

War Song 461

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Viola and Serena returned to Valor Estate in complete despair.

As soon as they entered the door, Viola raised her hand. She used every ounce of strength she had and slapped Serena hard across the face.

Ignoring any sense of decorum, Viola shouted angrily, "How could the Warren family produce such a disgraceful woman like you? You completely ruined the family's reputation tonight! Come, let's go see Mother. She'll deal with you!"

Serena had already been humiliated at Hell Monarch Estate. She hadn't gotten what she wanted, and even had her body touched by the Marquis of Ironridge. Now, she had become the laughingstock of the town. Panic and fear were already gnawing at her.

Now, as soon as she stepped through the door, Viola had slapped her.

For a moment, Serena was stunned, but then she completely snapped.

Was everyone just here to bully her now?

In a fit of rage, Serena slapped Viola right back and snarled, "Who are you calling disgraceful? You think you're any better? Weren't you disgraceful when you married my brother? Weren't you disgraceful when you went to Lady Helen's birthday banquet tonight? You went to laugh at others, but in the end, they laughed at you!"

Viola never expected that after everything Serena had done, the girl would have the audacity to strike back.

Blinded by fury, Viola ignored the searing pain on her face and grabbed Serena's wrist.

"Come with me to see Mother, now!"

Serena forcefully shoved her away, sending Viola sprawling onto the floor. Standing tall and looking down coldly, Serena sneered, "You really think I would've dared to do what I did tonight without Mom's approval?"

Viola sat on the ground, her face filled with shock. "What? Mother knew? Are you saying Mother knew you were going to try and seduce the Hell Monarch?"

Serena's eyes were full of resentment. "You were there, and you were completely useless! You offered no help at all. Why do you think I tried to cozy up to the Hell Monarch? It was for Barrett! Because you broke the limbs of the man who threw dung at our estate, Barrett was reprimanded and demoted! Mother was worried about his future, and that's why tonight happened."

The more Serena spoke, the more aggrieved she became. She acted as if everything she had done was truly for Barrett's sake, and that she had sacrificed herself in the process.

Tears fell from her eyes.

"Do you think I wanted this? Do you

think I wanted to become a

concubine? Even if I became a secondary wife, I'd still be just a concubine. I'm a proper young lady from the Warren family, and yet you think don't feel humiliated being reduced to this? But who did I do it for? I did it for all of you! And you, ungrateful wretch, you dare to hit me!"

Viola was utterly stunned. Her whole world seemed to collapse, though she couldn't quite explain why. She had always believed that, despite her mother-in-law's sharp tongue, Rebecca was at least an upright person, and that the Warren family was a respectable family

But now...

Slowly, she got to her feet, her face pale as she stared at Serena. "Does your brother know about this?"

Serena snapped, "What difference

does it make if he knows or not? I did it for him. Even if he knew, he would have agreed to it, unless he doesn't care about his future! But if he didn't, he wouldn't have cast aside Carissa when she lost her family, or begged to marry Aurora in hopes of building a great future with her. His career and ambitions are everything to him-more important than anything else!"

Their argument had drawn the attention of the household, and some quick-witted servants immediately went to report to Barrett and Rebecca.

Soon after, everyone was gathered in Rebecca's quarters, listening to both Serena and Viola recount their sides of the story. Seeing the red and swollen marks on their faces from slapping each other, Rebecca felt as though the world was spinning.

Barrett looked at Serena and Viola in utter disbelief, waves of shame flooding his heart. "You went to Hell Monarch Estate for Lady Helen's birthday banquet?"

He pointed at Serena, his hand trembling with rage. "You tried to become the Hell Monarch's concubine? You hate Carissa the most, yet you wanted to become her... How could you be so shameless?!"

Viola's numb mind finally started to clear. Her husband hadn't known about this.

He hadn't approved of any of it.

Thank God.

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Serena's voice trembled with frustration as she shouted at Barrett, "Barrett, your accusations are so unfair! If you hadn't been demoted, would I have been forced to do this?"

Barrett's reply was sharp, his tone unforgiving, "Since when does my future need you meddling in it? I will fight for my future on my own! You did this for yourself! You have feelings for Prince Rafael-what's so special about him that all of you keep chasing after him?"

Serena had been putting on an air of self-righteousness, but she was now completely exposed. Hearing her brother disparage the man she loved, her face flushed with anger and embarrassment.

"He's much better than you! Even Carissa would rather divorce you and marry the prince! Doesn't that prove he's far better than you? Besides, which noblewoman in the capital doesn't want to become the Hell Monarch's princess consort?"

Barrett's expression darkened. "You want to become the Hell Monarch's princess consort, but he already has a legitimate wife. Your dream is bound to fail."

Serena cried bitterly, "Don't you think I know that by now? But my plan was that even if I entered the household as a concubine, once I won the prince's favor, replacing Carissa would only be a matter of time! Aren't you all also angry with her? She sought an edict for divorce and dragged our family's reputation through the mud! Yes, I had my own motives, but I also wanted to defend our family's honor!"

"Enough!" Rebecca had finally regained her composure after listening to the siblings argue. Her sharp voice cut through the room, "Both of you, be quiet!"

Taking a deep breath, she turned her gaze to Serena, her eyes cold and piercing. "You said the Marquis of Ironridge, Lord Winchester, touched you?"

Serena sobbed. "He put his arm around my waist. Though he let go quickly, everyone saw it."

Rebecca's face darkened. "Since it happened in full view of everyone, Lord Winchester will have to take responsibility. The Marquis of Ironridge's family is one of the top five noble families in the capital, and it was Lady Jessica who promised to help you. Now that her plan has failed, she must bear the consequences.

"Tomorrow, I'll drag my ailing body to Ironridge Estate. Lord Winchester only has Lady Jessica as his official wife and one concubine, who has borne his children. If you marry in as a concubine, you'll still have an advantage. It's well known that Lord Winchester and Lady Jessica don't get along, and that concubine has already had several children. She can't compare to your youth and beauty-you will surely win his favor."

Serena shook her head, crying. "No, Mom! I don't want to marry Lord Winchester! Lady Jessica hates me if I marry into that household, she'll make my life miserable!"

"What do you know?" Rebecca took

a deep breath, her eyes narrowing with a vicious and sinister glint. "She has no children, and the concubine is favored. She hates that concubine far more than she hates you. She'd be desperate for someone to share the concubine's attention,

"She's going to use you, so you might as well use her. Once you've secured your position in Lord Winchester's family and won his

favor, he'll help your father and his

brother in court. That's the only way you'll truly have a good life in that household."

Barrett snapped, "I don't need her help, Mom! Stop talking like that. I'll figure out my career on my own. She's the legitimate daughter of our family-how could she ever become a concubine?" Rebecca replied coldly, "Lord Winchester touched her. Her reputation is ruined. What family would want their sons to marry her now?"

Barrett retorted, "She'll just have to marry into a lower household, perhaps the second or third son of a sixth or seventh-rank official, or even a scholar. It's still better than becoming one of Lord Winchester's concubines."

"No, I won't do it!" Serena screamed, her face pale. "I refuse to marry some second son or into a lowly family!"

Viola, who had been silent, spoke up

coldly, "And who do you think you'll marry now? You think the Hell Monarch would ever look at you? Tonight, when you threw yourself at him, he saw right through your intentions. He just held back because it was Lady Helen's

birthday..."

Serena whirled around, glaring at her. "Shut up! No matter what, I'm still better off than you-a once-divorced woman who remarried! You're no better than that trash, Carissa-" Slap!

Barrett struck Serena across her face, his expression livid. "She's your sister-in-law! How dare you talk about her like that?!"

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Serena covered her face, and threw herself into Rebecca's arms. "Mom, Barrett hit me!"

Rebecca patted her back, comforting her, and looked at Barrett with disappointment.

"You hit her just because she said a few words? As her brother, how could you not see how that would hurt her? Even if her intentions weren't purely for your sake, in the end, you still stood to benefit from her actions," she said.

"Mom, I hit her because she spoke disrespectfully of her sister-in-law," Barrett said angrily.

Viola's heart swelled with emotion. Seeing how fiercely Barrett defended her made all her sacrifices feel worthwhile.

Rebecca glanced at Viola and said, "Enough. All of you leave for now. I'll talk to her myself."

Feeling suffocated by the toxic atmosphere, Barrett turned and strode out of the room, still fuming.

Viola noticed his frustration, and hurried after him. She took his arm and said, "Honey, after seeing how you defended me tonight, I swear I'll do everything to protect your future." Barrett stiffened.

A wave of sorrow quietly rose within him.

The truth was, he hadn't slapped Serena to protect Viola. He had lost control the moment his sister called Carissa trash. That one word had ignited a fire in his mind, driving him to slap Serena without thinking. When he had shouted, "How dare you talk about her like that?", he had meant Carissa.

People often say a person only realized how much they cherished something once it was lost, but by then, it was too late.

He knew it was too late. He wasn't even sure what he felt for Carissa anymore-maybe guilt, maybe frustration. He had been wrong, but he also felt Carissa had never truly loved him. If she had, she wouldn't have so ruthlessly gone to the palace to request a divorce edict.

"I don't need anyone to secure my future for me. I'll work for it myself." He pulled his arm away from Viola. "If you say things like that again, I won't be happy."

Viola quickly held onto his arm again. "Okay, I won't say it anymore. I know you're ambitious, honey. It was my mistake."

Barrett allowed her to hold his arm, but his heart felt cold and desolate.

He had once been the brightest

hope for elevating the Warren family to new heights. Now, look at what he had become. His legitimate wife was a woman who had been married before. His other rightful wife, a former captive of Sandorian soldiers, was known for her cold and ruthless nature, which sent shivers down one's spine.

Before he went to the battlefield at Victory Pass, his wife had been the legitimate daughter of the then-Marquis of Northwatch, the most favored apprentice of the Pathfinders Guild, admired by both the queen dowager and the king.

Barrett once had such a promising future. But through all his efforts, he lost so much and ended up in this mess.

Was it all because he had taken Aurora as his rightful wife?

All men took concubines, so why had he paid such a steep price? The bitterness gnawed at him. He was utterly unwilling to accept it.

That night's drama reached Amelia, even though she was "recovering" in her chambers. She didn't say a word about it, nor did she inquire or comment. She knew Serena was an ungrateful woman. No matter who Serena married, she would never appreciate Amelia's kindness, only her faults.

So, once the marriage was settled, Amelia decided she would only prepare a dowry for Serena and leave the rest alone.

The next morning, Rebecca made her way to Ironridge Estate.

Two hours later, she emerged. She was trembling and supported by her maid, Jade, as she climbed into the carriage.

The moment Rebecca entered the carriage, silent tears began to fall. Though she had gotten what she wanted, she had been humiliated in the process. The Marquis of Ironridge's family had truly crossed the line with their arrogance.

As Rebecca's carriage departed,

Margaret returned to her chambers to change and ordered gifts to be prepared. She planned to visit Hett Monarch Estate to personally apologize. The previous night's fiasco had nearly ruined Heten's birthday celebration.

Helen was still recovering from her hangover, so it was Carissa who received Margaret.

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Seeing Margaret's pallid complexion, Carissa ordered for herbal tonic soup to be brought in. The soup was originally intended for her own use, as Rafael had advised her to keep up her health and prevent any lingering ailments from the battlefield.

Noticing Margaret's breath was more hurried than usual, as though she was seething with anger, Carissa said gently, "There was no need for you to make this trip if you're unwell. What happened last night has nothing to do with you."

Margaret drank the herbal tonic soup, clutching her chest for a long time. Then, she started speaking slowly, "I truly wish it had nothing to do with our household. But Jessica is still part of our family, and I saw what happened yesterday with my own eyes.

"She wanted to ruin Prince Rafael's reputation, only to end up ensnaring her own husband in the scandal. She brought shame upon herself, and left our family no choice but to bring Ms. Warren into our household as a concubine."

Carissa had anticipated this outcome. The Marquis of Ironridge's family valued its reputation above all else. Though Jessica had tarnished it over the years, Margaret had constantly been cleaning up after her. The younger members of their family were always cautious, guarding their actions and words to avoid bringing disgrace to their name.

For a family that had stood for over a century, preserving their honor was paramount. They would rather suffer in silence than let their name be sullied.

What's more, the fault lay with Jessica, Margaret's own daughter-in-law.

"The Warren family came today," Margaret continued, breaking her usual discretion.

She never aired her household's dirty laundry, not even a whisper-but today was different. The matter had occurred at Hell Monarch Estate and during Helen's birthday banquet, no less.

"Rebecca was adamant that my son had ruined her daughter's reputation. With so many witnesses present, they now claim their daughter's marriage prospects are ruined. They're even willing to lower their standards and have Ms. Warren enter our household as a concubine."

Carissa, not wanting to comment too much on the situation, offered gentle consolation, "It's already happened, Madam Winchester. Perhaps it's best to make peace with it."

"Forgive me for causing you such trouble, Your Grace," Margaret quickly composed herself, restoring her usual grace.

However, her earlier confrontation with the matriarch of the Warren family had shown her just how shameless people could be.

Carissa smiled slightly. "I've seen a lot, Madam Winchester. It's always difficult to deal with those who lack honor."

Margaret was touched by her words, a hint of regret in her expression. "You must have had a hard time back then."

"Don't let it trouble you," Carissa replied gently. "If she lacked proper conduct before, once she enters your household, she'll have to follow the rules."

Margaret sighed, nodding. "Everyone

knows what happened yesterday. She wasn't interested in my son. I've already reprimanded him-how could he be so foolish? After so

many years in the bureaucracy.net

still not learned caution or the importance of maintaining

boundaries. This is a serious lapse in etiquette. This time, it was just about taking a concubine, but what about next time? This serves as a lesson for him to never be so

careless again."

Carissa was aware of Margaret's level-headedness, and agreed, "That is true, especially when it comes to matters between men and women. Otherwise, you end up with another parasitic in-law."

Thinking back to the events of that

morning, Margaret felt a wave of frustration wash over her. "I've already seen enough of that today. The desperation to latch on, that brute force, that utter

shamelessness-I've rarely Ove

encountered such things in my life, but today... I've truly learned."

When Rebecca arrived this morning, she had spoken bluntly. Her daughter's reputation had been ruined, and with so many witnesses present, her marriage prospects were now bleak. If the Marquis of Ironridge's family refused to take responsibility, she threatened to make the scandal public.

The Warren family's reputation was already tarnished-what harm would it do to drag the marquis' family down with them?

The Warren family was nothing but

a rotten bunch. Whoever got involved with them would be tainted. Handle it discreetly, and the damage would be minimal. But if it were to explode into a full-blown scandal, then the Marquis of Ironridge's hundred-year reputation would be destroyed in the blink of an eye.

In the end, it all came down to marrying an unworthy wife.

If Jessica hadn't schemed against the Hell Monarch, this mess wouldn't have landed on their doorstep. Now, it was up to Jessica to figure out how to clean up her own mess.

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After Margaret took her leave, Helen hurried into the sitting hall.

However, she only found Carissa sitting alone, leisurely sipping coffee, her expression contemplative.

Helen frowned and asked, "Wasn't Madam Winchester supposed to be here? I rushed over, thinking I'd get to have a chat with her."

Carissa rose and curtsied gracefully. "Mother, Madam Winchester just left a short while ago."

"She's gone?" Helen said, out of breath, sinking into a chair. "Wasn't she here to talk to me?"

Her disappointment was evident. She thought Margaret had been here to see her. Helen often envied Eleanor, who was always surrounded by visitors from high society.

"She was here for you as well," Carissa explained gently. "But when she heard you were still recovering from last night's festivities, she didn't want to disturb you and left early."

With just one glance at Helen's expression, Carissa could tell what was on her mind. Her mother-in-law's thoughts were never hard to guess.

"Overindulging in wine has its consequences," Helen muttered, her thoughts turning to her son's outburst the previous night. She glanced at Carissa carefully, and asked, "Did Rafael give you a hard time last night?"

Carissa cleared her throat lightly and answered, "No, he just said a few words to me, and that was it."

"Just a few words?" Helen could tell Carissa was fibbing.

Who knew her son better than her?

When everything was fine, he could be pleasant enough, but when something truly angered him, a few words wouldn't smooth things over. She suspected Carissa had endured much more of his temper than she was letting on.

The poor girl was trying to cover for him.

Helen's heart softened at the thought. "I know you're in charge of the inner courtyard, and matters like taking concubines should be your decision. But if he doesn't like it, don't bring it up again. It'll only provoke his scolding or wrath. Men, when they lose their temper, can be ruthless-even to their own mothers."

Carissa's face flushed as she recalled what Rafael had whispered to her earlier that morning before leaving for court: "If I didn't have to attend court today, you wouldn't have been able to get out of bed." Embarrassed, Carissa quickly turned her head away and murmured, "Yes, I understand."

Seeing Carissa avoiding her gaze, Helen sighed and called out, "Gillian, instruct the kitchen to prepare some royal jelly for the princess consort. She needs to recuperate." "Understood, my lady," Gillian replied before excusing herself.

Helen then asked about Serena, and Carissa relayed the events truthfully.

After hearing the story, Helen was momentarily stunned. "Madam Winchester really agreed to let her into the family? It's clearly a setup, and not even aimed at her own son!" Although Helen had been in high spirits the night before and hadn't noticed all the details, she had pieced things together through the morning chatter while getting ready for the day. "The Marquis of Ironridge's family has upheld its reputation for over a century. They wouldn't want even a whisper of scandal," Carissa explained.

"For the sake of that reputation,

they'll just submit? If it were up to me, I'd let people say whatever they want. There's no way I'd allow her through the door! A little thing like her, with a hundred schemes in her head? People like that have no place in the household," Helen said firmly.

Helen had always been wary of overly scheming people. She knew she couldn't outmaneuver them, so she preferred to keep them far away.

Carissa chuckled softly. "Even if she's full of schemes, once she's in their household, they'll be crushed one by one. She won't survive long if she doesn't fall in line."

Helen thought about it. The Marquis

of Ironridge's family was indeed a strict household with countless rules. It wasn't easy even for a legitimate wife to navigate, let alone a concubine.

Life would be tough for Serena there.

Losing interest in the topic, Helen shifted the conversation to the preparations for Kiera's engagement gifts and dowry.

Carissa reassured, "You don't need

to worry, Mother. The dowry is already being prepared, and Queen Kylie won't slight Kiera. Their residence is currently being

Logan, she'll only go to the Quinton family's residence for the wedding ceremony. After that, she and Logan will reside in their own estate."

renovated. When Kiera et

Helen nodded. "I've set aside some dowry money for her. As her sister-in-law, you should contribute as well. After all, Rafael has saved quite a bit over the years." Carissa smiled. "Don't worry, Mother. I'll make sure it's more than enough."

Helen propped her elbow on the table, looking at Carissa thoughtfully. "You know, you handle things so efficiently. You really put my mind at ease. I think... I really like you." Carissa was momentarily stunned.

How did one even respond when their mother-in-law suddenly declared her affection?

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A few days later, after court had adjourned, Salvador retained Rafael for a private conversation. Ignoring the stack of documents left untouched, Salvador signaled to Derek to set up the chessboard.

"It's been a while since we last played chess together," he remarked.

Rafael adjusted his belt, and sat down comfortably. "After days of poring over case files until my head felt like it was spinning, it's a blessing to have a reprieve. I'm deeply grateful for the leniency, Your Majesty." Salvador watched Rafael's actions with a furrowed brow. "You're still clinging to those old military habits? How rude. You are now head of the Supreme Court and a high-ranking member of the court. Remember to maintain your dignity and composure."

"Why worry about appearances in front of my own brother?" Rafael replied with a bright grin.

"Do you act so freely in front of your princess consort as well?" Salvador said, placing a white piece on the board with a deliberate motion.

Rafael held a black piece, and his expression was inscrutable. "In front of my own princess consort, I would be even more unrestrained."

Salvador studied him with a smile on his lips. "I've heard that someone expressed interest in becoming your concubine at Aunt Helen's birthday banquet?"

"That such rumors even reach your ears must be an offense, Your Majesty," Rafael said, placing a black piece on the board.

"Well, I usually disregard idle gossip, but since you are my brother and Mother is concerned, I must ask are you considering taking a concubine?" Salvador inquired.

"I have no such plans." Rafael flashed another wide grin. "Your Majesty, after so many years of warfare, my health is in pretty poor shape. I am still under Sebastian's care. Even managing one wife is somewhat overwhelming, and I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to handle the additional burden of a concubine."

Salvador shot him a disapproving look. "Nonsense. You are a trained soldier, strong and robust. How could you be overwhelmed? Are you implying that I, with my numerous concubines, might struggle to manage them all?"

"I would never dare criticize your harem, Your Majesty. Besides, as king, you have the duty to expand your lineage. It's only natural to have more concubines. Even ordinary officials keep several con

don't they?"

"Expanding the family lineage," Salvador repeated, glancing at Rafael. "As a member of the royal family, it is also your responsibility to ensure the family's continuation."

Rafael chuckled. "I had initially planned to remain single to avoid too many entanglements. With the current arrangement-having a wife and with my mother now out of the palace I find that too many concerns are rather unsettling. So, I don't plan on having any children for the time being."

Salvador stared intently at Rafael while holding a white piece, lost in thought. After a moment, he said, "Let's stop for now. Return to your duties. I hear there is a major case awaiting review at the Supreme Court."

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"You're right," Rafael replied. "A woman killed twelve members of her husband's family, including her own children. The case occurred in Brightmoor District. The local governor has sentenced her to death by execution, which the Ministry of Justice has approved. I have yet to finish reviewing the case files."

Salvador frowned. "Such a cruel woman should not merely face death by execution. She deserves immediate beheading."

Rafael responded, "I will review the case files and make a fair decision according to the law."

"Alright, get going!" Salvador waved his hand dismissively, as if shooing away a fly. "You're being so rude! I find it tiresome to deal with you!"

Rafael smiled. "Then, I shall take my leave."

As Rafael exited the hall, Salvador grabbed a handful of white pieces and scattered them across the chessboard.

After a while, Salvador's face grew pale. "Derek, have I been too harsh? He's afraid to even have children."

Salvador constantly had people watching Rafael. Did he really think Rafael couldn't sense his lingering mistrust?

However, Derek dared not voice his thoughts. He only smiled and said, "Your Majesty, you are overthinking. Prince Rafael may simply not wish to have children at the moment."

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"Who doesn't want children? I look forward to the expansion of the royal family," Salvador said. "He's only a few years younger than me. At his age, he should be considering fatherhood."

Derek replied softly, "Perhaps Prince Rafael understands your concerns and does not wish for any discord among brothers. Do you remember? From childhood to adulthood, he has always seen you as his role model and pride. Whenever he spoke of you, his expression was always one of admiration."

At Derek's words, Salvador reflected on many past events, and his gaze softened considerably.

After a long pause, he sighed deeply. "Perhaps I have been overthinking things."

Derek silently poured more coffee, understanding from years of service that such sudden sighs often reflected nostalgic sentiments rather than a shift in his cautiousness.

Rafael's decision to delay having children was a wise one. At least for now, without offspring, Salvador could feel somewhat at ease. Rafael had only recently returned from reclaiming the

Southern Frontier, and at this moment, he commanded the highest respect among the court officials, as well as the greatest admiration from the people.

Any ruler would feel uneasy with a prince so accomplished and revered.

By handing over his military authority and settling down with a wife, Rafael was signaling his loyalty and offering Salvador a sense of security.

Upon returning to the Supreme Court, Rafael had been approached by officials from the Ministry of Justice with inquiries about the case. He dismissed them on the grounds of not having finished reviewing the case files.

That evening, after dining with Carissa, Rafael received a visit from the Minister of Justice, Patrick Lloyd. They argued in the study for half an hour over the case, and ultimately parted on unfavorable terms. When Rafael returned to Orchid Hall, the dark expression on his face vanished, replaced by a relaxed and gentle demeanor.

Carissa had prepared a pot of tea. She wasn't clear on the details of the case, but had heard from Dylan that Rafael was troubled by the murder case.

The Ministry of Justice had sent people to the Supreme Court earlier today, and tonight, the Minister of Justice himself had come, clearly indicating the urgency of the case.

"So, what is it about this case that makes it so difficult for you to reach a decision?" Carissa asked straightforwardly.

Rafael was clearly overwhelmed by the case, but upon entering, he acted as if everything was normal. She knew he didn't want to burden her with his official troubles, but she also wanted to help share the load.

"This case has sparked a massive

uproar locally, with numerous scholars and even renowned

intellectuals writing essays condemning the woman. The outrage isn't just confined to

Brightmoor District-it has Spel.net

far and wide. In the capital, more than half the court officials are

urging the Supreme Court to quickly review the death sentence, with many calling for immediate execution."

"Such a widespread uproar indicates that the case has a significant impact, and it seems that someone is manipulating public opinion," Carissa said.

"Yes. I had someone look into it, and

it's true that there's been

manipulation of public opinion. However the outrage is largely due to the fact that this woman defied traditional family roles and authority. She murdered her entire family, including her own children, which is seen as exceptionally heinous."

"Who's behind the manipulation?" Carissa asked

Rafael took a sip of his tea, his voice still sounding a bit hoarse as he replied, "It's Yuvan."

"Not surprising," Carissa said. "If he wants to stir up trouble, he'll need to create incidents that turn public opinion against the government. This case has solid evidence, doesn't it?"

"The woman has already confessed

to her crimes Rafael sighed. "Her father-in-law and husband are well-respected locals, but this woman herself was known to be rather petty. According to testimony from neighbors, she disapproved of her father-in-law and husband using money to do charity work."

"You've reviewed all the evidence. Is it sufficient?" Carissa asked.

"It's fairly complete."

Carissa found this puzzling. "Then, why the hesitation? Are you concerned that Prince Yuvan might be exploiting this case, so you're delaying your decision?"

But she quickly spotted a flaw in Rafael's words. "Fairly complete? That means it's not entirely sufficient."

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Rafael nodded, his admiration for Carissa always evident in his gaze.

"That's right. The family, including her, consisted of thirteen people. She killed twelve of them-her father-in-law, husband, and three sons, all of whom were in good health, as well as her mother-in-law and two unmarried daughters. The remaining victims were servants and maids.

"The issue is that this incident happened at dusk, not in the dead of night when everyone was asleep. After dinner, she suddenly turned violent, grabbed a kitchen knife, and killed everyone. This woman had no martial skills and was known to be ill, requiring long-term medication."

"A sickly, somewhat harsh person could kill one person, but they'd be quickly subdued. Were they all poisoned? Did they all lose consciousness?" Carissa asked.

"No, they were all awake. Neighbors who witnessed the scene said the woman seemed to have gone mad and possessed extraordinary strength. She killed anyone she saw. If those neighbors hadn't fled quickly and locked themselves in their homes, they might have been killed too. The local authorities have verified that the wounds and the murder weapon match."

Carissa understood why Rafael had been hesitant to authorize the review of the death penalty. The case did indeed have its doubts, but there were reasons for the widespread uproar. With neighbors as witnesses, the woman's own confession, and the matching of the weapon with the injuries, it seemed nearly impossible to avoid the conclusion.

"By the way, since the murders happened after dinner, have you checked the food?"

"No, because the bodies showed no signs of poisoning," Rafael said. "I'm wondering if the woman might have been poisoned to make her go mad and gain superhuman strength. I've consulted several physicians, but they all say they've never heard of such a poison."

Their gazes met, and they spoke in unison, "We can consult Sebastian!"

Rafael immediately changed his clothes and headed to Arcane Sanctum. He couldn't wait any longer.

The case had stirred public outrage, with people clamoring for the woman to be executed in the most extreme manner. The Ministry of Justice was pressuring him, and most of the court officials were not on his side. Even if there were doubts, no one was willing to investigate further, given the eyewitnesses and the woman's confession.

In light of these factors, the doubts seemed trivial.

The day after Rafael visited Arcane Sanctum, he summoned Patrick and his two deputy ministers to the Supreme Court.

Patrick was growing increasingly anxious, and said, "I truly don't understand what further doubts you have, Your Highness. This case has stirred public outrage. If the review doesn't proceed, the people will accuse the court of incompetence."

Rafael replied, "Please be patient. I've called for Sebastian to explain some of the doubts, particularly regarding how the woman could have such extraordinary strength to kill twelve people. She had been on medication for a long time and was in poor health..."

Patrick interrupted him, "She was just hiding it! She was unhappy with her father-in-law and husband for a long time, feeling that they wasted money on charity. The woman was a miserly and mean-spirited person. She has already confessed, and there are eyewitnesses and matching evidence. If we let her go due to a minor doubt, what happens to the authority of the law?"

"What about her motive? What was her motive for killing her entire family? Even if she were bitter and resentful toward her father-in-law and husband, why kill her own children? Why not spare even the servants and maids?" Rafael countered.

Patrick tapped the table in

frustration and said, "Didn't she already confess? She suddenly decided they deserved to die, that they all should go to hell. Neighbor testimonies also show she had a poor relationship with her family. Her children didn't care for her.

"Perhaps there was an argument at dinner, and in a moment of rage, she acted. You're new to public office and haven't seen many cases, but I've seen plenty where people kill in a fit of rage. In extreme anger, people can exhibit strength beyond their usual capacity. So, the doubts you have are not really doubts at all."

Meanwhile, at Horizon Estate, Yuvan was listening to reports from his subordinates.

"In less than half a month, the entire Starhaven population will likely be discussing this matter and condemning the court's inaction."

Chapter 469

Yuvan's gaze remained indifferent as he turned the emerald ring on his thumb.

"That's not enough. Keep spreading the word that Rafael, the Hell Monarch, is defending the woman to show he's fit for the Supreme Court post he holds. Claim that he's daring to defy public opinion for personal gain, and emphasize that he's just a military man with no understanding of the law or public administration.

"Also, suggest that even the king is deceived by him. Because of Rafael's immense accomplishments and influence, the king is forced to give him some regard."

The subordinate asked, "Do you really believe he will order a reexamination, Your Highness?"

"Of course he will, if there are doubts." Yuvan smiled faintly, a cold, bloodthirsty glint in his eyes. "I understand him well. He is meticulous about human lives. Anyone who values life so seriously will be extremely cautious. With such significant doubts, if he doesn't call for a reexamination, he cannot reconcile with his own conscience."

"Understood. I will proceed as instructed." The subordinate saluted and exited swiftly, disappearing as he wrapped his cloak around him.

Yuvan's lips curled into a playful smile. "Rafael, I want to see your reputation ruined and make sure you never hold military authority again. I want the entire kingdom to understand that you pose a threat to the throne, and that the king fears you, which would further discredit him."

"Wayne!" he called out.

A middle-aged man in a gray cloak emerged from behind a partition screen depicting the landscape of a mountain scene.

He lowered his head in deference. "Yes, Your Highness!"

Yuvan inquired, "Is there any way to detect the parasitic toxin within the woman?"

Wayne's voice was grave, "It can't be detected. It's just a tiny threadworm hidden in her brain. Even if they cut off her head, they won't be able to detect it. The threadworm only responds to my commands, and for now, the woman won't show any unusual signs."

Yuvan nodded slightly. "Good."

"There's no need for concern, Your Highness. The governor of Brightmoor District is one of our own. Even if the case is sent back for reexamination, it will be presented to the capital as originally planned. The delay will only inflame public anger, which benefits us."

Yuvan's eyes were cold and venomous. "This plan has been in the works for a long time. There must be no mistakes. With Kiera's wedding in August, I will use the opportunity to return to the capital. Before then, Rafael's reputation must be thoroughly tarnished, and Salvador must be labeled as a foolish monarch."

Wayne's expression remained flat.

"Rest assured, Your Highness. This case is just the first step. If Prince Rafael decides to bypass a reexamination and directly executes the woman, we'll have what we want. At that point, we will reveal that the woman was poisoned and driven mad by someone making Prince Rafael a murderer of innocents. Also, they still have the Westhaven matter to address."

Yuvan toyed with the rim of his cup, his eyes dark with contemplation. "Yes, Aurora must not be allowed to live. She must be killed to prevent Salvador from using her to placate publicoutrage. I want the people of Westhaven and Starhaven to have no outlet for their anger, and to

direct all their fury at Salvador and the Sullivan family."

"Understood!" Wayne nodded. "But there is no rush to act now. Currently, Marshal Liam is still obstructing the third prince... No, Westhaven's crown prince now. We should deal with Marshal Liam first, and then move against Aurora."

Yuvan raised an eyebrow, slightly surprised. "You have confidence in killing Marshal Liam?"

"It is challenging, but it must be done," Wayne replied calmly.

A flicker of ruthlessness appeared in Yuvan's eyes. "Then, proceed. If you need any resources or funds, just let me know."

Wayne frowned in thought before speaking slowly, "There were some underworld figures we could have used, but with so many martial artists arriving for the Hell Monarch and Lady Carissa's wedding, using them might risk leaks."

"That won't do. Haven't you trained any suicide soldiers?" Yuvan asked.

Wayne shook his head. "It is not yet time to deploy them. Training them is difficult, and losing them to Marshal Liam would be a waste."

"Don't worry about that," Yuvan

insisted, weighing the options. "Marshal Liam is an obstruction.

Once he is out of the way, there will

be no one to stop Westhaven's

crown prince. He is focused on

avenging his brother and redrawing the borders. He'll only work with me once Marshal Liam is dead."

Wayne began to speak again, but Yuvan raised a hand to silence him. "Use the suicide soldiers."

Wayne had no choice but to agree, "As you say, Your Highness."

Yuvan added, "Keep the news of the spreading rumors discreet. Ensure Rafael does not find out that it is our doing."

"Don't worry, Your Highness," Wayne replied. "News from Brightmoor District will not be connected to us, given the hundreds of miles between Valken and Brightmoor District."

After a pause, Wayne continued, "Grand Princess Eleanor's daughters have begun to infiltrate various prominent families. They're bound to stir things up and create chaos. When that happens, these families will be too preoccupied with their own problems to offer any support to the court."

Yuvan sipped his coffee, masking the earlier coldness with a facade of the naive, gentlemanly demeanor he usually portrayed. "That's good."

Chapter 470

At the Supreme Court, Patrick was growing increasingly anxious.

"Your Highness, why have you summoned Sebastian? He has never examined the deceased. No matter how skilled he is, he's not a coroner."

Rafael remained calm. "Please be patient, Mr. Lloyd. Given the magnitude of this case and the uproar it has caused, if we mishandle it and wrongfully accuse someone, the entire kingdom will condemn us." Patrick was accustomed to handling cases, so how couldn't he know that there was the slightest doubt in the case on hand? But with the perpetrator's confession, witness testimonies, and physical evidence, what ground was there for a retrial?

"It's a waste of time! Every extra day the perpetrator lives is a sign of disrespect to the victims she has murdered," he argued.

Rafael replied, "The case documents from Brightmoor District also recommend execution. It is only April, and with swift couriers, it only takes about a month for the documents to travel back and forth. Why are you so impatient?"

"When will Sebastian arrive? We've been waiting for ages," Patrick fumed, sitting aside.

Though it was unwise to speak too harshly to the Hell Monarch, his displeasure was evident on his face.

The two deputy ministers shivered in fear. Patrick wasn't intimidated by the Hell Monarch as his daughter, Sylvia, was highly favored by the king. On the other hand, the two deputy ministers didn't have daughters who were the king's favored concubines.

Just as Patrick finished speaking, Rafael's deputy minister, Matthew, led Sebastian into the room.

Though not tall, Sebastian exuded an imposing presence. Upon entering, he cast a cold glance at Patrick. The minister quickly stood up, his previous irritation replaced by a courteous demeanor. "Hello, Sebastian. I apologize for the inconvenience today."

"Apologies for keeping you waiting, Mr. Lloyd. That is my fault," Sebastian said coolly.

"No, not at all. My frustration was not directed at you," Patrick hastened to clarify.

He dared not offend Sebastian. It was thanks to this renowned physician that his mother had been cured. If it weren't for Sebastian's medical skills, Patrick would be deeply mourning his mother now.

"If it wasn't directed at me, then who was it aimed at? The prince?" Sebastian asked as he took a seat.

"No, of course not. I wouldn't dare," Patrick said earnestly, trying to make a good impression on Sebastian. "It's aimed at them."

He pointed at his two deputy ministers beside him, who were both taken aback. They hadn't said a word, but it was their duty to take the blame for their superior, so they quickly bowed. "Yes, it was us who angered Mr. Lloyd."

Rafael knew well that Sebastian

could handle Patrick. Last year,

when Patrick's mother fell gravely ill,

even the best physicians had given up hope. It was Sebastian who, despite harsh weather and relentless storms, persisted for an entire month with acupuncture treatments, ultimately saving her life.

As a result, Patrick was deeply grateful to Sebastian. Given that he had just been promoted to Minister of Justice, if he had to mourn for three years, he would find the bureaucratic landscape much changed upon his return. Moreover, with several brothers also mourning, the Lloyd family couldn't rely solely on Sylvia to hold everything together.

Sebastian wasted no time on pleasantries, saying, "His Highness already came to see me last night and explained the case. Let me tell you this even if a frail, chronically ill person is enraged, their temporary strength would be significant but not enough to overpower several strong men."

The group grew serious upon hearing this. Rafael was new to public office, and had investigated too few cases to be convincing. However, Sebastian was a seasoned physician. If he said it was impossible, it was indeed impossible.

Patrick spoke up, "But there were witnesses who saw her commit the murders. She confessed, and the weapon used matches the wounds on the deceased."

Sebastian responded, "I haven't reviewed the case files myself, but I can infer that the wounds on the victim were severe, with deep cuts to the bone, correct?" "Yes, exactly!" Patrick and the two deputy ministers nodded vigorously.