

War Song 491

Chapter 491

Carissa was silent for a moment before saying, "Lulu, show our guest out."

Heather's anger flared. "Carissa, I haven't finished speaking yet, and you're already so eager to drive me away? I am your aunt!"

In her rage, Heather threw a cup to the floor, her chest heaving with emotion.

Carissa glanced at the shattered cup on the floor. The liquid spread beneath her feet, dampening the tips of her shoes.

She raised her head to meet Heather's gaze, her voice stern and cold as she said, "If you had vented your anger this way at Gracehold Estate, by smashing a cup in front of them and cursing Samuel for his heartlessness, I would have been glad for Leona and still respected you as my aunt.

"But didn't you see how aggrieved Leona was that night? Yet, you were only making excuses. When she asked if you would accept her back into the house if she got a divorce, a simple nod from you would have been a great comfort, even if you only advised her to endure.

"Her words about divorce might have been spoken out of momentary distress, but your refusal only deepened her pain and despair. Did you ever consider that?"

Heather's face turned crimson with frustration as she shouted, "She can't get divorced! Have I wasted my breath telling you all this? If I had agreed to accept her back, what would have happened if she really returned with a child in her womb? Did you ever consider her situation? She respects you so much-how could you be so cruel to her?"

Heather was now standing and stamping her feet in anger, with tears streaming down her face. She dabbed at her tears with a handkerchief, only for more to fall.

"In the long run, what's the big deal with putting up with some temporary distress? She's a duchess and a legitimate wife. Why should she fear a courtesan from a brothel? Even if Ruby is Grand Princess Eleanor's illegitimate daughter, she was raised in that filthy place.

"In time, Samuel will grow weary of her and return to Leona. If you explain that to her, she wouldn't be so adamant about getting divorced. She has always listened to you. If you talk to her, she'll take your advice."

Heather sat down again, looking pitifully disheveled as she turned her body to the side to wipe her tears and blow her nose.

Looking at her aunt's tear-streaked face, which bore some resemblance to her own mother's, Carissa felt a pang of sympathy. Still, she couldn't help raising her voice and asking, "What are you afraid of? What exactly are you so scared of?"

"What are we afraid of?" Heather

said through her tears, her voice

muffled as she buried her face in her hands. "We're terrified of being sent to our fief. You know where it is it's a harsh, desolate place. How are we supposed to endure that?"

Carissa shook her head, her tone cold as ice as she replied, "You're afraid of facing hardship at your fief, so you choose to endure the humiliation of living in the capital, bowing to others and discarding even the dignity of a prince.

"Then, you expect Leona to be as

weak as you are? Has the king even mentioned sending you to your fief? Your husband isn't serving in court. He's just a leisurely prince. No one cares whether he goes to his fief or not Your constant worry is of no concern to the king."

Heather's voice grew cold as well, "The king's will is hard to fathom. What do you know? I don't want to discuss this further with you. The situations of our two families are different.

"When your parents were alive, their military achievements could protect us to some extent. Now that they're gone, we must keep a low profile in the capital. We don't even dare to employ household soldiers. So, please don't compare our family's situation to yours."

Heather tucked the handkerchief back into her sleeve and stood up. "I won't say more. I'm not asking for your sympathy. Leona respects you and cares for you. Since that's the case, I only ask that you don't ruin her.

"You should withdraw the two people you've assigned to her. Servants who lay hands on their masters are not good servants. The Earl of Gracehold's family doesn't need them, and neither does Leona."

"That's not happening!" Carissa moved to the door, making a dismissive gesture with a firm attitude. "They're not servants. I won't allow them to leave before Leona gives birth. Aunt Heather, you're not welcome here. Please leave!"

Heather's eyes widened in shock. "Carissa, are you really driving out your own aunt? After all the care I've shown you?"

Carissa did not lift her gaze. "Lulu, show our guest out."

With that, Carissa swept out of the room.

Chapter 492

The news of Carissa's anger towards Heather reached Helen's ears.

After calling Lulu in to get the full story, Helen was furious.

"Who wouldn't be infuriated by such behavior? It's only because Carissa is younger that she put up with Lady Heather. If I were there, I'd have slapped her a few times myself!

"Hurry, get the kitchen chefs to prepare some sweet treats- No, better yet, go buy an assortment of pastries from the best bakery in the capital. Cheer Carissa up. Don't let her stay angry and make herself ill over such spineless people. It's not worth it to ruin her health over them."

Helen's maid, Mindy, hurriedly prepared to buy the treats, but Violet said, "I'll go. I'm quick on my feet."

"Yes, you should go, Violet," Helen said anxiously.

She had seen her daughter-in-law angry before, but this time, Carissa's frustration with Heather was something she couldn't express. It was like when Helen was extremely annoyed with her sister but dared not show it.

No, it wasn't quite the same. Victoria was reasonable and had Helen's best interests at heart, whereas Heather didn't even care about her own daughter. How could Heather compare to Victoria? Even after returning to Orchid Hall, Carissa was still fuming and couldn't calm down.

Was it because they were afraid of being sent to their fief that they had to be so humble? They were even willing to discard the dignity of a prince and make Leona suffer as they did?

Carissa couldn't understand. People said that a mother should be strong, but Heather was not. Instead, she was even weaker than ordinary people. Her parents' weakness directly contributed to Leona's soft nature, leaving her unable to stand firm even as a duchess.

As Carissa was fuming, she heard footsteps outside. Looking up, she saw Violet entering with Helen's arm linked through hers. Violet carried a red box in her other hand. Carissa stood up and asked, "Mother, what brings you here?"

Violet placed the box on the table and smiled. "Lady Helen was worried you'd make yourself ill with anger. She asked me to get an assortment of pastries from the best bakery in the capital. A little sweetness will surely lift your spirits."

With that, Violet opened the box and began to take out the treats one at a time. While the kitchen chef made great pastries, the old, renowned bakery in the capital made even better ones.

Carissa couldn't help but chuckle as she looked at the delicious and beautiful pastries. Still, she was somewhat touched.

"Thank you, Mother. I'll have some now."

Carissa picked up a pastry and put it in her mouth. Despite her frustration, which made everything taste like wax, she still nodded and smiled when Helen asked if it was good.

"It's delicious."

The pastries themselves weren't rare-what was valuable was her mother-in-law's thoughtfulness. Knowing Carissa was upset, Helen had bought pastries to cheer her up.

Seeing her daughter-in-law smile,

Helen also grinned and said, "There's no point in getting worked up over someone like that. She doesn't have a spine to speak of. So what if they get sent to their fief? Life there

would be much more carefree.

Living like this, barely scraping by, is

worse than going to their fief!"

"Their life in the capital isn't great either. They live in a subdued manner, always deferring to others, and they don't dare challenge even an earl's household. What's the point of living such a pitiful existence?" said Violet, who also struggled to understand.

"Besides," Helen continued, "the cold

and desolate land isn't so terrible. Didn't her father, General Dominic, spend half his life stationed in such a place? What's there to complain about? And when a prince goes to a fief, it's far from the king's reach. Life there is bound to be much freer and more enjoyable. With money and rank, that's living in indulgence."

Carissa explained, "It's not that simple. Once at their fief, they can't return to the capital without a summons. Though the king is

relatively lenient now and allow net

occasional returns, going to such a remote fief means a complete departure from the circles of power in the capital.

"Prince Harvey has other children, and he naturally wants them to find suitors in the capital. But with their actions, what kind of good matches can their other children hope for?"

Seeing her daughter-in-law's expression darken again, Helen quickly said, "Forget about those people. Dwelling on them just leaves you feeling drained."

Chapter 493

Carissa handed Helen a pastry with a smile. "Mother, I'm not angry anymore. Please have some."

Seeing that Carissa had taken the pastry directly with her hands, Helen frowned slightly. Her daughter-in-law was still rather rough around the edges, wasn't she?

After hesitating for a moment, Helen accepted the pastry. Well, it wasn't like she would get sick from eating something a bit dirty.

-

The Oversight Department was busy once again as they launched a formal investigation against Samuel. They accused him of immoral conduct, public insults towards the court, and showing blatant disrespect for royal authority.

They argued that Samuel was unworthy of being recognized as one of the top scholars, and petitioned the king to remove his name from the National Examination Register. They also called for his removal as the heir to the title and estate of the Earl of Gracehold.

During the morning court session, Salvador stripped Samuel of his title as heir, but didn't revoke his status as a top scholar. It would be too embarrassing to cancel the appointment of someone he personally selected.

Despite this, Salvador was infuriated. He issued a severe reprimand to the Earl of Gracehold and summoned him to the royal study after court.

As Noah cried and lamented about his failure to properly discipline his son, Salvador said coldly, "This is the last opportunity I'm giving you. If the duchess suffers even a bit more distress in your household, the Earl of Gracehold title will end here."

Noah was utterly dumbfounded. He stood dazed for a moment, suddenly recalling that Leona was the king's cousin. Even if Harvey and Heather were inept, Salvador still valued family connections.

Feeling disheartened, Noah left the royal study. As he walked out, he caught sight of Rafael waiting at the door. Recalling the prince's bloodthirsty and cold expression when Gracehold Estate was vandalized that night, Noah shivered and hurriedly saluted before quickly departing.

Once he left, Rafael entered the royal study, where Salvador was drinking coffee and trying to calm his anger towards the Earl of Gracehold's family.

He addressed Rafael, "There's no need for formalities. Have a seat."

"Understood, Your Majesty." Rafael sat down in an armchair. "You asked me to wait outside. Is there something important you wish to discuss?"

Salvador dismissed everyone except Derek, who remained in the hall to attend to him. Derek prepared coffee on the side and served a cup to Rafael.

"Take a look at this," Salvador said, tossing a document at his brother.

Rafael caught and opened it, his expression immediately becoming solemn. It was about the exchange of prisoners with Sandoria.

Salvador continued, "The two

kingdoms have had a ceasefire for

some time now. After Louis and Timothy held several rounds of negotiations with Sandorian

representatives, an agreement was reached to return the captured

soldiers.

"However, one of the prisoners previously escaped from the enemy camp and had been providing intelligence about Sandoria to Hector. After Hector's death, Louis took over receiving the reports before passing them on to you. Unfortunately, his identity has been discovered and he was captured."

Rafael was stunned. "Are you referring to Septimus Tetra?"

Previously, when investigating the Westhaven army's movements from Sandoria, it was Septimus who had followed their trail. The intelligence from him had verified the information brought by Carissa. He had been captured?

Rafael's heart tightened immediately. Though he had never met the man personally, he knew Septimus had been initially captured in Calmstead City before Hector's death, along with several hundred others. Rafael had not participated in that battle, as he hadn't been dispatched to the Southern Frontier battlefield at the time. He had heard about it from Timothy.

In that battle, the Sandorian forces launched a night raid, burning tents and killing many soldiers. The two sides engaged in fierce combat amidst the flames, and it was then that Thomas had lost his life.

Rafael had taken over from Hector to lead the Hell Monarch Army onto the battlefield. Several times, he had captured Sandorian soldiers, hoping to exchange them for the previously captured Sinclair Army soldiers. However, his requests had always been rejected.

Instead, the soldiers captured later were accepted for exchange, but the Sandorians still refused to release that initial batch of prisoners.

Now, negotiations had finally succeeded, but Septimus had been captured and fallen into the hands of angry Sandorian troops. Would he survive?

Chapter 494

"Your Majesty, what is Septimus' true identity?" Rafael asked.

When Rafael received Septimus' intelligence from Louis, he had investigated all the military commanders and captured soldiers, only to find that none of them were named Septimus Tetra.

Salvador shook his head. "I don't know. It's likely that no one knows. Your late father-in-law received the initial intelligence. Perhaps he knew his identity, or perhaps even he didn't know. Since Septimus was able to escape from the enemy camp, it indicates that his martial arts skills are quite impressive, and that he is no ordinary soldier."

Rafael frowned.

When he received the intelligence from Septimus, he hadn't inquired about his identity. Moreover, even if he had asked, Septimus' identity would likely not have been disclosed to avoid compromising the intelligence. It was too risky.

"Your Majesty, he has provided a lot of valuable intelligence and has done our kingdom a great service. We must rescue him," Rafael said.

Salvador nodded, his gaze solemn. "So, I need you to go in person. One thing we know for certain is that he's still alive. Sandoria intends to use him to negotiate for a city in exchange. According to Timothy's report, Septimus is imprisoned in a dungeon at Sandoria's border city. However, the exact location is still unknown. Your task is to locate where he is being held, then find an opportunity to rescue him." Rafael knelt on one knee, his gaze resolute. "I understand and accept your command, Your Majesty."

Salvador sighed. "For now, Oliver is dragging out the negotiations. Sandoria's resentment towards Septimus is deep, so he is likely to suffer. In any case, whether he is dead or alive, bring him back. We need to know who he really is."

"Understood. I will depart for Sandoria's border city tomorrow. I will leave the Supreme Court matters to Matthew for now," Rafael replied.

"Be careful. Bring along several skilled fighters and disguise yourselves as civilians to gather information. If you can't rescue him, do not be reckless, understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Salvador added, "Also, Patrick has gone to Brightmoor District to investigate the case of the family that was annihilated. We now have some clues about the true culprits, so you need not worry about that matter. Don't let it distract you."

Rafael nodded slightly.

Salvador continued, "And about Leona, I also don't wish to interfere too much in the affairs of my ministers' families. Have Carissa take good care of her. I truly hope that Uncle Harvey..." Salvador trailed off, shaking his head.

He knew all too well what Harvey's intentions were. The older man wanted to remain in the capital, not out of devotion towards his mother, Megan, but because he was unwilling to leave the wealth and privilege of the capital.

Harvey's inherent weakness,

combined with his scheming nature,

was evident. Despite Megan's old age, he hadn't even taken her out of the palace to live elsewhere, leaving her with a few other elderly

concubines. His so-called devotion was merely a facade, and his

supposed love for his children was tainted with both cowardice and cunning.

"You don't have to worry, Your Majesty. Carissa has sent people to look after Leona. With you having reprimanded the Earl of Gracehold today, they should no longer neglect Leona. However, Samuel has indeed disrespected his primary wife, and he is not someone who should be trusted with any significant responsibilities," Rafael said.

Salvador's eyes were filled with disgust. "I'm well aware of that. I'll allow him to keep his title, but he'll never serve in court again. He has now lost the chance to inherit the

title of the Earl of Gracehold. Astor

selecting a new heir, let the Earl of Gracehold's family be in chaos for a while. Let them create trouble elsewhere, as long as it does not harm Leona."

"Your considerations are thoughtful, Your Majesty."

"Have you heard about that courtesan from a brothel, who's supposedly the daughter of one of the concubines in Aunt Eleanor's household?" Salvador asked, looking at his brother. "Yes, I've heard about it."

In fact, it was Winona who had uncovered the information.

Salvador mused, "What do you think our aunt is trying to achieve? A daughter from a grand princess' household was sent to a brothel and then into a noble family. Was the Earl of Gracehold's family the only one affected? Or are there other households involved, perhaps under different pretenses?"

Salvador valued family loyalty, but was also deeply suspicious. He had a talent for connecting even the smallest hints into a web of possibilities.

"You might consider sending someone to investigate further. Your Majesty," Rafael suggested.

Salvador smiled. "It's not a pressing issue. You may go about your duties."

"I will take my leave." Rafael saluted and withdrew.

Chapter 495

At Hell Monarch Estate, Carissa was helping Rafael pack his belongings, her expression marked by a hint of worry.

"Why don't I go with you? I'm not comfortable with you going alone."

"I won't be alone. I'll have Dylan and Jacob with me. You should stay behind to handle Kiera's wedding arrangements. Besides, Ryan will be going to the academy soon." "How is Jacob's martial prowess?"

Carissa wasn't very familiar with Jacob. Although he was an important figure in the estate, he often seemed rather inconspicuous.

"He's average in skill but sharp-witted."

Hearing that, Carissa was still uneasy, considering the dangers of infiltrating the Sandorian border city.

"Then, perhaps Violet should go with you?"

Rafael embraced Carissa, kissing her forehead. Her concern genuinely pleased him.

"No need. I've invited my master to accompany me."

"Sage Everett is going with you? That's good."

Everett was highly skilled and elusive. Even when he was far away, he seemed to appear out of nowhere whenever needed, as if he were omnipresent.

"Yeah, don't worry. I'll rescue Septimus."

Rafael placed another tender kiss on his wife's cheek, feeling reluctant at the thought of being apart for at least a month.

"His name is Septimus Tetra?" Carissa asked.

"That's right. He sent us intelligence while mingling with the Sandorian supply convoy headed to the Southern Frontier. The fact that Westhaven soldiers had disguised themselves as Sandorian troops was verified through him.

"After we reclaimed the Southern Frontier and returned to the capital, Louis took over coordinating with him. The plan was for him to stay in Sandoria for a year and only return once we were certain there would be no more conflict," Rafael explained.

"Septimus Tetra... Septimus Tetra," Carissa repeated. "Is that a codename?"

"No, it's his actual name. His

surname is a little unusual, I know,"

Rafael said, then paused

thoughtfully. "A codename? In another language, Septimus means

seven, while Tetra means for

Wait... seven plus four is eleven..."

As Carissa pushed him away gently, their eyes met, and an unlikely thought emerged in both their minds.

Almost simultaneously, they exclaimed, "The Farrell family's eleventh son, Thomas Farrell!"

Rafael's heartbeat quickened. "Is that possible?"

But why not?

He had heard Timothy mention Thomas several times while on the Southern Frontier battlefield. Thomas had been young and brave-if he hadn't died on the battlefield, he would have surely been a commanding figure by now.

Timothy had both cherished and respected his cousin.

Rafael recalled, "General Farrell once

said that the battle was fierce and chaotic. The Sandorian soldiers launched a surprise night attack and set fire to the camp, resulting in heavy casualties. The soldiers remains were buried in a large pit, many burned beyond recognition.

"Timothy saw Thomas fighting fiercely against the enemy in the firelight. Thomas was eventually injured and kicked back into the flames, but the battle was so chaotic that Timothy couldn't look for him." Carissa mused, "If Thomas was injured and kicked back into the fire, he might have crawled out unnoticed by Timothy and been captured."

Rafael nodded solemnly. "That's a possibility."

Carissa remembered Thomas' mother, Alice. Since her son's death, she had been reclusive. She had attended Helen's birthday banquet, but seeing her former daughter-in-law, Viola, had been a significant blow.

If Septimus was indeed Thomas, then...

It was unfortunate that he had now been captured by the Sandorian forces and was likely being tortured. Carissa hoped Oliver could stall the negotiations long enough to at least give Thomas a chance to be rescued.

"I hope he remains unharmed. Whether or not he is Thomas, he has contributed greatly to the reclaiming of the Southern Frontier. He must safely return to Starhaven," she said, her heart aching for him.

On the battlefield, anything could happen, but those who survived the direst situations were few and far between.

"I won't wait any longer. I'll leave the city tonight. There could be unforeseen developments," Rafael declared.

He couldn't predict Oliver's

temperament. Though Salvador had

yet to decide whether or not to agree to Sandoria's proposal to exchange Septimus for a city, Oliver would certainly refuse. Rafael feared that if

Oliver refused too decidif

The

Sandorian people might execute Septimus on the spot.

Chapter 496

Rafael left the city that night, taking Dylan and Jacob with him. At the same time, a carrier pigeon flew back to the Pathfinders Guild, carrying a letter requesting help from Everett.

After Rafael left, Violet pulled Carissa into the next room to sleep together, under the excuse that she was worried Carissa would feel lonely after getting used to having someone beside her. Carissa

knocked on her head. "I'm not lonely at all. You're just bored, aren't you? Why don't you go play with Rod?"

"I'm not going to him. He's all high and mighty now ever since becoming a drill instructor for the household soldiers. He walks around like a peacock," Violet said, lying on the bed with her chin propped up on her hands.

"And I'm not bored or lonely. I just wanted to chat with you. In a couple of days, we'll have something fun to watch-Serena's going to be taken into the Marquis of Ironridge's family as a concubine." Carissa folded her arms behind her head. "I know, but I've been thinking about something else lately."

"What are you thinking about? Wondering if Jessica will die of anger?" Violet turned her head, grinning mischievously.

"No. Why are you so focused on their family drama?"

"It's not just theirs. I'm also keeping an eye on the Earl of Gracehold's family," Violet said, kicking her legs up playfully. "Samuel and Ruby were living the good life a few days ago. I wonder if they'll cry themselves to death after Samuel gets stripped of his heir status."

Carissa smiled faintly. "Who knows?"

"Cari, you don't smile as cheerfully as you used to," Violet said, poking her finger between Carissa's brows. "You should lighten up! There's gossip to follow, jokes to laugh at, and unfortunate people to kick when they're down."

Carissa turned to look at her. "Let

me ask you something. Imagine this:

during the war, you were already married and presumed dead

battle. But in reality, you were captured. When you finally came back, you discovered that your

husband had remarried. How would

you feel-heartbroken or angry?"

Violet thought for a moment. "I can't put myself in that situation. I don't have a husband. You do, though. Why don't you imagine it for yourself? You'll understand how it feels."

Carissa's voice turned soft and distant. "I've already thought about it. If Rafael thought I died in battle and remarried after a few years, I would be heartbroken, but I think I could understand. After all, no one can wait for someone forever. It's too much to ask."

"Is this what's been bothering you? No wonder you've looked so down," Violet said, rolling over onto her back before turning to look at Carissa again. "Why are you even thinking about this? Are you just torturing yourself, or is something actually going on?"

"I'm not sure, but I can tell you about it. You know how to keep a secret," Carissa replied.

She then told Violet her suspicions about Septimus possibly being Thomas. After finishing, she emphasized, "It's just a suspicion. We'll only know for sure once we rescue him."

Violet listened, and then said, "After

Thomas died, the Farrell family was generous enough to release Viola back to her family. I heard they even gave her two shops as

compensation, along with The

pension. If Thomas is really still alive, it's not entirely Viola's fault. But if she decided to return to her family, why did she take his pension and the shops the Farrell family gave her?"

She paused to think for a moment.

"If it were me," she said, "I wouldn't have taken them. After all, the Farrell family isn't some wealthy noble house. They're not exactly

swimming in money. So many oset

their sons died on the battlefield, and they have so many widows and orphans to take care of. From a moral standpoint, Viola shouldn't

have taken the two shops or

Thomas's pension. Taking back her

dowry would've been enough."

"Yeah, and now she's using that pension and those two shops in her marriage to Barrett. If Thomas really does come back, he'll probably feel pretty hurt."

"It's a tough situation involving loyalty and personal happiness," Carissa said with a sigh, her mood growing heavy as well. "If it is Thomas, and he didn't let Viola know he was alive because of his loyalty, then Viola remarrying is understandable. It's a sad reality."

That was just how it was, but the whole situation was overwhelmingly sad.

Chapter 497

The two friends chatted through the night. After experiencing the battles in the Southern Frontier, Violet had matured a great deal. Especially now that she was living in the capital, she had come to learn much about the affairs of powerful families. She realized that the world wasn't as simple as it had seemed back in Meadow Ridge.

Life in Meadow Ridge had been far too easy. Every day was spent causing trouble, walking dogs, teasing cats, digging around for snakes, or chasing wild boars. The worst thing that ever happened was getting beaten up by apprentices from other guilds.

As they talked, they grew sleepy.

Violet turned over and casually threw a leg over Carissa, yawning. "I really envy you for having such a good mother-in-law. Lady Helen's always so protective of you."

"I know."

"Maybe I should just marry the marshal too, then she'd be my—"

Before Violet could finish her sentence, Carissa kicked her off the bed. Violet jumped back up and started pounding on Carissa, laughing.

"I was just kidding! Did you really take it seriously? Besides, Lady Helen already said she'd take me as her goddaughter. I'm just making her wait for me to accept. She absolutely adores me!"

Carissa blocked Violet's punches with her elbows, then raised a leg and pressed it against Violet's neck, pinning her head to the bed. "I'm exhausted. Sleep!"

Violet struggled to free herself from beneath Carissa's leg, then flopped back down onto the bed and wriggled under the thin blanket. "Fine, I'll sleep. I'm really tired."

The next day, Carissa took Kiera and Violet out shopping.

Their main stop was The Golden Tower to check out the latest styles. Of course, they could have had the shop send the new items to their residence to choose from. However, Kiera wanted to see a wider selection. She had been cooped up at home for too long, and was eager to get out and walk around.

Although the palace had already prepared jewelry and accessories for Kiera's wedding, Carissa didn't think it was enough. Kiera also wanted to buy more—after all, young girls love looking pretty. Who didn't love beautiful jewelry?

After breakfast, Helen went back to sleep for a while. When lunchtime came and Carissa, Violet, and Kiera still hadn't shown up to check on her, Helen sent someone to find out where they were. To her shock, she learned that the three of them had gone out shopping without her.

They had gone without her?

Helen could hardly believe it. How dare they go shopping without her?

To ignore someone as dignified and esteemed as her—how outrageous!

Storming out, she muttered, "Janice has been with me for so many years, and I gave her up generously. Now they go shopping without inviting me? They can forget about me ever paying them any attention again."

Gillian and Mindy hurried after her, asking, "Where are you going, Your Grace?"

"I'm going to the palace! It's not as if I need them for company!" Helen snapped furiously.

The Golden Tower was located on South Street in the capital, and it was a well-established shop with a long-standing reputation. Their designs were unique, some even more exquisite than what the palace craftsmen could produce. In fact, many of the palace concubines sent people to The Golden Tower to buy jewelry and accessories.

Moreover, the young heir of The Golden Tower knew how to market his products. Some items were made in very limited quantities. Even though the profit from just a piece wasn't huge, it helped maintain the store's prestigious reputation. Keeping that reputation

alive was what really mattered in the

long run.

The building had three floors: the first sold more affordable items, the second held higher-end goods, and the third was reserved for limited-edition pieces. But even the items from the first floor, though lower in price, were special simply because they came from The Golden Tower.

After they parked the carriage, the driver stayed outside to wait while Carissa, Kiera, and Violet entered the tower, hand in hand.

The moment they stepped through the doors, Carissa's brow furrowed.

She had just seen some old acquaintances.

The first floor was spacious, and it was divided into three halls. To get to the second floor, they would need to take the staircase on the right, but next to the stairs was a display case where several people stood. Carissa recognized them immediately.

Rebecca, Viola, and Serena.

They were engrossed in picking out jewelry, and hadn't noticed Carissa's arrival.

Carissa wanted to avoid them, but the young heir of The Golden Tower, Nathaniel, had already spotted her.

He quickly rushed over, his youthful, handsome face brimming with excitement—so much that he practically glowed.

"Are you the Hell Monarch's princess

consort, Your Grace? Is that really

you? My goodness! When you

returned victorious with the Hell

Monarch, I was on the third fet

watching you both during the victory parade. I never imagined you'd visit our humble shop today! Forgive me for not greeting you properly sooner!"

As soon as these words left his mouth, all three of the women turned to look at Carissa.

Chapter 498

Rebecca looked at Carissa, taking in the latter's entire appearance. Carissa exuded an undeniable air of luxury and authority now-she was truly different.

Rebecca's gaze was filled with anger, regret, resentment, and frustration; a mix of emotions that made her teeth ache.

Serena shared those feelings, but hers were laced with even more hatred and jealousy. She had been so close, just a step away from becoming the Hell Monarch's concubine. "What bad luck!" Violet muttered coldly.

Carissa only glanced at them briefly before turning her attention back to the smiling young heir of The Golden Tower.

Business people really did have sharp eyes. Even on the day when she looked completely disheveled, he had still recognized her.

Well, it wasn't that surprising. She and her mother had visited The Golden Tower before, and had met him.

Carissa smiled and said, "Nathaniel, there's no need for such formalities. We'd like to go up to the third floor to pick out some jewelry. Would that be alright?"

"Of course!" Nathaniel replied excitedly. "Please come this way. I'll personally attend to you all."

The Golden Tower often hosted many distinguished guests-members of the royal family, powerful officials, noble families, and wealthy merchants from the capital. Nathaniel occasionally attended to them himself, but such enthusiasm as he showed toward Carissa was rare.

As Carissa, Kiera, and Violet ascended the stairs, Serena suddenly spoke up. "Some people who used to be so eager to please my mother now act like they don't even know me. It's really disappointing." Kiera was too wrapped up in the excitement of shopping to hear the remark, but she noticed Violet's grip on her wrist loosen. Before she could even process what was happening, Violet had already leaped down the stairs.

What was going on?

Violet marched straight up to Serena. "Who are you talking about? Just say the name instead of being vague."

Serena was startled by Violet's fierce expression, and she instinctively took a step back to hide behind Viola.

On the other hand, Viola was thoroughly exasperated.

Could her sister-in-law not just keep quiet and pretend not to see them? Everyone had witnessed what had happened at Helen's birthday banquet. After doing something so shameless, one would logically think that Serena would avoid Carissa at all costs, right?

At the very least, Serena shouldn't be provoking them.

Rebecca's face darkened as she said, "Serena, enough. Her status has changed, and we can't afford to offend her. Besides, there's no real past relationship to worry about. It was all just for show to earn a reputation."

After her remark, Rebecca stepped forward and bowed toward Carissa, who was standing halfway up the stairs.

"Please forgive her, Your Grace. My daughter is ignorant and still thinks of you as a sister-in-law, which is why she made such inappropriate comments. I beg you not to take offense."

As Carissa stood on the middle landing of the staircase between the second and third floors, all the guests on both floors began to look her way. Among them were a few of the ladies who had attended the birthday banquet that night.

"Your sister-in-law? She's my sister-in-law! Don't just go randomly claiming that you're related to her!" Kiera immediately reacted, tightening her grip on Carissa's arm as she raised her chin and glared at Serena.

"And besides, when have you ever treated my sister-in-law as your own? The whole capital knows you wanted to be my sister-in-law instead! How can you still have the nerve to say such things?" Kiera's sharp words drew laughter from many of those present, causing Serena's face to turn ashen with rage.

Having been taught by the queen dowager to be poised and proper, Kiera always carried herself with grace and liveliness. However, there was a touch of Helen's sharpness in her nature as well. She wouldn't normally resort to harsh words, but these two-Rebecca and

Serena-were truly despicable.

How dare they publicly make trouble for her sister-in-law and act as if she didn't exist?

Carissa watched Kiera with a deep

sense of satisfaction. It wasn't

because Kiera was defending her. Initially, she had worried that Kiera, with a personality similar to Leona's, might turn out the same way. But now, it was clear Kiera wouldn't.

Kiera was akin to a delicate flower, but she was a flower with thorns.

Without sparing Rebecca or Serena another glance, Carissa turned to Kiera and said, "Let's go. I brought some Mystic Pearls today and was thinking of commissioning a pearl and gem-inlaid tiara for you. wonder if the shop can

accommodate us, Nathaniel."

"Of course!" Nathaniel nodded eagerly, his face bright with excitement. "Whatever your wishes are, Your Grace, The Golden Tower is at your service." Carissa playfully tapped Kiera on the nose. "Come on, let's pick out some jewelry. Whatever you want today, your sister-in-law will gift it to you." The two of them linked arms and headed up to the third floor. Violet shot Serena and Rebecca a cold glare before turning away as well. Serena was seething with jealousy, practically on the verge of losing control.

Chapter 499

A pearl and gem-inlaid tiara with Mystic Pearls, and Carissa offering Kiera free rein to choose anything from the third floor?

There was a time when Carissa would give Serena jewelry and seasonal clothing as gifts. Carissa had always been generous, and had even promised to provide Serena with a lavish dowry when the time came for her to marry.

But now, Carissa was arranging a dowry for someone else.

Today, Serena had come to The Golden Tower with Viola to pick out her dowry. However, Viola was only selecting items from the first floor. They hadn't even bothered to go up to the second floor, let alone the third, where the top-tier pieces were displayed.

The difference between people-how could it be so vast?

Serena felt the gazes of the other guests on her, eyes filled with mockery and disdain. The humiliation surged within her, and she quickly grabbed Viola's arm.

"Viola, I want to go to the third floor too."

Viola was already frustrated. She had been reluctant to spend her own money on her sister-in-law's dowry. As a sister-in-law, she was expected to contribute, but now she was expected to cover the entire cost. She hadn't wanted to come to The Golden Tower either, since the jewelry here was on the expensive side. She had figured she could just visit some other jewelry shop and pick out something simple. However, Rebecca had insisted that since Serena was marrying the Marquis of Ironridge, her dowry couldn't be too meager. Besides, if her dowry was grand enough, people would know that Viola, as her sister-in-law, was generous and virtuous.

With Rebecca's words in mind, Viola had grudgingly brought them to The Golden Tower.

Even so,

she had planned to stick to the first floor, where they were already making good progress. But after Carissa's arrival, Serena was throwing a tantrum about wanting to go up to the third floor. Viola cursed inwardly. Didn't Serena realize that the Warren family's funds were practically depleted? Didn't she know that her entire household was living off Viola? And now, Serena had the nerve to insist on going up to the third floor!

But with so many people watching, Viola couldn't afford to be embarrassed. She forced a smile and said through gritted teeth, "Let's take a look at the second floor. We don't need to go to the third." However, Serena stubbornly insisted, "I want to buy something from the third floor! It's not like we don't have any money—didn't my brother just get rewarded with a hundred gold coins?"

Viola's chest heaved with frustration. A hundred gold coins-did Serena think that much was some kind of endless gold mine that could never run out?

"Come on, take a look at the third floor," Rebecca said casually from the side. "We're not buying much, just one or two pieces. After all, some things are about quality, not quantity."

She wanted to see what Carissa

would buy for the princess. In the

past, Carissa had never gifted anything from the third floor to Serena. Even if Rebecca could only say a few words, she must make sure those words reached the guests on the third floor, because they were the real elites of the capital.

Viola had no choice but to lead them upstairs.

The third floor was completely different from the first and second. The decor was more refined, not as grand and opulent as the lower levels. But upon closer inspection, it became clear that everything from the display cases to the furniture—was made from top-quality mahogany wood. The trays holding the jewelry were intricately carved from fine

zebrawood.

There was only one display case on this floor, with the rest of the space taken up by private rooms where guests were served coffee and refreshments while an attendant brought trays of jewelry for leisurely browsing.

They didn't see Carissa, but they could hear Nathaniel's voice coming from one of the private rooms. He sounded astonished.

"These pearls are the finest I've ever

seen! They're so round and lustrous, and there's not a single flaw on

them—truly premium quality

you really going to have all

twenty-something of them made into a tiara, Your Grace?"

Carissa's voice was light with laughter. "Yes. Make a tiara, a hairpin, a pair of earrings, and a gold bracelet set with pearls. I'm sure you'll have some great ideas for making them even more exquisite." "I'll make sure both of you are satisfied, Your Grace, Your Highness."

"Kiera, go ahead and pick out a few more things. I'll buy them for you," Carissa said, her voice warm and indulgent.

The words rang sharp and piercing in the ears of Rebecca and Serena. Carissa's generosity now was on a completely different level than what it had been when she was with the Warren family.

And everyone knew those Mystic Pearls were part of Carissa's dowry—yet here she was, using them to craft a set of jewelry for Kiera to add to her dowry instead.

"Ladies, this way, please!" A polite shop assistant greeted them with a broad smile. "We've just received some new tiaras and a few exquisite scarlet emerald pendants."

They were led into one of the private rooms. Serena glanced at the tiaras the shopkeeper brought out, and she couldn't take her eyes off them. The gemstones were so dazzling that they seemed to captivate her entirely.

She pointed to a set, and declared loudly, "I'll take this ruby tiara! Wrap it up!"

Serena wanted Carissa to know that she had also bought something from the third floor.

Viola's heart nearly leaped into her throat.

Was Serena mad? She didn't even ask the price!

Chapter 500

The shop assistant smiled and said, "Of course, miss. Please have a seat and enjoy some coffee and pastries while I prepare your selection."

He didn't mention the price—none of the guests who made it to the third floor would ever ask. Once everything was packed, the total would simply be presented.

Rebecca's heart skipped a beat as she eyed the ruby tiara. She had enough experience to know that such a piece would be incredibly expensive. Rubies varied in quality, and these were far from the small, ordinary ones. These were exquisite and on a whole different level.

She glanced at Viola and whispered, "Since she wants it, you might as well buy it. What do you think?"

Viola was so frustrated that she found herself laughing inwardly in disbelief.

What did she think? Did she even have a choice? The shop assistant was already placing the tiara into a luxurious jewelry box.

Even the box itself looked expensive. It was made of cherry wood, inlaid with velvet and a row of tiny gemstones. Its sides were carved with intricate patterns. A tiara packed in something this lavish could never be cheap.

As the shop assistant neatly wrapped the tiara and presented it, he asked, "Madam, is there anything else you'd like to see?"

Noticing Serena's gaze drifting toward another tray, Viola quickly stepped forward. "No, just this one will do."

The shop assistant smiled. "Very well. Thank you for your patronage, ladies. This ruby-embedded tiara in gold thread will be 36,800 silver coins."

Rebecca gasped aloud. "What? Over 36,000 silver coins for a single tiara?"

Her outburst left the shop assistant stunned, and others in the nearby private rooms poked their heads out, surprise written all over their faces.

Rebecca quickly covered half of her face with a handkerchief, her gaze pleading as she turned toward Viola for help.

Serena was now holding the jewelry box in her hands, and she also looked at Viola. She hadn't expected it to be this expensive. In the past, Carissa had given her jewelry and bracelets with gemstones, but those had only cost a few hundred silver coins. She thought that no matter how expensive this set might be, it would only cost two or three thousand silver coins at most.

Viola had said they could only spend a thousand silver on jewelry today.

However, since Serena was marrying into a prominent family, it should be fine to spend a few thousand on a nice tiara, right?

But never in her wildest dreams had she imagined it would cost nearly 40,000 silver coins.

Still, Serena knew Viola could cover

the cost. In addition to her late husband's pension, Viola's dowry included a significant amount of silver coins and property from

her

own family. 36,800 silver coins was

a hefty sum, but Viola could manage

it.

Serena quickly hugged the jewelry box close to her chest, then turned to Viola with a sweet smile. "Viola, thank you so much for contributing to my dowry."

Viola stared in shock at Serena's

actions. A surge of anger and embarrassment rose to her head. She had thought Serena might refuse the tiara after hearing the price. But instead, she had snatched

it from the shop assistant and

thanked her for contributing to her dowry.

"You said this one was enough," Serena said with an innocent look, adding a touch of pitiful charm as she glanced at Viola.

Viola looked at Rebecca for support, and Rebecca nodded in agreement. "Since you decided on this one, we'll go with what you chose."

Viola's eyes widened. She couldn't believe that even her mother-in-law had said that.

The tiara was over 36,000 silver coins, and they were expecting let her to shoulder the cost?!

The shop assistant was looking at Viola. Though his smile was unwavering, Viola felt that there was a hint of condescension in it.

Feeling both humiliated and embarrassed, Viola took a deep breath, forcing back the tears that threatened to spill. She addressed the shop assistant firmly, "We won't take it."

She expected the shop assistant to

sneer or mock her, but he only maintained his polite smile. "Very well. If you don't like it, feel free to

choose something else or come

back another time."

He extended his hands, waiting for Serena to return the jewelry box. Since he was keeping his distance, the shop assistant was slightly bowed as he held out his hands.

Yet, Serena didn't return the box. Frustrated, she snapped, "Who said we don't want it? We do! Mom, you need to get Viola to pay for it now!"

Rebecca was genuinely appalled by the price. 36,800 silver coins for a single tiara was exorbitant, and it would make her heart ache to actually buy it.

But with Carissa in another private room and others watching, she couldn't afford to be embarrassed.

So, she took a firm stance and said sternly, "Viola, if you don't have enough money with you now, have the shop assistant collect it from our home."