

War Song 481

Chapter 481

The moment everyone heard Rafael's question, their hearts sank.

Noah hurriedly said, "Your Highness, please forgive me. No one has bullied Lady Helen..."

"Earl of Gracehold, are you saying my mother is lying and falsely accusing you?" Rafael coldly retorted.

"N-no, that's not what I meant."

Although the Earl of Gracehold held a position in court, when facing someone as cold and imposing as the Hell Monarch-a seasoned general from the battlefield-his confidence faltered.

Under Rafael's piercing gaze, he felt a chill run down his spine.

"It's all a misunderstanding-just a misunderstanding," said Noah.

Having gathered her wits, Dorothy immediately questioned, "Are you trying to throw your weight around, Your Highness?"

Samuel finally recalled his scholarly pride and disdain for powerful princes like Rafael.

He scoffed coldly, "Lady Helen was throwing her weight around. She barged into my family home to meddle in our internal affairs. And now, even you are stepping in to protect her, Your Highness. Are you really going to bully our humble family?"

Rafael didn't even glance at him, his eyes filled with indifference. "He talks too much. Dylan, slap him!"

Dylan, who had been waiting outside after driving the carriage, entered the room in quick strides at Rafael's words. Grabbing Samuel by the collar, he swung his arm and slapped him hard. The slap sent Samuel sprawling onto the ground.

Half of his face went numb, his ears ringing as his vision momentarily darkened. He struggled to prop himself up, only to be met with another slap. This time, blood spurted from his mouth as he collapsed onto the floor.

"Samuel!"

Both Dorothy and Abigail cried out at once, but Abigail didn't dare step forward to help.

Only Dorothy, furious and panicked, shouted, "Help him up!"

The household servants rushed forward to assist Samuel, but he was already dazed, barely able to stand as his legs trembled beneath him.

Despite his mouth being filled with blood, he still managed to weakly roar, "Hell Monarch, you've gone too far!"

Heartbroken and furious, Dorothy turned to Harvey and demanded, "Your Highness, did you bring them here to deliberately bully our family?"

Seeing his son-in-law being beaten, Harvey didn't exactly feel sympathy, but he did sense that things were getting out of hand. He was already considering how to de-escalate the situation when Dorothy questioned him. Instinctively, he wanted to

shake his head.

But Rafael spoke coldly first, "Uncle Harvey, it's best you stay out of the matters between me and the earl's family. I've heard my cousin is having complications with her pregnancy. Shouldn't you be sending Aunt Heather to check on her?"

This was Rafael showing Harvey some respect, giving him a way to only care about his daughter without needing to bother about anything else.

Yet, Harvey chose to smooth things over, saying, "Rafael, this must be a misunderstanding. Show some consideration for me, and let's resolve this with words, okay?"

Harvey still hoped to avoid a full-blown confrontation between the two families. He didn't want any added trouble.

Having shown the minimal amount

of respect expected toward Harvey, Rafael turned away and coldly ordered, "The earl's family dared to lay hands on an honored concubine and falsely accuse the royal family of bullying. Since Samuel is a scholar, I'll teach him a lesson on behalf of the king. Dylan, send word to Travis. Have him bring the household soldiers and smash everything in the earl's residence."

Travis had been standing by for a while. Dylan went out to deliver the command, and soon enough, he returned with dozens of household soldiers.

Though they carried no

weapons-being in the capital, even household soldiers couldn't casually bear arms they had their fists. The moment they entered, they began smashing whatever they saw. If something couldn't be broken with their fists, they kicked it with their feet.

The scene terrified the members of the Earl of Gracehold's family.

"Hell Monarch! How dare you insult our dignified family like this? I'll bash my head in right here and see how you explain this to the world!" Dorothy shouted, her eyes turning dark with panic. With that, she charged toward a pillar, intent on throwing herself against it.

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Naturally, Dorothy's head never made contact with the pillar. With so many people in the room and her actions being so slow, her children and grandchildren had plenty of time to pull her back. Dorothy had only intended to use that act as a way to scare Rafael, hoping it would stop the household soldiers from smashing things.

But Rafael's expression remained cold, and the household soldiers didn't pause in their destruction. They continued to smash anything in sight, sending some of the more timid women screaming and fleeing to the back courtyard.

Dorothy was furious, her vision darkening with anger. She hadn't expected Rafael to be so brazen, completely unafraid of her threat to bash her own head in.

The soldiers didn't go into the inner courtyard, as it was off-limits to men. Travis knew this rule well, so they restricted their rampage to the front courtyard and the main hall.

Noah watched the scene with a pale face. He knew very well why Rafael was so enraged tonight because his son, Samuel, had pushed Leona earlier today, causing her to suffer complications with her pregnancy.

It wasn't that he didn't want to punish his son, but Samuel had already lost two teeth as a result of the beating he received from Alana. With blood filling her grandson's mouth, Dorothy's heart ached too much to mete out further punishment.

Moreover, no one from Hartstone Estate had come to reprimand them directly, so they had held on to a sliver of hope that the situation would pass. However, Helen had come late at night specifically to stir up this matter, scolding them to provoke a confrontation, which then gave Rafael and Carissa an excuse to step in.

Noah knew that they were in the wrong from the start. So, no matter what Rafael did tonight, they could only endure it. If word got out, the narrative would turn into the Earl of Gracehold's household attacking Helen—a crime of insubordination.

If the matter was pursued further, it would reflect poorly on Samuel, who, after losing his position, showed no remorse. He had mistreated Leona, his legitimate wife, while favoring a concubine, which led to Leona's pregnancy complications and her need to rest in bed for a month.

None of these accusations were something the Earl of Gracehold's family could bear. In comparison, the Hell Monarch's fury, though overwhelming, was something they could endure. At least this way, the matter wouldn't be brought before the king.

Meanwhile, Samuel stood with defiant pride. In his mind, he had already composed several articles denouncing the Hell Monarch. He was convinced that once these articles spread, many scholars would rise to condemn Rafael for using his military power to oppress others.

Many scholars at the National Academy had once idolized Samuel. As long as he led the charge, articles condemning the Hell Monarch would spring up everywhere like wildfire.

So, he wasn't afraid. In fact, he actually hoped Rafael would cause even more destruction and behave even more outrageously. The more tyrannical the prince appeared, the more monstrous his image would become in Samuel's writings.

Ruby was nestled in Samuel's arms, his blood dripping onto her head, making them seem like a pair of tragic lovers rejected by the world.

In truth, the sight unfolding before

them all even startled Helen. She

had maintained an outward appearance of calm, but it was all an act. The hand she kept hidden under her dress was trembling slightly. It was her first time witnessing her son's true fury.

The entire front courtyard was in shambles. Everything that could be smashed by hand had been

destroyed. In the hall, chairs, tables, partition screens, and the antiques on the shelves all lay on the ground-some shattered, others cracked.

Dorothy burst into loud sobs, wailing that Rafael had gone too far and that she would report this to the authorities. But Abigail held onto her tightly not just supporting her but gripping her firmly to prevent her from trying to dash toward the pillar

again.

Though Dorothy wanted to put up a fight, it was clear that Rafael wasn't intimidated. His face remained expressionless, with not the slightest hint of remorse or hesitation.

Carissa sat beside him, her gaze even more chilling.

Unable to hold back his anger, Harvey finally stood up and shouted, "Enough! Everyone, stop this at once!"

But no one listened to him. Instead, his outburst only made Rafael's expression even colder.

Harvey suddenly felt a chill around his neck and instinctively recoiled. He knew how pitiful he must look, but all he could do was simmer with anger. He didn't dare use his status as Rafael's uncle to pressure him.

Heather clutched her sleeve tightly, remaining silent as the sounds of smashing from outside continued. She had no idea what was being destroyed, but each crash only heightened her anxiety.

She was furious at Carissa.

How could she be so thoughtless? All this destruction meant a complete fallout with the Earl of Gracehold's family. How would Leona ever have peaceful days in the household after this? "Enough. Everyone, stop," Carissa finally said.

The sound of smashing quickly came to a halt, and Travis led the household soldiers to stand in formation just outside the courtyard.

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Some of the servants rushed outside, only to find the courtyard in total disarray, no different from the chaos in the main hall.

His face ashen and lifeless, Noah stepped forward and bowed. "Has your anger been fully vented, Your Highness?"

Rafael remained silent, his expression cold.

It was Carissa who spoke up instead, "Earl of Gracehold, do you harbor any resentment in your heart?"

Noah gritted his teeth. "I wouldn't dare."

"You wouldn't dare?" Carissa's face was devoid of any warmth. "It's best if you don't. Because next time, I promise you, the estate will be leveled to the ground."

Noah had witnessed the grandeur of her wedding and knew that behind Carissa stood not only the Hell Monarch's household, but also a number of martial artists. In fact, there were even two martial artists affiliated with her currently stationed here in his own household.

Forget leveling the estate—if Carissa wanted, she could kill everyone in Gracehold Estate without leaving a trace.

Tonight, Noah had brought utter shame upon his ancestors. If word of tonight's events spread, he wouldn't be able to show his face to anyone.

He didn't know how to respond to Carissa, but Samuel shouted angrily, "Those who oppress others will inevitably face retribution!"

Carissa turned her gaze toward him, and only then did her lips curl into a cold smile. "Oh, you're one of the top scholars of the national examination, right? Are you planning to gather the scholars in the capital tomorrow to write articles condemning the Hell Monarch and his household? And then use your title as the king's student to blow up tonight's events?"

Samuel froze. How had she guessed?

He lifted his chin and wiped the blood from his mouth. "Are you afraid now? It's too late. Unless you cut off my hands, I will write and denounce you."

Carissa replied, "Why would I cut off your hands? Someone like you, who's good at writing articles, shouldn't go to waste. Just make sure you write well. Make sure to reference all the classics, and talk about loyalty, respect, righteousness, and integrity—if any of your actions can still be considered those things.

"Oh, and that woman in your arms, that's your concubine, Madam Ruby, right? Make sure to write about her role today. Let the world know how she caused the duchess to suffer complications and forced her to be bedridden for a month."

Samuel's face turned beet red. "Are you meddling in my household affairs now, Your Grace? What does the duchess needing bed rest have to do with Ruby? I'm the one who pushed her."

Carissa turned to Harvey and

Heather. "Did you hear that? He admitted to pushing Leona, causing her to be bedridden for a month. The reason? Ruby came to provoke her. She fell down the steps on her own, yet Samuel,

unable to distinguish right from wrong, blamed everything on Leona. So, who will you protect your son-in-law or your daughter?"

Harvey and Heather's faces shifted with a mix of emotions, their gazes filled with disappointment as they looked at Samuel.

"How could you do that? How could you treat her like that? She's your rightful wife!" Heather demanded angrily.

Samuel responded, "Mother, I acted out of anger. Ruby didn't fall down the stairs on her own-Leona ordered someone to push her. She's so jealous that she can't stand any other women with me-" "She fell on her own. I saw it with my own eyes," interrupted Alana.

Samuel's expression darkened. "Who do you think you are? How dare you interrupt when your betters are speaking?"

He despised Alana, especially after she had struck him earlier that day.

Alana coldly retorted, "Don't you dare pull rank with me. Neither I nor Leah are your servants. We are here to protect Lady Leona. You harmed her, and I let you off easy by only punching you twice.

"You men who claim to read the

classics, preaching righteousness and virtue, are nothing but scoundrels and hypocrites. You don't even measure up to us

warriors. One of the top scholars of

the national examination? More like

garbage!"

Dorothy finally regained her breath. Sitting in her chair, she pointed at Alana and shouted, "Outrageous! Since you're not part of our household, leave at once!"

Violet could no longer hold back.

She snapped, "Old hag, either go ahead and run into that pillar or shut up! I've never seen a grandmother as muddle-headed as you-favoring a concubine over your grandson's rightful wife. Tomorrow, I'll go out with drums and announce to the entire city just how you mistreated the duchess and elevated a whore from a brothel!"

Dorothy had never endured such insults. She was so furious that she pointed a finger at Violet but couldn't utter a word.

In Samuel's arms, Ruby whimpered and began to cry. "I was a pure courtesan before I married into this household. No man had ever even touched me before."

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Violet glanced at Carissa, who gave her a slight nod.

Violet then coldly laughed and said, "You're claiming to be a 'pure courtesan'? Maybe you can fool someone as brainless as Samuel, but do you really think you can fool us?"

Her words instantly enraged Samuel, who snapped, "How dare you slander her?"

Violet sneered. "Slander her? I wouldn't dare. Ruby, shouldn't you tell everyone your real name? What was it again? I heard your esteemed father gave you a rather lovely name-Celeste Kingsley, wasn't it? But Grand Princess Eleanor didn't call you that, did she? She called you something else, right? Cece, wasn't it?"

Ruby's face turned deathly pale, but only for a moment.

Soon, her eyes filled with tears, and she choked out, "W-What are you talking about?"

The faces of those from the Earl of Gracehold's family also changed drastically. They stared at Ruby's elegant and beautiful face in disbelief.

Could she really be Eleanor's daughter?

Surely, she wasn't her biological child. Eleanor had only given birth to Jessica. However, it was rumored that the grand princess had taken in several concubines for her prince consort, though none of them had ever appeared in public. Those concubines must have had children, but those children had never been seen either.

But this? It was simply too absurd.

Even if Ruby wasn't Eleanor's biological daughter, she would still have to call the grand princess her rightful mother. How could Eleanor allow her own daughter, even an illegitimate one, to end up in a brothel? Violet snorted. "There's no point in denying it. I've thoroughly investigated everything. Do you really think that little secret of yours could be hidden from our princess consort?"

"No, I'm not. I'm not!" Ruby wept as she clung to Samuel's sleeve. "If I were Grand Princess Eleanor's daughter, how could I have ended up in such a low place like a brothel?" With her pitiful sobbing tugging at Samuel's heartstrings, he quickly comforted her, "I believe you. She's just trying to use you to defame Grand Princess Eleanor." "Idiot," Rafael scoffed softly.

Carissa looked at Noah and said,

"She is indeed Grand Princess Eleanor's illegitimate daughter. As for why she entered your estate under a false identity, that's for you to figure out. I won't interfere in that matter. I'm here tonight because my mother-in-law was mistreated. As for what Leona has endured while staying in your household, I trust her parents will handle it. The prince and I need not worry ourselves further."

"Your Grace, please!"

In a moment of panic, Noah stepped toward Carissa, but Violet immediately blocked his way. He stopped in his tracks, looking at Carissa desperately. "Your Grace, please clarify your words! Is she truly Grand Princess Eleanor's illegitimate daughter?"

Violet replied coldly, "You should ask me. I'm the one who investigated this. She is indeed Grand Princess Eleanor illegitimate daughter, born to one of Lord Henry's concubines. She was raised in the western courtyard, and from a young age, was taught how to please men. "As for her claim of being untouched before entering your household, it's laughable. She lost her purity long before becoming part of this family. I don't know how many men have taught her the arts, but if you doubt me, just watch how she tears your household apart and you'll know the truth."

"I'm innocent! I am pure!" Ruby collapsed into Samuel's arms, crying so hard she nearly fainted. "How could she slander me like this? Samuel, you know best whether I'm pure or not!" Samuel held her tightly, his voice rising, "That's right. She is pure! I can vouch for it."

"Vouch? With what? A single red stain?" Violet sneered. "You're supposed to be a scholar, a top candidate in the national examination, yet you're this foolish. Do you really not know how to tell if a woman is truly pure?"

Samuel's face turned deathly pale with anger as he shouted at Violet, "Shut your mouth! Get out! All of you, leave!"

"You think we want to stay in this filthy place?" Violet shot a cold glance at Ruby. "We weren't going to expose your secret, but you went too far by harming Lady Leona. She's never done anything to you, yet she suffered because of you."

"And now you dare to hurt her? You're only brave enough to pick on someone weaker. If you had any real courage, you'd go back and fight your legitimate mother. If you did that, I'd even respect you."

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Ruby continued to cry uncontrollably, her sobs wracking her body. Despite her tears, her fingers clung desperately to Samuel's shirt, as if holding onto him was the only thing keeping her grounded. Though her eyes had run dry, her cries were still filled with a deep sense of hurt and vulnerability.

"Such a mess!" Rafael commented as he stood up, taking Carissa's hand in his.

He turned to the stunned Helen. "Mom, let's go."

Helen snapped out of her shock and rose to her feet.

But before leaving, she glanced at Heather and said, "I just went in to see Leona. She thought it was you and was so happy, but when she realized it wasn't, she was disappointed. You're such a weak mother, so it's no wonder your daughter turned out the same. You know very well who I caused a scene for today. If you have any shred of dignity as a mother, don't let this slide so easily. Otherwise, you'll lose all respect in my eyes."

"Mother, let's go. Every mother has maternal instincts. I'm sure Aunt Heather knows what to do," Carissa calmly added.

"Carissa!" Heather called out, her eyes brimming with tears. "I know you're here for Leona today, but have you thought about what this will mean for her? After all this commotion, life in this household will only get harder for her."

"Is it easy for her now?" Carissa countered, sweeping a glance across the room. "Look around. Who here has stood up for Leona? If Alana hadn't punched Samuel twice, he would've only gotten a scolding for pushing her."

Carissa's eyes were filled with disappointment. She truly didn't understand what Harvey and Heather were so afraid of.

Harvey was a prince. Even if he didn't hold any real power or position at court, the title of prince alone was enough to put him above the Earl of Gracehold's family. Yet, despite the grave injustice Leona had suffered, Heather still blamed Carissa for causing too much trouble tonight.

The aunt Carissa once knew wasn't this timid. When did she become like this?

"Let's go," Rafael said, leading Carissa out the door.

Violet supported Helen as they followed. Once they left, Travis led the household soldiers out and faded into the night.

The lights in Gracehold Estate were still on, and everyone's eyes, filled with doubt and coldness, were fixed on Ruby.

Heather went to see Leona. Upon seeing her daughter, who was as thin as a stick despite being pregnant, she couldn't hold back her tears any longer.

"How could he treat you like this?"

"You're carrying his child! I thought even if he favored that concubine, he would still give you the respect you deserve. I regret it so much. Why did I marry you off to him?"

Leona, however, had no more tears left. She murmured, "It's my fault. I was the one who liked him first, but he said he liked me too... Mom, I want a divorce."

Heather was utterly shocked. "A divorce? No, you can't! What will you do after that?"

"Mom, I can't survive here any longer. My reputation doesn't matter anymore."

Leona's eyes were filled with complete despair. She wasn't the type to be jealous, and she could tolerate Ker husband taking

concubines. But when he net

her, sending her crashing into the table without a second thought, her heart had died.

"No! I won't allow a divorce. Was this your cousin's idea? She's a divorced woman herself, so now she's pushing you to divorce too?" said Heather, furious and alarmed.

Leona quickly tried to explain, "It has nothing to do with Cari. I haven't seen her in a long time."

Heather grabbed her daughter's shoulders. "Don't defend her! Do you even know what she did tonight? She brought Rafael over and they wrecked the entire front courtyard. They even injured your husband!" Tears poured from Leona's eyes. "Really? She stood up for me? At least someone did. I'm such a disappointment. I even caused my cousin trouble over my own matters."

Heather was frantic. "You foolish

girl! Don't be fooled by her. She just wants you to end up like her-a divorced woman. But she was lucky enough to find a good match with

the Hell Monarch. What about you? What about your child?"

Leona wiped her tears away and looked at Heather. "Mom, if I get a divorce, will you let me return home?"

Heather covered Leona's mouth and warned, "Don't you dare say those words again! You're a duchess with an annual stipend and land of your own. You can support yourself without depending on the earl's family.

"As for your husband, I believe he'll come to his senses. That woman... that woman is Grand Princess Eleanor's illegitimate daughter. She's up to something by coming into this household."

Leona's heart sank further. She didn't care who Ruby was. No matter how scheming or filthy her methods were, none of this would've happened if Samuel had believed Leona. Leona had already given up on Samuel.

Seeing her daughter's silence, Heather assumed she would listen and continued, "Trust your mother. Once the child is born, your husband will change his mind. And when the old matriarch sees her great- grandchild, how could she not love the child? They'll be good to you. You just need to endure. Things will get better after this rough patch.

"The real problem is that old matriarch-she caused all this. Your father-in-law and mother-in-law were both against that wretched Ruby entering the household. When I saw her today, I understood why your husband was bewitched by her.

"Despite her ragged appearance, she has a certain frail charm. But no matter her identity, real or fake, the earl's family will never keep her. She's someone Grand Princess Eleanor sent to a brothel. Does the earl's family dare defy Grand Princess Eleanor by keeping her?"

Heather stroked Leona's gaunt face, her heart aching as she continued, "In the end, you're the one who chose him. Even if it was the wrong choice, you'll have to bear the consequences. You know why we've kept such a low profile all these years. Your father's fief is in that bitter, freezing land. If we attract trouble and upset the king, we'll be sent back there. How often will we get to see you then?"

Leona raised her head, forcing her tears back. "Even if I get a divorce, the king won't send you back to the fief. I'm only asking you this—if I get divorced, will you and Dad let me come back home?" Heather's tone turned sharp, "You foolish girl! After everything I've said, why are you still thinking about divorce? As for those two people your cousin arranged for you, you should send them away. I heard it was the one named Alana who struck your husband. She acted swiftly, but it only drove a wedge between you two. It seems to me that your cousin must have instigated this."

Leona couldn't hold back her tears. "Mom, they're here to protect me. If Alana and Leah hadn't been there today, do you think I would've only been pushed once? Cari is looking out for me."

"Looking out for you? You believe

that nonsense? Heather scoffed coldly. "Leona, remember what I'm telling you only your parents will never harm you. Everyone else has ulterior motives, even if they don't show it. If you're doing well, they'll be jealous. If you're struggling, they'll pretend to pity you. But none of it is genuine."

Leona smiled bitterly. "So, if I really get a divorce, you won't let me come home."

Heather's tone hardened as she

replied, "It's not that I won't let you come home. I won't allow you to get a divorce If you keep talking like this, I'll go to Hell Monarch Estate tomorrow and confront your cousin to see if she's the one putting these ideas in your head."

Leona panicked and quickly propped herself up. "Please don't go to her. It's not her idea. It's mine."

Knowing her daughter's weakness,

Heather spoke angrily, "You've always been an obedient, well-behaved child. How could you come up with something so rebellious on your own? Let me tell you this: if you dare bring up divorce again, I'll blame your cousin, no matter what. She must have planted these reckless thoughts in your head."

Leona lay back down, her eyes devoid of life. She didn't know why, but she suddenly wanted to laugh. She actually did laugh a little, then quietly wiped away the tears that had slipped down her face. "I understand, Mom."

Hearing how compliant Leona sounded, Heather was satisfied.

"Good. Focus on taking care of yourself and the baby. I'll visit you whenever I can. As for your father, he will surely reprimand your husband. He won't dare treat you so brazenly again."

In Leona's eyes, there wasn't even the slightest flicker of emotion left. Not even tears. Her parents had been her last source of support, but her mother's words had crushed her hopes completely.

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After Harvey and Heather left, the servants in Gracehold Estate were busy cleaning up. Apart from Samuel and Ruby, who remained in the sitting room, everyone else dispersed. Even Abigail did not stay as she escorted Dorothy back to her quarters.

Before leaving, Dorothy gave strict orders that Noah was not to make things difficult for Samuel.

"Which of the young men in this family is as outstanding as he is? The king personally selected Samuel as one of the top scholars. Him losing his position is only a temporary setback. Which family doesn't have multiple wives and concubines? It's just that some petty people are stirring up trouble."

"Mom, go rest," Noah responded, but he didn't agree. He simply gestured for his wife to escort Dorothy away.

Noah then turned his gaze to Ruby, who was sobbing uncontrollably in Samuel's arms. He felt a surge of frustration.

"Why are you crying? If you hadn't provoked Leona, would tonight's events have happened?"

Still shielding Ruby, Samuel spoke up, "Dad, how can you blame Ruby? You've seen how vicious the people in Leona's quarters are. They even dared to strike me, your son!"

"You insolent brat, shut your mouth!" Noah snapped before turning his fury back on Ruby. "You will go outside and stand in a corner, out in the cold. Don't you dare move until I tell you to."

Samuel immediately stepped forward to protect her. "She can't! She's already been dragged and injured by that vicious woman. Just look at her face..."

Noah could no longer hold back his rage. He slapped his son across the face and bellowed, "Insolent child! Don't you realize the disaster that's upon you?!"

Having been struck multiple times today, Samuel was filled with fury. "Fine! If you can't stand me and Ruby, then we'll leave the estate. I'll give up my title as heir. Whoever wants it can have it. It's just a small, insignificant title-I don't care."

True to his word, Samuel stormed off to pack his things and leave.

Noah sat in his chair, listening to a servant report that Samuel had packed up his belongings, including his ink, brushes, and many of the books he'd been reading, and had loaded everything onto a cart. "Did Ruby try to stop him?" Noah asked icily.

"N-no, she didn't. She helped him pack," the servant stammered.

Noah closed his eyes, recalling what Carissa had said. Eleanor's illegitimate daughter, who had become a courtesan at a brothel, entering the Earl of Gracehold's family-what were her intentions? He needed to think carefully.

Combining this with what Violet had mentioned, Noah was now almost certain that Ruby was here to sow discord, sent by Eleanor to disrupt the peace of his family.

He had initially considered two possibilities. The first was that Ruby had been sold off to a brothel after falling out of Eleanor's favor. The second was that Eleanor had deliberately arranged for Ruby to enter his family to ruin their reputation.

Now, he was almost certain it was the latter.

Samuel had once been a promising

top scholar and a distinguished nobleman with a future full of

potential. However, after he became involved with Ruby, he first tarnished the century-old reputation of the Earl of Gracehold's family by bringing a woman from a brothel into their home. His relationship with Leona then deteriorated, leading to charges

brought against him by the

Oversight Department, which

ultimately resulted in the loss of his

position.

If Ruby remained in Gracehold Estate, who knew what other disasters would follow?

Especially considering that Leona had already been harmed to the point that it had even led to complications with her pregnancy. If Ruby didn't leave, Leona's chances of a smooth delivery remained uncertain.

Though Harvey and Heather hadn't explicitly condemned Ruby tonight, their anger was evident. However, they weren't a big problem. After all, the couple likely wished for Samuel and Leona to get along. So, they would likely counsel their daughter to be patient and focus on safely giving birth.

What truly worried Noah was the Hell Monarch's princess consort. Tonight, Rafael had practically torn apart Gracehold Estate.

Would Noah mention this in court? No, he wouldn't dare say a word. The fact that a member of the Earl of Gracehold's family had laid hands on Helen, an honored concubine, was enough to bring his family under serious accusations of insubordination.

What's more, Rafael's household

soldiers had entered Gracehold Estate unarmed. They hadn't used weapons using only their fists to break things. Their hands were even injured from smashing items showing how meticulously the Hell Monarch had calculated his actions.

Samuel left the estate that night. When Dorothy heard of it, she couldn't bear the thought of her grandson suffering and arranged for them to live in a manor on Hibiscus Lane, sending no small amount of silver coins along with them.

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After Samuel settled down, he immediately began drafting a scathing article condemning the Hell Monarch. Once he finished, he reached out to his old scholar friends, inviting over a dozen people to join him. However, only three or four actually showed up.

Those who did come were stunned after reading his article. They quickly made excuses, claiming they had urgent matters to attend to, and hurriedly left.

Samuel was bewildered.

He chased after one of them, grabbing him by the arm and asking, "You all read how the Hell Monarch bullied me. Aren't you going to help?"

The scholar's name was Sean. He entered the National Academy last year and had once deeply admired Samuel-before Samuel brought a courtesan from a brothel into his home. Today, Sean had come merely out of respect for old ties.

Samuel's article boldly and repeatedly denounced the prince who had just reclaimed the Southern Frontier. It accused the Hell Monarch of disrespecting women-specifically, of disrespecting Ruby. Sean was left speechless.

Once that article was published, the whole world would criticize Samuel and curse his name.

Sean wanted no part of this mess.

In response to Samuel's questioning, he merely said, "If you're upright and set a good example, people will follow without orders. But if you're not, no command will make them obey!" With that, Sean nodded respectfully and left.

Samuel's face turned red with rage. Not only was he one of the top scholars, he was an honored scholar chosen by the king himself. How could he be accused of being anything less than upright? Turns out, his scholar friends were all just a bunch of spineless bootlickers. He used to think they had some integrity, but now it was clear-they were all terrified of the Hell Monarch's reputation.

In his fury, Samuel smashed things in the coffeehouse. However, the coffeehouse staff weren't about to indulge his tantrum. Despite his angry outburst and boastful claims of his lofty status, the shopkeeper remained indifferent and demanded Samuel pay for the damages.

Back at Hell Monarch Estate, Rafael had returned to his office. Meanwhile, Helen sat in a daze, waiting for Carissa to come to greet her.

The moment she saw her daughter-in-law, she grabbed her hand and asked, "Carissa, what's the story with Ruby? Is she truly Grand Princess Eleanor's illegitimate daughter?"

"Mother, it's true. Besides Celeste—that's Ruby's real name—it's likely that more women will be sent to various noble families in time," Carissa replied.

"But why? Why would she send her own illegitimate daughter to a filthy place like a brothel? Isn't that a disgrace to her own name?" Helen asked, still puzzled.

"If we hadn't uncovered Ruby's identity, who would have known? It was done in secret, so as long as it wasn't exposed, it wouldn't affect her reputation," Carissa explained.

Helen racked her brain, trying to understand the situation. However, she couldn't make sense of it.

"But why would she do it? Just to humiliate her husband's concubines and their children? Yet, she was the one who arranged those concubines for him. She lost interest in her husband and no longer wanted to

her

share a bed with him. Also, with status, it's hard to believe she would be so harsh toward his concubines' children. If this were to get out, her reputation would surely suffer."

Eleanor had spent years carefully cultivating her image and

maintaining close relationships with noble families. Despite being a

grand princess, she had not onnet?

allowed her husband to take

concubines, but had even personally arranged them, earning her

admiration for her supposed

tolerance and generosity.

Although there had been some scandals in the past, they were quickly hushed up, and Eleanor managed to maintain her good standing.

Carissa smiled knowingly. "Some people appear gentle and generous on the surface but are full of schemes underneath. Don't you already know that Grand Princess Eleanor is exactly that kind of person?"

"She took so much money from you under the guise of The Gilded Tower, claiming she was losing money when she was actually profiting. So, she acts like she's tolerant and accepting of her husband's concubines, but it's very possible she secretly despises them."

Carissa refrained from revealing too much.

The intricacies of the situation were too complex for her simple-minded mother-in-law to fully grasp. Helen just needed to understand the

basics. After all, the truth would

come to light soon enough, and

Helen didn't need to know more than what the general public would eventually learn.

Helen nodded vigorously at her daughter-in-law's explanation. "Yes, you're right. Some people are just like that—showing one face in public and another in private. Grand Princess Eleanor might be far more ruthless than we thought. We should limit our interactions with her."

"Exactly. It's best to keep our distance. Even when you do meet her, there's no need to dwell on past grievances about The Gilded Tower. Just maintain the appearance of harmony," Carissa agreed. She didn't want her mother-in-law to confront Eleanor directly. The two were not evenly matched, and it wouldn't end well for Helen.

"I understand," said Helen, taking the advice to heart.

Chapter 489

Carissa had Violet arrange for someone to keep an eye on Samuel for a few days. Despite everything, this once-renowned scholar, who had been favored by his family's matriarch, still held onto his lofty ambitions.

Over the past few days, Samuel had carried his written articles to the National Academy, hoping to find someone to present them to the king. But no one at the National Academy would pay him any attention anymore.

Believing it was because they were jealous of his talent, Samuel seethed with frustration. Determined, he then sought out people at the Academy of Wisdom. But no matter where he went, people deliberately avoided him.

After all, he was a top scholar who had been personally demoted by the king, destroyed his marriage for a favored mistress, abandoned his family to set up his own household, and even renounced his title as heir.

To make matters worse, rumors had spread that he had married the daughter of a merchant, then forced her to use her dowry to buy the freedom of a woman from a brothel. Even though the civil officials considered that a minor offense, it was still a sign of moral corruption and a disgrace to the scholars.

Then, the truth about Ruby's identity started to circulate.

Although no one knew for certain whether it was true or false, it cast a shadow that made people even more wary of Samuel. He spent several days running around to no avail. Enraged, he blamed Rafael, convinced that it was the prince's influence and power that caused everyone to avoid him.

Consumed by resentment, Samuel drank heavily at a tavern.

In his drunken stupor, he clenched his fist and shouted, "The king's power only protects the nobility! Prince Rafael, with his overwhelming military achievements, does whatever he pleases. Why does no one dare stand up to him? The entire court are cowards, all of them!"

It didn't take more than three days for those reckless words, shouted in a public place, to spread like wildfire across the capital. Soon, all the court officials had heard about it.

The reaction was swift. Both civil and military officials denounced Samuel, calling him arrogant and self-righteous. Reports criticizing him began piling up on the prime minister's desk.

Jeremiah, of course, did not conceal the matter and reported it directly to the king. Salvador summoned Rafael to royal study for questioning, and soon, the events of that day were laid bare.

Leona was Salvador's younger cousin. She had always been kind and well-mannered, adored by everyone who knew her. No one had expected Samuel to treat her so cruelly.

As for Ruby, the revelation that she was Eleanor's illegitimate daughter sent a ripple of suspicion through Salvador's mind.

Carissa had deliberately leaked

Ruby's true identity. It was her way of informing Eleanor that the secrets she thought were well hidden had long been exposed. As for how much Carissa actually knew? That was for Eleanor to speculate on. The real torment came from not knowing the full extent.

Carissa wasn't worried about Eleanor-Rafael and Jacob were already handling that situation. What concerned her more was Leona.

Alana had come by recently, explaining that the duchess had brought up the idea of divorce with her mother, only to be met with a harsh refusal. Ever since, Leona seemed completely deflated, as if all life had been drained from her.

Even when she had been deeply disappointed by Samuel and the Earl of Gracehold's family, Leona had never been this despondent.

Carissa feared that in her fragile state, her cousin might do something drastic. So, she asked Alana and Leah to keep a close watch on the duchess and ensure she didn't act impulsively.

As Alana was leaving, she remarked, "Lady Heather might come looking for you. That night, I overheard the conversation from outside the door. When the duchess proposed the divorce, Lady Heather seemed to think you had been the one to instigate it."

Carissa wasn't at all concerned about Heather's visit. She was thoroughly disappointed in her aunt and had nothing much to say to her. But if Heather wanted to come, then let her come. True to expectations, as the news of Samuel's outburst against the court officials spread and escalated, Heather showed up at Hell Monarch Estate.

Helen had initially planned to confront Heather with a few harsh words, but Violet persuaded her to hold off.

"You've already said your piece to

her that night. Let's hear what she has to say today. If she's here with good intentions for the duchess, we can forgive her. If she's here to make things difficult for Cari, then;

deal with her as Cari's

you

can

mother-in-law."

Despite Violet's words, Helen, who was still seething with anger, muttered, "I've never seen a mother act like this. It's a disgrace for a mother."

Chapter 490

In the sitting room, the fragrance of coffee filled the air.

Lulu brought out some cloud cakes. It was raining outside, and her shoes were soaked. As she walked across the cloud-patterned stone floor, several clear footprints were left behind.

Carissa didn't speak. She sat in a chair, slowly sipping her coffee, with only a high, square table separating her from Heather.

The cloud cakes were placed on the table. Lulu, holding a tray, retreated to stand at the door, keeping watch. Carissa picked up a piece of cloud cake by hand and ate it slowly. The sound of her chewing was barely audible.

Heather also took a piece with a fork and brought it to her mouth. She ate with refined manners, taking small bites and using a tiny porcelain saucer underneath to catch any crumbs that might fall onto her purple floral gown.

Heather's skin had a yellowish tint, and the purple gown she wore made her complexion look even duller. Her eyes were lifeless and shadowed with dark circles, clearly the result of several sleepless nights. Perhaps because Carissa hadn't spoken yet, Heather finally couldn't hold back.

Setting down her plate and fork, she wiped the corner of her mouth with a handkerchief and said, "Carissa, have you become so estranged from me, your aunt?"

"I thought it was you who had become estranged from me," Carissa calmly replied.

Heather sighed softly. "It's because of the matter with Leona's trousseau, isn't it? I owe you an apology for that. Let's just put it behind us, shall we? We're family, after all. If your mother were here to see us fighting like this, it would surely break her heart."

"If my mother were to be heartbroken, it wouldn't be because of me," Carissa said, meeting Heather's gaze. "Furthermore, I haven't given a second thought to the issue of Leona's trousseau and your refusal. So, if you're here for something specific, just say it directly. There's no need to bring my mother into this."

Heather's expression was conflicted. "You say you haven't given it a second thought, but do you know that because of you, our family was placed under house arrest for a month? We weren't even allowed into the palace for New Year's Eve that year."

"So, are you blaming me for that matter, Aunt Heather?" Carissa asked, finding the situation rather amusing.

"I didn't mean to blame you."

Heather hesitated, her frustration evident. In truth, she was indeed upset. Harvey's household had always been modest and low-key. They had never courted trouble or caused any issues, so it was hard to believe that the king had placed them under house arrest.

"You're here to talk about Leona, right? Just say what you need to," Carissa said, clearly tired of beating around the bush.

Heather turned to face her niece more directly, her hands clasped in her lap.

"Yes, that's right, Carissa. Your

cousin is not like you. She's timid,

delicate, and has a fragile constitution. She can't handle hardship and she won't be able to handle the gossip and scrutiny that follows a divorce. Besides, she is a duchess. How will it look if a

duchess is forced into a divorce by a courtesan from a brothel? She won't be able to endure the

embarrassment."

Her tone became more earnest, "So, I'm pleading with you not to encourage her to get a divorce. She is pregnant now and can't handle such upheavals. Besides, what man doesn't have multiple wives or concubines?

"Leona is capable of tolerating others. Even if Ruby is beautiful, people tire of looking at the same face. Leona's character is solid and respectable. If she waits three to five years, Samuel will definitely return to her. At that time, life will get better."

Carissa's eyes remained cold and indifferent. "Do you think I encouraged her to get a divorce, Aunt Heather?"

"If it weren't for you, she wouldn't have said such ridiculous things. She's only been married for a short time, and she's pregnant. If this child is a son, he'll be the heir to the Earl of Gracehold's title, a position of high status. Why choose a difficult path now, one that's so challenging for a woman to navigate? Heather replied.

Carissa's eyes were full of disdain, but she maintained her composure. "Aunt Heather, you've

misunderstood. I have never

encouraged Leona to get a divorce. Have you considered that her fragile nature, especially while pregnant, might make her feel exceptionally distressed?"

"What woman doesn't feel distressed at some point?" Heather countered.

"She's a duchess, and her parents are a prince and princess consort. She has support-she doesn't have to feel so distressed," Carissa replied.

Heather's tone grew sharp, "Is that what you've been telling her? Did you lead her into believing that her family could support her, making her think it's acceptable to pursue a divorce so recklessly?"