wife?

"Is that all she said?" Viola asked, looking at Alice.

"That's all."

Alice didn't want to say more. She was already deeply disappointed. The term "mother" had been inappropriate; it should not have been used. Viola shouldn't have said it, and if she did, it shouldn't have been so subtle that it was barely heard.

"Madam Alice, actually, my husband is not as people say. He is a righteous gentleman, just like Thomas. They're both..."

"Be quiet!" Alice's expression

changed abruptly. "Don't you dare compare Mr. Warren to my son! Every letter from the battlefield was about how much Thomas cared for you. After he married you, you didn't give birth to any children, but he didn't take any concubines because he promised he wouldn't. How can you compare my son to Mr. Warren?"

Chapter 452

Viola was anxious.

"What I'm saying is the truth. The rumors were mostly unfounded, likely spread by the Hell Monarch's princess consort out of resentment. Moreover, the recent incident of dung being thrown at our residence was also orchestrated by her."

Alice turned abruptly and walked away, her steps unsteady and her face pale. Viola's words had struck her deeply.

After hearing Zoey's remarks, Alice had thought that even if she accepted Viola's marriage to Barrett, the affection she spoke of couldn't be genuine. But now, hearing Viola's words, Alice felt a coldness wash over her.

She could hardly believe that Viola would compare Thomas to someone like Barrett.

She found Opal and gripped her niece-in-law's hand tightly, fearing she might lose control of her emotions and disrupt Helen's birthday banquet.

Opal took her back to the theater area, where Carissa noticed them and asked, "Are you feeling unwell? Perhaps you should go back and rest. The days are long, and you can come back whenever you wish." "Rest assured, Your Grace, it's nothing," Alice said, trying to maintain her composure despite her agitation.

"Shall I accompany you to the sitting hall to rest for a while?" Carissa offered.

"No, please don't trouble yourself, Your Grace," Opal quickly interjected. "The guests are here, and you still have to oversee the event."

Carissa nodded. "Very well. Just enjoy the performance and try not to think about anything else."

Carissa caught sight of Viola standing not far off. When their eyes met, Viola quickly looked away, her expression a complex mix of emotions.

Carissa had seen them talking earlier, but since it was a matter between their families, she felt it wasn't her place to intervene. She had genuinely invited the Farrell family, though she hadn't expected Viola to come along.

Soon, the male guests began to arrive in the garden. Given the scale of the banquet and the spacious setting, the separation between men and women was not as strict.

Although everyone was in the garden enjoying the flowers, they were at a considerable distance from each other and did not engage in close contact.

As Carissa was about to sit down

and enjoy the performance with the others, she noticed Janice heading towards the male guests from Helen's side. She kept a close

eye

the scene, and observed that Janice approached Rafael and said

something to him. Rafael nodded,

then moved towards Helen.

Helen was currently enjoying the flowers with Eleanor and other ladies. They were talking, but the content of their conversation was unclear.

Fortunately, Violet was nearby,

maintaining a cold and watchful

demeanor. From her vantage point, she was not too far from them, and despite the noise of the event, she should be able to hear their conversation clearly.

Carissa glanced at Serena, who stood behind Jessica, barely visible. Nonetheless, Carissa could see that Serena was extremely nervous.

At the same time, Rafael was striding purposefully towards Helen, as though he had something urgent to discuss.

As Rafael approached Helen,

Jessica suddenly stepped aside and

grabbed Serena's arm, giving her a

forceful push. Serena stumbled and cried out, falling directly towards Rafael.

Her cry drew everyone's attention. Seeing her about to fall into Rafael's arms, the crowd collectively gasped.

What a scandal this would be if she fell into the Hell Monarch's embrace-how could she ever salvage her reputation after this?

Especially with so many prominent families present today, how could she ever find a suitor? The only way out might be for the Hell Monarch to take her himself.

But which family did that reckless girl belong to?

However, the situation seemed full of hidden schemes. Many noble ladies recognized the ploy and watched with thinly veiled amusement, their lips curling into cold smiles. Then, with a loud thud, Serena fell to the ground.

The onlookers blinked in confusion. How had she gone from seemingly falling into the Hell Monarch's arms to being a full yard away from him?

Moreover, Rafael had turned on his heel and walked away. His expression was one of clear disgust, as if he feared being tainted by something unclean.

Chapter 453

All eyes were on Serena as she lay on the ground, her tears on the verge of spilling. Her knees and forehead throbbed with pain.

But the pain was secondary-she had come so close to falling into the Hell Monarch's arms.

She thought that although Rafael was a martial general, he would surely have a compassionate heart. Any man would instinctively reach out to help if a woman was about to fall. However, just as

she believed she was about to be caught, she felt as if some force had pulled her forward. She landed on the ground while Rafael had swiftly stepped back.

The speed of his retreat was so swift it was barely perceptible, as if he had never moved at all.

Struggling in pain, Serena raised her head, her eyes filled with tears, only to meet Rafael's cold, icy gaze. The intensity of his stare made her shiver uncontrollably.

A maid helped her up, but Serena could barely stand, leaning heavily on the maid for support. Instinctively, she looked towards Jessica, who was standing nearby, watching with a detached expression and showing no sign of wanting to assist.

Everyone was observing her, their gazes filled with scorn or judgment.

"I recognize her. She's a lady from the Warren family. Her name is Serena."

"Are you sure? What is someone from the Warren family doing here?"

"I don't know. The princess consort wouldn't be hosting someone from the Warren family, would she?"

"Is she trying to elevate her position? It looked like she was deliberately throwing herself at Prince Rafael. Is the Warren family completely shameless?"

"Hmph, does the Warren family have any shame left? They've long since lost all sense of propriety and limits."

Hearing these comments, Serena burst into tears. She had never expected Rafael wouldn't come to her aid.

In a state of desperation, she hurried towards Viola, crying as she tried to explain, "Viola, it wasn't intentional! Someone pushed me."

She wanted to clarify, but Viola's face was a mix of anger and disbelief, clearly unconvinced by her words.

Whoever pushed her was irrelevant-it was clearly premeditated. Even if Viola wasn't aware of Serena's plan, she had clearly seen that Serena had aimed to throw herself at Rafael. After all, Serena hadn't originally been standing in that direction.

Hearing the crowd disparaging the Warren family, saying the members were shameless and disgraceful, Viola felt a cold fury wash over her. She almost wished she could slap Serena across the face.

What was this little wretch doing

here? If Serena hadn't made a scene,

few would have noticed her

presence Now, everyone knew that two people from the Warren family had arrived uninvited, confirming the very accusation of the family being shameless.

Viola's face burned with humiliation as she glanced at the crowd, locking eyes with Alice, who was being supported by Opal. Alice's gaze was filled with disappointment and coldness, which only added to

Viola's distress.

She shoved Serena aside and hissed, "Get away!"

Serena was pushed down to the ground again, and she stared at Viola in disbelief.

"Viola!" Evelyn hurried over, grasping Viola's wrist tightly. Through gritted teeth, she said, "Aren't you embarrassed enough?"

Viola's chest heaved with anger as she saw everyone staring at her with astonishment. She struggled to contain her rage.

She had come to observe Carissa's situation and to see if she was being mistreated by Helen. Instead, she had become the subject of ridicule because of Serena. Carissa stood by the roses with a faint, mocking smile, which only deepened Viola's humiliation.

Clutching her handkerchief tightly, Viola said, "Mom, let's go."

Evelyn was anxious. "We can't leave now. The birthday feast hasn't even started."

"If you're not leaving, I am."

Viola turned on her heel, and headed for the exit. Seeing this, Serena also stood up and rushed after her, intending to leave together.

However, they were heading towards the male guests, who moved aside as they approached, clearly trying to avoid any association with them.

Viola's face was ashen with anger, her hatred for Serena burning fiercely.

Now, the Warren family had become a complete joke-not because of Aurora, but because of her and Serena.

What was most humiliating was that

her former mother-in-law had

witnessed the entire scene. Alice had already harbored doubts about Viola's husband, and now, Viola feared that the Warren family would be seen as even more disgraceful in the older woman's eyes.

Chapter 454

Lily walked over to Serena and said, "Ms. Warren, you have a head injury. Please come with me so I can tend to it."

Lily had previously worked at Valor Estate, and she was a familiar face to Serena.

Serena was aware that her forehead was bleeding. Though it was only a small amount, appearing at the birthday feast with a bloody forehead would be highly inappropriate. Thus, she reluctantly followed Lily. As Lily attended to Serena's wound, she said softly, "Never covet what's someone else's."

Serena felt humiliated, and trembled all over.

Outside, Violet approached Carissa.

"It was Jessica who pushed her. Clearly, they planned it together. They probably intended for Serena to fall onto your man and force him into marrying her. What's odd is that Jessica seems indifferent to whether the plan succeeds or not."

Carissa replied, "Yeah. When Lady Dakota came out with her grandchildren and then the topic changed to taking concubines, I knew their intentions. They want to make my mother-in-law envious, and push her to make Rafael take a concubine. They're trying to create a rift between my mother-in-law and I.

"As for Serena, they never intended for her to become Rafael's concubine. They know full well that he won't accept anyone from the Warren family. Their real aim was to tarnish Rafael's reputation, making it seem like he ruined a young woman's reputation without taking responsibility."

"Is Serena out of her mind? To think she wants to marry the marshal has she lost her sanity?" Violet found Serena's actions particularly foolish. "After today's fiasco, who would still consider her?" Carissa said calmly, "She's foolish, but she came here with Lady Jessica's backing, which means her mother is also involved. Barrett's status was lowered, and from what I know of his mother, she must be frantic. When people are desperate, they don't think clearly."

Violet agreed with that assessment.

"By the way, you weren't far from them. Did you overhear what Grand Princess Eleanor and my mother-in-law discussed? Why did Janice call Rafael over?" Carissa asked.

Violet responded, "They were with Dakota, talking about whose son is more respectful and devoted. Eleanor claimed that while the marshal was capable, he wasn't as respectful as Kendrick. Lady Helen got upset and insisted that the marshal was indeed very respectful, but Eleanor wouldn't believe it.

"That's when Janice suggested she would call the marshal over by telling him that Lady Helen was feeling dizzy and unwell. If the marshal rushed over, it would prove his respect and devotion. Lady Helen agreed to this."

Carissa said with interest, "Janice? It was Janice who suggested it?"

"Yes, it was her."

"Janice proposed something during a discussion among the ladies? That's intriguing," Carissa said.

Violet pressed her finger against her own forehead. "She's either incredibly bold, or has ulterior motives. She should be dealt with."

"Yes, but the real issue is making my mother-in-law accept that there's a traitor among her people."

Carissa felt that dealing with Janice wasn't the problem. The real issue was Helen's blind confidence in the loyalty of everyone around her.. Given this situation, Helen wouldn't believe that Janice had been bribed

by Eleanor.

Carissa glanced at Helen, who was still chatting with Eleanor and Dakota. Her chin was lifted high, looking very proud.

Carissa felt a deep sense of frustration. She had previously clashed with Eleanor over the issue with The Gilded Tower, and now, it seemed they were back in a difficult situation.

Was this a case of having not suffered enough, or did Eleanor think she had become wiser?

Finally, the feast began, with male and female guests seated separately, divided by screens.

Carissa sat beside Helen, with Gillian and Janice attending to them.

Ryan was introduced to the esteemed guests by Rafael, allowing the distinguished figures present to make his acquaintance.

The birthday feast was flawless; even Eleanor, who had the highest standards for banquet etiquette, couldn't find a single fault.

Aside from the incident with Serena, there were no other disruptions.

As the dishes were served one by one, each dish was a masterpiece of color, aroma, and flavor. The well-trained servants attended to the guests, ensuring that every detail of etiquette and procedure was meticulously observed.

Many people thought to themselves that it was no wonder the Hell Monarch didn't mind that Carissa had once been married to another man. Besides being skilled in battle, she also managed her household well.

The Warren family had indeed lost a treasure-one wondered if Barrett regretted his decisions.

As they thought this, many couldn't help but compare Viola and Carissa. The difference between them was like night and day.

Chapter 455

Ultimately, Viola didn't leave the banquet before this.

The scrutinizing gazes that fell upon her face made her feel utterly humiliated. Yet, she couldn't bring herself to look away, unwilling to miss even a moment of Carissa's potential embarrassment. Such a grand banquet was bound to have some slip-ups.

The next part of the event was the toasting ceremony. Although the male and female guests were seated separately, the screens dividing them were only a slight barrier.

During the toasts, it was customary for the guests to bow their heads in acknowledgment. As the male guests moved to toast, they said, "Let's go, we'll toast to Lady Helen."

The women paused, putting down their utensils and lifting their fans to cover their faces.

Rafael led a group consisting of Harvey, Jeremiah, and Trevor, and the men approached Helen. They didn't glance at the female guests but walked straight to Helen, stopping a short distance before her and raising their glasses.

"Lady Helen, we wish you a long and healthy life, filled with joy and peace. May you live as long as the mountains."

Originally, Rafael was supposed to drink this toast on behalf of his mother, but Helen, delighted, took the glass herself and said cheerfully, "Good. May everyone live as long as the mountains. Let us enjoy many more years and the blessings of our descendants."

Jeremiah and Trevor, both of advanced age, found this wish suitable for themselves as well. Only Harvey stood awkwardly by.

Jeremiah and Trevor drank as a gesture of respect, and Helen promptly drank from her glass. Harvey quickly finished his drink, and excused himself before departing with them.

The men continued to toast in groups of three. After Helen had drunk several glasses, Carissa stood and said, "I will now toast to the earls and marquises in attendance on behalf of my mother-in-law. Thank you for coming today. If there has been any lack of hospitality, please forgive us."

There were two earls and one marquis in attendance today, and the marquis was the Marquis of Ironridge, Jessica's husband. He had not once glanced at Jessica since entering.

Jessica's eyes burned with anger. If he wasn't interested in looking at her, she had no desire to look at him.

"Well said, Your Grace!" Leopold said with a smile, draining his glass and giving a respectful bow to Carissa. "I have great respect for you."

"Lord Winchester, you flatter me," Carissa replied with a smile.

The two earls also finished their drinks and cast admiring glances at Carissa.

Viola watched the scene unfold, and found it ironic. The toast was meant for Helen, and if anyone should be drinking in her place, it should be Rafael. How did it end up being Carissa?

Viola expected Rafael to be furious, but when she glanced at him, she found him gazing at Carissa with an expression of deep, tender affection.

At that moment, Viola was utterly dumbfounded. She stood frozen in shock.

This kind of look was familiar to her, though it had been a long time. Thomas used to look at her like that, but Barrett never had. His eyes were always calm and distant. Memories of Thomas surged forth like a tidal wave, and the image of Rafael seemed to merge with his.

Viola quickly downed a glass of wine, trying to suppress the swirling thoughts.

What use were memories now that Thomas was gone?

Meanwhile, Serena was sitting beside her. She saw Rafael within her reach, and knew this was her only chance. Jessica would no

longer take her to meet the He.net

Monarch, and after her previous

failure, Jessica hadn't offered a

word of comfort.

Serena had to marry Rafael-she was determined!

Driven by obsession, she ignored the curious stares of those around her. Standing up with her glass, she walked forward, her voice trembling as she said, "I offer this toast to Lady Helen. I wish that..."

Before she could finish her sentence, she staggered and fell toward the Hell Monarch.

Finally, a strong arm reached out to catch her. Her heart leaped with joy, but when she looked up, her face went pale with shock-it was the Marquis of Ironridge, Leopold! Leopold released her as

soon as she was steady on her feet, but the room's eyes were already on them. Leopold's face darkened with realization, his expression turning ashen. "You bitch!" Jessica's voice cut through the air as she hurled her glass to the side and stormed forward.

Grabbing Serena by the shoulders, Jessica slapped her hard.

Serena was thrown off balance, crashing to the floor. She covered her face, her eyes brimming with tears, looking around in panic as if caught in a nightmare.

Everyone's gaze was fixed on her, as

it had been before. But this time,

their eyes were filled with mockery. It was clear to all what her intentions had been. If there had been any doubt before, it was gone

now. Serena was clearly trying to latch onto the Hell Monarch.

Chapter 456

Viola was completely floored. She couldn't believe Serena would repeatedly engage in such shameless behavior. This time, Serena had even offended Leopold!

Most troubling of all, Leopold hadn't merely grabbed her. He had caught her around the waist, likely an instinctive reaction.

As a male guest, Leopold was unaware of the earlier commotion in the garden. All he saw was a woman who appeared to be fainting with an injured eye, and he instinctively reached out to catch her. The instinctive action had been so swift that Leopold's mind lagged behind just a moment. By the time he realized what he had done, he was already holding Serena.

And it had been in full view of everyone!

Carissa's expression hardened. "Guards, escort Ms. Warren back to her residence. She's unwell."

Margaret cast a grateful glance at Carissa. If Serena wasn't sent away promptly, the situation would be difficult to resolve.

Lily and two maids quickly entered. One supported Serena's arm, while the other helped her out of the room.

Serena, initially dazed, suddenly struggled and looked toward Jessica with desperation as she was dragged away, tears streaming down her face. "Lady Jessica, you promised you would help me! Please help me!"

Her plea sparked a flurry of discussions among the guests.

"Was she aiming for Prince Rafael or Lord Winchester?"

"Since she said Lady Jessica would help her, it's possible she was aiming for Lord Winchester. I've heard that Lord Winchester's secondary wife is Madam Winchester's niece, who has already given birth to a son and daughter and is currently pregnant. Perhaps Lady Jessica wants Lord Winchester to take another secondary wife?"

"But why resort to such underhanded tactics? She's a duchess. Why doesn't she just handle it directly?"

"You probably don't know the trouble Lady Jessica caused at Lord Winchester's household. She has been hiding at her natal home for some time. Since she can't just go back, she's making a scene to cover it up!"

The whispers and speculations reached Leopold's ears, adding to the already tense atmosphere.

Jessica was furious, her eyes flashing with a murderous intensity as she met Leopold's gaze. She knew her husband had misunderstood, but how could she explain the situation here? Was she supposed to admit that she intended to push Serena onto Rafael?

"Lady Jessica, help me! You said you would help me!" Serena, who had already been dragged out, shouted desperately. "Lady Jessica, you can't just abandon me!"

Jessica's rage was about to explode, but Eleanor intervened with a sharp command, "Hold on."

Jessica's anger was instantly quelled as she looked at her mother with a plea for help.

Eleanor's eyes were dark with fury. She was upset not only with Jessica for failing to manage the situation, but also with Serena's audacity to feign fainting and create a scene

But with the situation already met

escalated, if Jessica didn't intervene, the matter would likely become even harder to resolve. Eleanor's

long-maintained reputation was also at risk of being ruined.

She turned to Margaret and said, "Madam Winchester, this girl is someone I have taken a liking to and has nothing to do with Jessica. She has been unwell today, which is why she has been fainting repeatedly. Once we resolve this issue, I believe neither my household nor the

Marquis of Ironridge's household would seek to tarnish her

reputation."

Margaret sneered, "Grand Princess

Eleanor, you really go above and beyond, even concerning yourself

with our household's matters. But

you are right. We, the Marquis of Ironridge's family, do not ruin reputations without cause. Take her away for now. We'll consider it further later."

Eleanor, though deeply embarrassed and furious, maintained a polite smile. "Today is Lady Helen's birthday banquet. I apologize for the disturbance. Lady Helen, please accept this glass of wine from me, and I hope you won't hold it against us."

Helen had been drinking, and she looked confused by the unfolding events. She glanced at Carissa and noticed her calm demeanor but cold eyes, and realized that something significant was amiss.

Leopold, along with the two earls, also turned and left. It was obvious Leopold was furious.

Was the young woman enamored with Leopold, or was Jessica deliberately arranging a concubine for her husband to strip the current favored secondary wife of his attention?

Chapter 457

Carissa continued to entertain the guests, but privately instructed Violet to keep an eye on everyone, especially those with ulterior motives.

Violet observed two young women who frequently exchanged glances with Eleanor. After noting their details, she approached Lily to inquire about them.

Lily was assisting with the arrangements inside. After identifying the two women, she came out and told Violet, "The one in the yellow dress is from Lady Ruth's natal family, but I don't know her name. The one in the violet dress is from the late Lady Chloe's natal family, and her name is Renee. She is exceptionally talented and beautiful. People often compare her to Queen Kylie. Queen Kylie's talents were once unrivaled in the capital."

Violet made a mental note of that. When Carissa emerged, Violet informed her of the two women's identities.

Carissa understood immediately. Both Ruth and the late noble concubine, Chloe, had connections to Eleanor and Yuvan. They were clearly trying to insert their own people into Hell Monarch Estate. They had brought Serena here to cause trouble for Rafael.

It seemed they couldn't allow Yuvan to stay in Valken anymore. He needed to be brought back to the capital, where he could be watched closely.

It was also time to settle the score with him for what happened to Avis.

After the banquet, Rafael held Carissa's hand as they saw off the guests at the main entrance. Together, they made a stunning pair-the prince was handsome and noble, while the princess consort was beautiful and elegant.

The guests couldn't help but admire the pair, thinking that they were indeed a perfect match made in heaven.

The guests left the estate in an orderly fashion, thanks to the careful arrangements made by the guards, with no sign of congestion.

Eleanor and Jessica shared a carriage, and opened the appreciation gift presented before they departed.

Carissa had prepared a thoughtful gift for each guest, though each was different.

Jessica opened her gift to find a small sculpture of a tortoise, a symbol of longevity and wisdom.

She tossed it aside with a huff. "What is this?"

She then looked at Eleanor's gift, which was a small sculpture of an elephant, a symbol of virtue and integrity.

Fuming, Jessica exclaimed, "What does this mean? Is she implying that I won't live long? And she gave you an elephant! Is she suggesting you lack virtue?"

Eleanor shot her daughter a cold glance. "Be quiet! Haven't you seen how your mother-in-law looks at you? You've been staying at Harmony Palace for too long. It's time for you to go back."

"Go back? He hasn't even come to pick me up!" Jessica had been waiting for Leopold to come for her. "And after what happened today, what am I supposed to do?"

"What else can you do? Take Serena

as Leopold's Secondary wife. At least that will divide some of the worthless woman's favor."

Eleanor rubbed her temples, growing impatient. "Enough! Go home and stop bothering me. I have things to attend to. You should return home and manage the shop you have with Dakota. Also, have you sold The Gilded Tower yet?"

Jessica was furious at the thought of taking Serena into her household, but with her mother asking about the business, she had to reply, "I'm in the process of transferring it, but it won't be settled right away." "What price are you asking?"

Jessica hesitated. "Four hundred thousand silver coins."

Eleanor's eyes widened in shock. "Have you lost your mind?! Four hundred thousand? Everyone knows The Gilded Tower is modeled after The Golden Tower. It's made a profit already. You should sell it at a lower price. Otherwise, it will come back to haunt us if anything goes wrong."

"Mom, I'm trying to recoup the large sum we gave Aunt Helen. We need to earn that money back. Besides, our business is doing so well. Even forty thousand silver coins is still a bargain."

"How many times have I told you?"

Don't be greedy. The gold

ornaments sold in the first year will have started fading by now. If someone raises a fuss, the Royal Citadel will investigate, and it will come back to us. Don't you know who sits at the top of the Royal Citadel? It's the Klein family. It's the uncle of that spawn from the Duke of Northwatch's family!"

Seeing her mother's stern expression, Jessica could only reluctantly agree, "Understood, Mom. I will lower the price."

"You should return to Ironridge Estate tomorrow," Eleanor's tone was now tinged with impatience.

Jessica sulked. She really didn't want to face her mother-in-law again.

Margaret had been seriously ill before, and it had seemed like her coffin would be brought into the residence, but she managed to hold on. Now, she was still in charge of the household and was unwilling to relinquish control.

Chapter 458

And that wretched woman currently favored by Leopold was Margaret's niece. She was made his concubine and, like a breeding sow, already had a son and a daughter. Now, she was pregnant again and was expected to give birth in a few days.

Returning now would only add to Jessica's grievances. But with her mother's orders, Jessica had no choice but to go back.

The pride she once had, boasting about returning to her natal family, now seemed like a distant memory. No one came to pick her up, and she had to return alone, looking quite embarrassed. Taking Serena in as a concubine...

That wretched woman had bore a son and a daughter, and was about to give birth again. Though Serena was foolish, her youth and beauty gave her an advantage. Jessica could let Serena deal with that wretched woman, and then benefit from the chaos.

Even though Jessica thought that way, her resentment towards Serena was profound.

Wretched, all of them-Jessica had brought trouble upon herself.

Eleanor closed her eyes, her thoughts drifting elsewhere.

Yuvan's plan to marry a daughter from the Spencer family as his new wife had been settled shortly after Avis' death. The Spencer family was powerful and influential, with soldiers, weapons, and warhorses. She wondered what position the Spencer family's daughter held within the family.

Also, Oliver's daughter had reached marriageable age and might be a good match. If Yuvan's eldest son, Randall, married her, they would acquire the support of the Prince family. Oliver controlled the Hell Monarch Army and the Sinclair Army.

There were also the marriage arrangements for Stephanie and Sabrina, which would be best managed within the high society of the capital. Through strategic marriages, they could attract some important figures.

But first, Eleanor needed a reason to bring Yuvan and his family back. For now, she couldn't afford to focus on Jessica and needed to plan carefully.

At Hell Monarch Estate, the lively atmosphere gradually faded as the guests departed. The servants quickly tidied up, and Carissa escorted Helen back to her quarters.

Helen had enjoyed herself and had drunk a little more than usual, so her steps were somewhat unsteady.

Carissa called out to a maid, and said, "Go and make a pot of sobering remedy for Mother."

The maid responded promptly, "Understood, Your Grace."

After the maid left, Carissa began to gently massage Helen's forehead. "Are you still feeling dizzy?"

Helen closed her eyes with a smile. "I'm just so happy, really overjoyed. Today's banquet was exemplary. Carissa, how did you manage such perfection? It was such a grand event, and you handled everything alone without bothering me once."

Carissa's lips twitched as she held back a smile. If she had asked Helen for advice, the result might have been chaotic.

In her slightly tipsy state, Helen opened her eyes a crack and glanced at Carissa. "Now, there's no other regret. I just hope you'll soon give me a healthy grandson, so I can enjoy the same delight as Lady Dakota."

Carissa smiled. "Well, if I can't give you one, would it be acceptable for Rafael to marry a few concubines?"

"That would naturally be..." Helen was excitedly about to agree, when she noticed her son standing at the door.

His tall shadow loomed like a giant beast on the wall. She froze momentarily, but reassured herself that marrying concubines wasn't wrong—every family did it.

She forced a smile and said, "You're so generous. It seems the rumors about you being jealous are just that—rumors."

"Taking in concubines?" Rafael strode in, his voice icy. "I married you because you wouldn't tolerate concubines. So, the rumors about you being jealous aren't true?"

"What?" Helen didn't immediately understand. "You want her to be jealous? Why?"

"Because I dislike having many women around me. I don't want any secondary wives or concubines."

Rafael's gaze shifted from Carissa

to Helen, his voice growing colder, "If she dares to arrange for concubines, I'll raise hell with her from dawn till dusk, even if it means going against the entire Pathfinders Guild or the martial world. I won't stop, not even if the Pathfinders Guild members turn me into mincemeat. There's no way I'll tolerate another woman around me. If she wants to try, she can go ahead and see what happens."

Helen shivered, suddenly completely sober. She stood up, and scolded, "What nonsense are you talking

about? Saying something as unlucky as getting turned to mincemeat?

your wife wants to arrange a

concubine for you, that's her being

If

generous. Why are you throwing a fit

at her?"

Rafael coldly replied, "Let her try to get me a concubine. If she does, I'll bring down this estate and then tear down the Pathfinders Guild."

"You're insane! Pathfinders Guild is

full of experts! How could you possibly take them on? Helen was so frightened that she moved forward and tried to cover his

mouth. "Just be quiet. Who el net

anything about taking concubines? Even if Carissa wanted to, would never allow it!"

Chapter 459

Rafael's stubbornness flared up again. He gently pushed his mother aside, then grabbed Carissa by the wrist.

"I just heard you mention getting me a concubine. Come with me. I'll deal with you in our room."

With that, he dragged Carissa out of the room.

Helen was stunned, unable to comprehend what was happening.

Wasn't it just a casual mention? Her son was truly out of his mind!

"Gillian, go and check on them immediately!" Helen said urgently. "We can't have him hurting her. How am I going to explain this to my sister? She dotes on Carissa the most!"

Gillian sighed. "How can I go? You wanted to arrange concubines for Prince Rafael yourself after listening to Grand Princess Eleanor and Lady Dakota. If I go now, it might only provoke His Highness further. Lady Carissa seems resilient enough..."

"Nonsense! Which husband beats their wife after marrying her? If you don't go, I will!"

Gillian tried to stop her. "Alright, I'll go get Mr. York. His Highness listens to him the most."

"Quickly!" Helen slammed the table in frustration.

The thought of Carissa's beautiful face getting hurt—oh, how painful it was just to imagine!

As Rafael dragged Carissa out of Helen's courtyard, he suddenly lifted her in his arms. Carissa let out a scream, which was loud enough to make Helen feel dizzy.

Oh god, had Rafael really hit Carissa?!

Helen pushed Gillian urgently. "Why are you still here? Hurry!"

Gillian hobbled outside, but they were already gone. Of course, she had to wander around the courtyard a bit to see if she could find them.

Alas, Helen didn't realize Rafael's intentions.

This was deliberate—to show that the matter of concubines should not be mentioned within the residence. It wasn't because of Carissa's jealousy, but rather because he forbade it.

Carissa was carried back to her bedroom. Lulu and the others giggled as they scampered out. It looked like they wouldn't be needed tonight.

Rafael set Carissa down on the table, wrapping his arms around her waist with a playful grin. "So, how was my performance tonight?"

"Only superficial, good enough to deceive Mother," Carissa said as she rested her head against his chest, reflecting on Helen's anxious expression.

It was clear the older woman was genuinely worried about her getting hurt. Although Helen was easily swayed and prone to being used by others, her heart was genuinely large and soft.

"As long as it worked on her, that's what matters. But my mother... Don't

expect her to be sharp like the

others. She needs someone to

protect her, or she'll end up getting tricked."

Carissa tilted her head. "Well, it's better than playing mind games with me."

He brushed his lips against hers. "She's easily swayed by others, but after the scene I made tonight, I think she'll be too scared to bring it up again for at least a year or two." Carissa laughed. "She's probably terrified."

Terrified was right-Lulu couldn't help but report, "Gillian's still pacing around the courtyard."

Carissa laughed softly, pushing Rafael away and jumping down from the table. "Alright, go tell Gillian that Rafael has calmed down and that she should go back and inform Mother."
"Understood!" Lulu hesitated for a moment at the door. "We have hot water ready. If you need any further assistance, the servants are waiting outside."

Carissa pretended not to notice the teasing glint in Lulu's eyes. "No need for further assistance. You all should get some rest."

"Yes, Your Grace!" Lulu withdrew and instructed everyone to leave, skipping the usual dressing routine.

The servants left happily. Although everyone was full, there were still many snacks and dishes left in the kitchen.

Additionally, Jacob followed Carissa's instructions and rewarded the household staff. Although it was just a small reward, it added a touch of festive cheer.

Chapter 460

After a busy day, and with the weather warming up, a bath was a necessity.

Rafael lifted Carissa effortlessly, his lips brushing her ear as he spoke in a husky, magnetic voice, "Perfect timing. Let's bathe together." Carissa wrapped her arms around his neck, her curiosity piqued. "We've been intimate every night, yet we haven't conceived. Why is that?" "Are you eager to be pregnant soon?" Rafael carried her into the bathing chamber, and started to help her out of her dress.

"Not really. I'm just curious. I remember my mother saying that she found out she was pregnant just over a month after marrying my father."

"I don't think we need to rush into having children," Rafael said, carefully peeling off her clothes until her fair shoulders were exposed. "I had Sebastian prescribe me some medicine. Let's wait until your health fully recovers first-you were injured on the battlefield, after all."

Her eyes widened. "You took contraceptive medicine? I've heard it can be quite harmful."

Rafael chuckled. "If women can take it, why can't men? Your health was already fragile. I couldn't have you taking contraceptive medicine just to prevent pregnancy. Sebastian told me that it's hard enough for women to build their strength back up. If you took it, it would undo all that progress and make things worse."

Carissa was touched. She had never heard of a man willing to take such medicine himself.

For the primary wife of a man, it wasn't even an option. If word got out that a primary wife was using contraceptive medicine, people would think she wasn't virtuous. They would think that her husband must despise her and leave her with no choice.

A proper wife was expected to bear children.

Her own mother had given birth to seven children. People used to say how lucky Melanie was-not only to have so many children, but for all of them to survive infancy. That kind of fortune was rare. But that luck...

Carissa shook off the thought, pushing it from her mind. She didn't want to dwell on it.

After their bath, the two lay in bed, and naturally, one thing led to another as they indulged in their love for each other.

"Shouldn't Yuvan and his family be returning to the capital soon?" Carissa asked, her voice hoarse from exhaustion as she lay in his embrace.

Rafael stroked her hair, his face adorned with a satisfied, warm smile. "They'll return soon. Even if we do nothing, they'll find an excuse to come back to the capital for a while. If they're set on it, they'll definitely return to handle the marriages of Randall, Sabrina, and Stephanie."

Carissa nodded in agreement.

The three children were valuable assets, ideal for forming alliances with the children of high-ranking officials. It was a significant step for them. During the New Year, Yuyan's hasty return to the capital had been about letting those three children make an appearance.

They hadn't talked about Serena, but Rafael found the whole thing disgusting. Among the many things he detested in the capital, the Warren family was at the top of the list.

How dare she try to approach him? It was a reckless move.

Carissa fell asleep in his arms, her thoughts lingering on the fact that Margaret would be visiting tomorrow.

Helen had grumbled for quite a while tonight, lamenting how that girl from the Warren family had been so shameless.

Gillian hadn't explained, only urging her to rest early.

After making such a grand appearance today and receiving envious glances from many, Helen was too happy to fall asleep.

She held Gillian's hand and said, "In the past, I thought Carissa, being a woman who was once divorced, might not be quite worthy of my son. Did you think so too?"

Gillian shook her head. "I never thought that. I knew Lady Carissa was pure. Even if she wasn't, as long as Prince Rafael likes her, that's enough for me."

Helen continued, "Speaking of liking,

it's clear that the woman Rafael likes must be her. Didn't you see the way Rafael looks at her? It's just like how the late king used to look at me-full of sweetness and affection."

Helen missed the late king. Back when he was alive, he always remembered her birthday, prepared gifts, and celebrated with her in the palace.

Gillian watched her. Helen always found ways to comfort herself. The way the late king looked at her wasn't like that. It was how Helen saw him through her own eyes.

The late king had never looked at even his most favored concubine the way Rafael looked at Carissa.

Helen fell asleep, dreaming of the late king's warm embrace. But even in her dreams, she was clear-headed-she would never have another man in her life.

Tears slipped from her eyes.

She was still so young, after all.