

## War Song 581

### Chapter 581

Carissa pretended to discuss the matter quietly with Rafael. They spoke in hushed tones, inaudible to others. As the maid and the guard couldn't hear anything despite straining to listen, their anxiety was palpable.

After a considerable pause, Rafael finally nodded.

"Alright then, we'll head to the capital together," said Carissa.

The maid sighed in relief. "Thank you, Lady Sinclair. You are truly a saint."

"What's your name?" Carissa asked.

The maid bowed. "My name is Greta."

Carissa turned to the guard. "And you?"

"My name is Dustin," the guard replied in a slightly gruff voice.

Though he was sturdy and appeared honest, a person's appearance didn't always reflect their true nature.

Carissa asked a few more questions but didn't get much more information. It was clear she wasn't expecting to learn anything significant from them.

At supper time, a pinch of Sebastian's colorless, tasteless powder rendered Dustin, Greta, and the driver unconscious. Once that was done, Carmen knelt before Carissa and Rafael. Violet sat on the other side, listening without objection.

Carmen looked up, her eyes filled with distress and urgency. "My mother, Grand Princess Eleanor, originally wanted me to seduce Prince Rafael and ruin your relationship. She hopes that you two will turn against each other. She believed that I would be suitable for this task because I have some skill in martial arts, and His Highness favors such women.

"However, I refused to do it. I knew that even if I did, she wouldn't release my real mom. My twin sister, Celeste, entered the Earl of Gracehold's family and completed her task, but she still had another mission. My mom is imprisoned in Harmony Palace's dungeon and isn't given proper food or clothing.

"Your Highness, Your Grace, I implore you to rescue my mom. If this can be accomplished, I will owe you a tremendous debt. I will be at your service, and even in my next life, I will repay you with all my gratitude." "How many siblings do you have?" Carissa asked.

She knew that Eleanor had found many concubines for her husband, but no one had ever seen those concubines or their children. The exact number remained unknown.

"I don't know how many were born, but there are eight still alive. We don't have any male siblings. They were all killed at birth," Carmen replied.

"Doesn't your dad care about this? His own children are being killed!" Violet exclaimed, her anger flaring.

"Care?" Carmen's face showed a flash of anger. "He's powerless and unwilling to clash with the grand princess. He doesn't dare to go against her because he's afraid she'll retaliate against the Kingsley family."

"I just don't understand," Violet said. "Why can't these matters be brought to the king or the queen dowager?"

Carmen's eyes brimmed with blood-like hatred. "Grand Princess Eleanor is ruthless and leaves no evidence. Without evidence, neither the king nor the queen dowager would investigate what's happening in Harmony Palace."

Carissa explained to Violet, "Grand Princess Eleanor's mom, Lady Chloe, was greatly favored. So, King Augustus cherished Grand Princess Eleanor as well. After Lady Chloe's death, Grand Princess Eleanor was sent to Lady Ruth to be taken care of.

"Since Grand Princess Eleanor and

King Sigmund were siblings, certain matters were overlooked. Now that a new king is on the throne, he's

even less likely to get involved in

family issues. He will only do

something if there's clear evidence and strong pressure from ministers pushing for changes in the behavior of the royal family members."

Carmen added, "Unfortunately, my mother harbors no gratitude towards King Augustus. She blames him for not arranging a marriage for her with Lady Sin- I mean, Your Grace's dad, but instead marrying her off to the declining Kingsley family. She resents King Augustus deeply for that.

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"The Kingsley family, which was on its third generation of hereditary titles under my grandfather, was about to have its title revoked. But because my dad married Grand Princess Eleanor, it extended the family's influence for two more generations. The Kingsley family relies entirely on Grand Princess Eleanor. They would never oppose her."

Recalling something from the past, Rafael said, "One year, at the year-end palace banquet, I saw Lord Kingsley hiding in a rock garden. He was drunk and crying. Maybe because I was young, he pulled me aside and told me about his family's troubles. "He said that a concubine's child had been killed because the concubine argued with the grand princess. The grand princess had thrown the child to its death and also harmed the concubine."

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Violet and Carissa shuddered at the thought. To throw a newborn baby to its death was an act of unimaginable cruelty.

Carmen managed a bitter smile. "Such things... who knows how many cruel and vicious secrets are hidden in the grand princess' inner palace? I once had a younger brother. When my mom was pregnant, she was sure it was a boy.

"She knew my dad couldn't protect her and that the grand princess wouldn't allow a boy to live. Boys were doomed from the start. So, my mom wanted to escape, but the grand princess had people watching her. Once you enter the grand princess' inner palace, the only way out is as a corpse."

Carmen wiped her tears and continued, "My dad promised to help her escape. My mom believed him and waited for a chance. When the time finally came, it was almost too late, but she finally had a chance the grand princess was out for a banquet and wouldn't return until late."

"Did she manage to escape?" Violet asked, both angry and anxious.

"She did escape, but was caught halfway. My brother was born in the carriage, and they didn't even cut his umbilical cord. When they were dragged back to Harmony Palace, my mom and brother were pulled across the ground all the way to Fragrance Courtyard. By the time they got there, my brother had stopped crying. His skin was torn, and he was just a bloody mess. He wasn't even breathing anymore," said Carmen.

Carissa, Rafael, and Violet had seen the brutality of a battlefield many times. However, that was a war between nations, where lives were exchanged and cruelty was unavoidable.

But now, they were talking about a grand princess' inner palace-how could she commit such insane and vicious acts? How cruel and twisted could a person's heart be?

Carmen looked at Carissa, her smile full of despair. "You haven't seen my mom or the other concubines in Harmony Palace. If you did, you would understand why the grand princess treated them that way." Goosebumps erupted all over Carissa's skin as she came to a sudden realization.

"Could it be that they all resemble my mom?" she asked sharply.

Carmen's tears fell freely. "That's right. My mom was mistreated so horribly because she resembles Madam Sinclair. The grand princess gathered every woman who

resembled Madam Sinclair an

made them my dad's concubines. She humiliated them, tortured them, and took out all her hatred for Madam Sinclair on them."

Carissa clenched her fists, a glimmer of ruthless intent in her eyes.

Violet's face turned ashen, her voice seething with anger as she declared, "We'll kill her!"

Grasping Carissa's hand, Rafael turned to Carmen and asked, "What is your mom's name? What is her connection to the Lester family that Greta mentioned?"

Since Greta had provided a specific address, they would need to verify it upon returning to the capital. If the verification didn't match, they would doubt Carmen's words, and Eleanor's plan would be jeopardized.

"My mom's name is Melanie Lester. The Lester family is my mom's natal family. They were also coerced and enticed by the grand princess. Moreover, as merchants, they couldn't possibly stand against Grand Princess Eleanor," Carmen replied.

"Carissa, your mom's name is Melanie Sullivan," Violet said angrily.

Still on her knees, Carmen pleaded, her voice choked and broken, "Just because they share the same name in addition to looking alike, my mom endured even more suffering than other concubines.

"Your Grace, I swear that if you can

save my mom, I will repay you with my life. I have no other option but to beg you know you do not like Grand Princess Eleanor either. We can join forces. Whatever you need from me, just give the order I will face any danger for you."

Carissa helped her up. "You will come back to the capital with me and follow their plan for now. I don't fully trust you yet. I need to investigate once we return. But if you're sincere, tell me what's hidden in the western courtyard of Harmony Palace?"

Previously, Carissa had thought the western courtyard might be where the concubines were hidden. But if it were only concubines, it wouldn't be so heavily guarded.

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"When we were in Harmony Palace, we weren't allowed to leave our own courtyards. Whether it was practicing martial arts or receiving instruction from the courtesans as my sister did, it all took place within our own courtyards. "I've never been to the western courtyard before. However, according to the servants, it's used for religious worship. Grand Princess Eleanor goes there to pray on the first and fifteenth days of each month," Carmen replied. Carissa frowned. "So, there's a temple there?"

It couldn't be as simple as a temple. If it were, why would Eleanor be so anxious? It seemed Carissa would need to find an opportunity to investigate further.

"You mentioned you have some skill in martial arts?" Carissa asked.

"Greta is my teacher. I've trained for several years. We sisters all have similar skills. Since the grand princess raised us, she needed us to be useful. She wouldn't want to waste her efforts," Carmen answered. Carissa nodded. That was true.

Eleanor was not merely cruel. Her collusion with Yuvan indicated she was plotting something significant, and she would naturally make full use of her resources.

"How does your dad treat your mom?" Carissa queried.

"Because my dad particularly favored my mom, Grand Princess Eleanor was able to manipulate him," Carmen said, her voice filled with frustration. "But my mom always wanted to escape from Harmony Palace. My dad had opportunities to help her in the past but didn't. "It wasn't until my mom was pregnant with my brother that he started to fear. But by then, my mom was heavily pregnant and about to give birth. How could she escape then?"

Her tone was full of resentment towards Henry, equal to her resentment towards Eleanor.

Carmen's voice choked up again as she spoke, "Now, my mom is imprisoned in the dungeon, kept there to ensure that my sister and I obey. Before I left, I managed to see her. She was so starved, she didn't even look human anymore. I'm really worried she won't hold on and might lose her life like this."

After hearing that, Carissa said, "Go back for now. I've put all three of them to sleep. I'll have them searched, including you."

A search signified their caution and would also make Greta believe that they had gained some level of trust. After all, it was unlikely Carissa and her group would find anything significant.

"Then..." Carmen prompted.

"Let's talk more when we return to the capital. I still can't fully trust you," Carissa replied calmly.

Carmen grew anxious. "But if you don't keep me by your side, I won't have completed my mission. At the very least, let me follow you back to the estate. Only then will the grand princess release my mom from the dungeon. While she may not treat my mom well afterward, at least she'll have enough to eat."

Carissa turned to her husband. "What do you think, Your Highness?"

Rafael sat upright, his demeanor serious. "I'll leave the decision in your hands. I'm merely here to listen."

Violet stifled a laugh. In Carissa's presence, Rafael's authority seemed nonexistent.

Carissa pondered for a moment before addressing Carmen, "Go back for now. I'll see you again. The journey back to the capital is long."

Seeing that Carissa had given her answer, Carmen sensed further insistence might be unwelcome.

So, she could only bow and reply, "Understood. I'll take my leave."

After Carmen left, Carissa turned to Rafael and asked, "Should we keep her or not?"

He hesitated for a moment before replying, "It's up to you."

Carissa rubbed her temples in frustration. "Am I such a petty person? I'm discussing this with you, not being jealous."

Rafael chuckled. "That's not what I

meant... Well, if we're discussing it rationally, it might be strategic to keep her around. We can still look into whether her words are truthful or not." en FindNovel

Violet stood up. "I'll handle the search."

She was best suited for this task. Regardless of the rational or irrational discussions between the couple, it seemed Violet shared the same opinion as Rafael. Keeping a close eye on things would ensure no trouble arose.

If Carmen was genuinely betraying Eleanor, it was fine if she couldn't be of much help. It would still be a good thing to see Eleanor's plans thwarted.

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tampered

with.

The next day, Greta and Dustin realized they had been drugged the previous night. There were clear signs that their belongings had been searched. Though their bundles had been repacked, their cautious nature meant they could tell immediately if anything had been "It's a good thing," Greta said, her eyes flashing with a cold gleam. "They must be planning to take us back to the capital, which is why they searched us. Once that's done, the rest will be easier."

She turned to Carmen. "During the rest stops, try to spend time alone with the Hell Monarch and make it clear, subtly, that you're skilled in martial arts. He favors women who are proficient in combat." Carmen nodded and pressed her hand to her forehead. "I feel a bit dizzy."

"It's normal," Greta said dismissively. "We were all drugged. You'll feel better soon."

Looking at Carmen, Greta continued, "Remember, seize any opportunity to get close to the Hell Monarch. It was a miscalculation that his princess consort arrived before us. The grand princess' letter came too late."

"The Hell Monarch's princess consort left the city in the evening. It's only normal that Mother didn't know about her departure," Carmen remarked.

With her hands clasped behind her back as if she were strategizing, Greta replied, "Yes, having the princess consort around makes things more complicated. But even so, the plan remains unchanged. Whether by persistent efforts or other means, we need to ensure the couple has conflicts and grievances. Ideally, you would become a concubine of the Hell Monarch."



Carmen took a sip of water. It was just past nine in the morning, and she felt a wave of heat wash over her.

"I understand. I will do my best. You can trust me, Sage Greta."

Greta nodded in satisfaction. "Rest assured, the grand princess always keeps her word. As long as you complete your mission, your mom will be released from the dungeon. If you become the Hell Monarch's concubine, her treatment will improve."

"I understand!" Carmen's eyes were resolute. "I'll make sure to satisfy Mother."

"It's good that you're obedient," Greta praised. "Don't be like your sister, who refused to follow instructions and criticized others for being useless. She only learned to obey after being taught a lesson."

"My sister... How is she now?" Carmen asked cautiously.

Greta took a seat, her expression haughty. "You don't have to worry about her. She never concerned herself with you. Focus on your own tasks."

"But my sister caused trouble at Gracehold Estate. Will Mother-"

Greta interrupted, "Rest assured. The grand princess has already summoned a physician to treat your mom, and her meals have improved. Whether she can leave the dungeon depends on your own abilities." Carmen nodded obediently. "I understand."

The group continued its journey.

The Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team members showed no interest in Carmen's situation. They were observant, and they waited until both Rafael and Carissa had a clear understanding of the situation.

Preoccupied with caring for her

husband, Kayla was unaware of many things She only knew that a woman needed saving and would be accompanying them back to the

and

capital. Unfamiliar with deceit scheming, Kayla was naturally unaware of any underlying issues. Over the years, her dedication to religion had given her a

compassionate heart. She saw rescuing someone in danger as a virtuous act.

Therefore, while taking care of her husband on the journey, Kayla extended her kindness to Carmen. With so many men traveling together and Carmen being an unmarried young woman, it was understandable that she might feel out of place or uncomfortable.

Carissa and Violet made no move to stop her. Kayla's greatest virtue was her purity Protected well by the Marquis of Elderglen's family, she 't need to manage the estate or act as a matriarch. Maintaining her tranquility and compassion was more than enough.

One shouldn't let the malevolence of this world dull all that was beautiful and kind. Otherwise, the world would be too unappealing.

## Chapter 585

One day, they stopped to rest in a small grove by the main road. About a mile away, there was a clear, shallow stream. The weather was hot, so everyone rushed toward the water.

Carmen washed her hands in the stream, but she couldn't jump in and soak like the men. However, seeing them play so happily, she picked up a stick and started to dance by the water's edge. Although her movements lacked any deadly force, they were graceful and captivating. She danced on tiptoe, leaping and spinning, blending dance with martial arts in a visually pleasing manner.

Caught up in the moment, everyone jumped out of the water and began to show off their own martial arts skills.

Greta observed Rafael, noticing that his gaze lingered on Carmen with what seemed to be admiration. She exchanged a satisfied glance with Dustin. As expected, the Hell Monarch was indeed particularly attentive to women skilled in martial arts.

After a long while, Rafael finally withdrew his gaze. He looked somewhat guilty as he glanced briefly at Carissa, who was talking with Violet nearby. He then walked over to them.

Greta did not miss Rafael's guilty look. Despite the setbacks they had encountered, including the presence of his princess consort, the prince had indeed taken the bait.

As Rafael sat next to Carissa, Violet automatically moved away to talk to Carmen.

"I didn't expect you to be skilled in sword dancing," she remarked.

Carmen blushed slightly. "It's nothing more than a decorative skill. If it were of any real use, you wouldn't need to protect me on the way back to the capital."

"I also practice martial arts. When we return to the capital, come and see me. We can have a sparring match," Violet replied enthusiastically.

"Well..." Carmen cast a cautious glance at Greta.

Pleased, Greta approached them and said with a smile, "It's a rare sight to see that Ms. Spencer has taken a liking to my mistress. She will certainly visit your residence. May I ask where it is?"

Violet gave her a sidelong glance. "You're just a maid, but you're asking quite a lot of questions."

Greta quickly bowed. "I apologize for my indiscretion. Ms. Spencer, please don't take offense."

"Ultimately, you're just a servant from a merchant family. I suppose I can't expect you to have adequate manners," Violet quipped, dismissing her with a hint of disdain.

Greta was not offended. She merely took a few steps back and stood with her head lowered.

Meanwhile, Rafael and Carissa were speaking in hushed tones.

"I might have been a bit distracted when I looked at her earlier," the prince said.

Carissa shot him a sidelong glance. "Raf, I'm not that petty."

Rafael turned his head.

Raf?

He felt a strange sense of joy at the nickname, as it suggested they had been married for many years. Previously, she had always called him "Your Highness", which left no hint of that intimate connection

between husband and wife.

Addressing him by name seemed awkward, as if it were something she found difficult to say. Admittedly, his name was rather unappealing. Why would anyone name him something so bland?

The Minister of Protocol, who had provided options for his name, should have really reconsidered his choices, and his dad, who had picked this name out of so many suggestions, should have reconsidered too. Rafael shifted uncomfortably. "Actually, Rafael is my middle name. My first name is Damon."

Carissa paused. "I know, but do you want me to call you that?"

"No, I just didn't want you to be unaware of my full name."

"How could I not know your full name? You're my husband."

He grinned, his tanned skin making his teeth appear especially white. "I never told you my first name, and no one else calls me that in your presence, as you're more familiar with my middle name."

Seeing his amused expression,

Carissa couldn't help but smile.

"There was no need to tell me. Before marrying you, I investigated everything I could. Besides, I knew you from a young age. Back then, my elder brother called you Damon, Sol was already aware of it."

Rafael considered this and asked curiously, "What else did you investigate about me?"

"Your age, height, personality, likes and dislikes, and any hidden illnesses. Besides the woman you mentioned liking, I also looked into whether you had any concubines or had visited brothels or

entertainment parlors," Carissa replied straightforwardly

"Hidden illnesses?" Rafael was taken aback. "What hidden illnesses? What could I possibly have? Also, why would I have gone to brothels or entertainment parlors?"

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Carissa turned her face away, a smile on her lips. It was only natural that she would have asked Sebastian to investigate. After all, men with self-respect weren't exactly common in this world.

Rafael gritted his teeth. "You actually think I'd have those kinds of diseases? I've been on the battlefield all this time! You didn't really suspect me, did you?"

The soldiers swam back to shore as Carissa reached out to take Violet's hand, completely ignoring her husband's question. Greta noticed Rafael's frustration and Carissa's haste to leave, as if the two were in the middle of a spat.

The journey back to the capital was uneventful after that. By the time they returned, it was almost August.

The Ministry of Protocol had long been aware of their arrival schedule, and news of their return had spread like wildfire across the capital. Filled with the purest of sentiments, the common people were naturally thrilled to see their heroes return. Crowds filled the streets, all eager for a glimpse.

Before entering the city, Carissa handed her horse to Carmen, instructing her to return it another day.

"Thank you, Lady Sinclair," Carmen said respectfully. "May I ask where you live?"

"Hell Monarch Estate," Carissa responded.

Carmen's eyes widened in shock. "Hell Monarch Estate? Are you... the Hell Monarch's princess consort?"

She hurriedly prepared to bow in deference, with Greta following suit. But Carissa waved them off.

"No need for formalities. Just bring the horse back tomorrow."

Having said that, Carissa extended her hand to Rafael. After casting a brief glance at Carmen, the prince took his wife's hand and pulled her up with a firm tug. The two rode off together on the same horse.

Greta noticed Rafael's lingering gaze at Carmen and felt a flicker of hope, but the real challenge was gaining entry into his estate. To do that, Carmen first had to win over the Hell Monarch's princess consort and earn her trust.

In other words, they would need to take a roundabout approach.

However, this would actually make the blow even more devastating. If the Hell Monarch's princess consort saw Carmen as a friend, the betrayal from both a friend and her husband would hit her even harder, increasing the chances of causing a much bigger scene. Watching them enter the city, Greta turned to Carmen and said, "When we return the horse tomorrow, bring a generous gift. We need to start by winning the favor of the Hell Monarch's princess consort."

Carmen let out a small sigh of relief. "Understood!"

As they prepared to enter the city, Thomas and Homer helped Lawrence onto a horse, making sure he was seated comfortably. Meanwhile, Violet, Kayla, and Carissa sat inside a carriage.

Sebastian had approved this arrangement. Thomas took charge of leading the horse to prevent it from becoming agitated by the noise and crowd. If anything went wrong, people were positioned all around to quickly pull Lawrence away if necessary.

The eleven young soldiers had thought the procession would be a simple formality, but they hadn't anticipated how overwhelming it would become.

As soon as they passed through the

city gates, a deafening cheer

erupted from the crowd. The city guards and garrison units were stationed on both sides of the road to control the citizens, but the people's excitement could not be contained. In their frenzy, they broke through the lines, rushing forward to chase after the horses. They ran, shouting and calling out as they

followed.

All eleven soldiers couldn't hold back their emotions. Tears welled in their eyes as they waved to the faces in the crowd-these were the people they had fought to protect.

In that moment, everything felt worth it.

Richard was accompanied by his three sons, and they led the way ahead. The streets were filled with the sounds of drums and fireworks, smoke billowing around them. He glanced back, trying to catch a glimpse of Joshua and Benson's faces, but the smoke made it impossible to see clearly.

He had a royal edict to announce,

but the sheer madness of the crowd made it impossible. The cheers never ceased, and even the city

guards couldn't hold the citizens net

back. The people ran alongside, surrounding the procession, Richard decided it would be best to wait until they reached Peace Street to make the announcement.

Peace Street was wider, and there was a circular platform in the middle. The officials led the eleven heroes to stand in that spot.

When it was time to announce the edict, Richard had to shout at the top of his lungs. Only after some effort did the soldiers finally hear him. They helped Lawrence down from his horse, but he couldn't kneel, not even in a half-squat. So, Kayla stepped out of the carriage to kneel and accept the edict on his behalf.

Despite the commanding power of the royal edict, no one in the crowd could hear a single word. The citizens' excited screams never stopped. Fortunately, it was an edict of praise and commendation, not a promotion or elevation of rank, so the details hardly mattered. Violet peeked through the carriage curtains, watching the ecstatic faces and hearing the thunderous cheers.

She turned to Carissa and asked, "Why is the ceremony so grand?"

Carissa smiled. "I'd guess the Ministry of Protocol spread the word ahead of time, and the storytellers in the capital likely exaggerated

exploits. They probably spun their deliver vital intelligence, mes to

how the soldiers risked their lives to

sound so dramatic and touching that the people were moved to tears."

Violet nodded. It seemed likely.

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The capital's storytellers were renowned for their ability to stir emotions, a skill few could match.

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Barrett was on duty today, tasked with helping the Capital Guard maintain order.

As the eleven young soldiers rode past him one by one, he carefully studied each of their faces. When his gaze fell on Thomas, he noticed that the once-handsome, striking figure seemed less radiant than before. A mix of nostalgia and complex emotions stirred in his chest, along with a fleeting sense of inferiority.

Heroes.



Barrett had once been a hero too. When he returned from the Victory Pass battle, the citizens had cheered for him the same way.

But now?

Now, he had been reduced to a mere ninth-rank capital guard, stripped of the glory that once surrounded him. No longer the golden boy, no longer entrusted with important duties. Watching the eleven young soldiers, Barrett couldn't shake the sense of being worlds apart, like a speck of dirt beneath their feet.

If he was ever going to rise again, it would have to be through his brother-in-law's support. Or perhaps, another war would break out, giving him the chance to earn military merits once more.

How foolish Barrett had been back then, always imagining things so idealistically. He had once thought military accomplishments were easily won. After all, back at Victory Pass, Wyatt Sullivan had taken a blade for him, losing an arm in the process.

And on the Southern Frontier battlefield, Barrett had witnessed the true horrors of war-the brutal siege, mountains of corpses, and rivers of blood. Only then did he realize that earning glory on the battlefield was not as simple as Aurora had once made it sound. How many brave soldiers had died with their ambitions unfulfilled?

And how many, like the eleven young heroes, had been captured and tortured? To escape and form an intelligence network like they had-they were probably the only ones who could pull off such a feat.

As thoughts of captivity and torture filled his mind, a chill ran down Barrett's spine, freezing him to the core.

He didn't know what would ultimately become of the Victory Pass incident. The king hadn't pursued the matter yet, but had sent people to keep a close watch on the Warren family.

One thing was certain-if Westhaven underwent a shift in power, so too would the Warren family. The new crown prince wouldn't be as concerned with preserving their reputation as the current king of Westhaven.

All the fanfare and glory belonged to someone else now, while Barrett could only continue scraping by. Despair settled deep in his bones at that moment, and his mind wandered to something Aurora had once said with such conviction: All she wanted was success. Yes, success. But it was far too difficult to obtain the success she wanted.

Barrett looked up at the eleven

young heroes. It almost felt as if he were looking up at a past version of himself and Aurora. But in the thick crowd, no one noticed him. Their attention was fully captured by the eleven celebrated heroes and the

man who had rescued them, the Hell Monarch.

The Hell Monarch didn't notice Barrett either. His attention was focused on the heartwarming scene unfolding before him—Richard's three sons stepping forward to embrace Joshua and Benson.

Richard didn't cry. No, he stood tall, his face filled with pride. In a moment like this, he wouldn't let tears fall.

He watched as his two sons knelt before him, bowing their heads to the ground, their voices trembling as they said, "Dad, we haven't been the sons you deserved, but we've returned."

Richard wanted to weep, but he smiled instead. He helped them to their feet and said, "I have always been proud of you."

All around them, families had come out to greet their loved ones, and each tearful embrace was a sight that tugged at the heartstrings.

Logan was sobbing openly as he clung to his adoptive brother, Felix. Logan was usually playful and easygoing, but he had none of his usual demeanor today. He wept like a child in his elder brother's arms, entirely forgetting that he was soon to be married. From inside the carriage, Carissa watched it all unfold.

These people thought they were separated by life and death, but unexpectedly, they experienced the joy of a reunion. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she realized this joy could never belong to her. She, her dad, and brothers would never see each other again in this life.

The true cruelty of this world lay in how blood ties, once so close, could be severed, with no promise of ever meeting again.

When she returned home, Carissa

went straight to her room. After

sharing in everyone else's

happiness, she was left with her own

sorrow. The weight of her grief

settled over her, and she locked

herself away, not wanting to Burden

anyone else with her emotions.

She stayed alone in her room for nearly two hours, working through her feelings.

Rafael had wanted to stay by her side to comfort her, but understood that she needed this time to process her emotions on her own. So, he sat outside on the stone steps, making sure no one disturbed her.

When Carissa finally emerged, her emotions in check and dressed in fresh clothes, Rafael immediately rose to greet her. He reached for her hand, noticing that although her eyes were dry, the traces of tears were still visible. Gently, he wiped the corners of her eyes with his thumb, his heart aching for her. "Let's go see Mom."

"Yes, that's exactly what I was planning to do," Carissa replied with a soft smile.

But after her tears, that smile carried a hint of fragility, making Rafael's heart ache even more.

## Chapter 588

Helen wiped away her tears as she listened to the servants report on the lively scene outside. She could only lament that she wasn't an ordinary commoner who was free to join in the festivities. The stories told by the storytellers over the past few days, which had been relayed to her by the servants, had moved her deeply. Yet, the tears she shed now weren't for the joyful festivities outside.

No, they were because she heard that Carissa had locked herself in her room since returning and hadn't come out for a long time. Helen didn't have to guess why Carissa was upset. This grand reunion didn't include her, for her dad and brothers hadn't fallen in this same battle.

"Come here," Helen said, beckoning to her daughter-in-law, who had just bowed to greet her. "Come sit by my side."

Carissa straightened up and walked over. But before she could properly sit down, Helen reached out and pulled the younger woman into her arms.

As Helen was seated, that tug resulted in Carissa finding herself kneeling, her face buried in her mother-in-law's embrace. Helen's arms wrapped tightly around her, and above her head, Carissa heard the older woman's voice, choked with emotion. "You can always think of me as your mom, your closest family. I will always protect you."

Carissa had initially felt a burst of resistance, trying to pull her face away from Helen's chest to catch her breath. But after hearing those words, her heart softened instantly. Each word struck her like a blow to her core, leaving her unable to resist. Her heart felt full, her nose tingled, and her eyes burned.

She had never expected her mother-in-law, who had always relied on the queen dowager for protection, to say something so maternal to her. Remembering a time when Helen had not been particularly fond of her, Carissa felt like crying at her words now. But in all honesty, her forty-something-year-old mother-in-law had such a firm embrace that Carissa was nearly suffocating.

Rafael watched the scene unfold and immediately regretted not being the one to give his wife a hug first. Now, he felt like his mom had stolen this heartfelt moment from him, leaving him frustrated and envious.

Meanwhile, Gillian wiped away her own tears, feeling a deep sense of relief and joy. This was good. Helen had finally learned how to show care and tenderness.

After the embrace, Helen released Carissa and gestured for everyone to sit down.

"Bring the refreshments!" she instructed the servants.

Having expressed her emotions, Helen now felt a deeper connection with her daughter-in-law. But Carissa, on the other hand, seemed a bit awkward and stiff. Eager to change the subject, she quickly brought up more pressing matters. "Mother, did you go to the palace after I left the capital?"

"I did, but I didn't get to see the king. My sister asked me to visit Lady Ruth, who's fallen ill. As for what my sister discussed with His Majesty, I wasn't privy to it." Rafael looked up. "Lady Ruth is sick?"

"Yes, she's quite seriously ill. It seems that the summer heat has been too much for her. The royal physicians have said her condition is not looking good. Yuvan has already submitted a report, requesting the king's permission to return to the capital with his family to attend to her."

"Has the king granted permission?"

"I heard that he has. A couple of days ago when I went to the palace, my sister said Yuvan should arrive in the capital any day now. Horizon Estate is already undergoing renovations in preparation

What was meant to come would always come.

After sitting for a while longer, Rafael stood up. "I'll head to the palace to report in. I'll be back later to join you for dinner. By the way, where's Kiera?"

"She's out with Logan," Helen replied,

waving a hand dismissively. "The wedding date is already set; they'll be married in just a few days. Let them run around as they please. There's no need to keep her confined just because she's a princess."

Rafael didn't argue. He glanced at Carissa once before heading out.

Carissa turned to Helen. "Has Kiera's dowry been packed and sealed?"

"Yes, everything has been arranged. Gillian and Luke took care of it all, but I didn't completely leave it to them. I personally checked the ledger."

"Have you visited Kiera's estate yet?" Carissa asked again.

"No, I haven't, but Luke went to inspect it, and everything seems to be in order."

"We don't have much to do at the moment. Why don't we bring Vivi along and go see for ourselves?" Carissa suggested, still feeling like it was necessary to see for herself.

"It's just a residence. There's nothing much to see. Besides, my sister has already instructed the palace staff to ensure everything is prepared."

Helen glanced outside, where the sun was blazing down. She wasn't eager to step out into the heat and risk damaging her skin. But when she saw Carissa's expectant gaze, she relented with a sigh.

"Alright, it wouldn't hurt to take a look. If there's any furniture missing, we can order it now. After all, we can't rely solely on the palace staff to get everything right."

## Chapter 589

Kiera's residence, Ivory Estate, was located in the palace district where the highest-ranking nobles resided. The common folk referred to it as Noble Street, and it was only about three or four miles from Royal Street.

Ivory Estate was also conveniently close to Hell Monarch Estate, just a short distance away on foot. Of course, Helen had no intention of walking. They all traveled by carriage.

Ivory Estate was already occupied by staff sent by the queen dowager, tasked with maintaining the property, cleaning, and tending the garden. A number of flower trees had already been planted, and potted plants adorned the grounds.

Salvador had been quite generous to Kiera. The estate was vast, with a grand and imposing front courtyard, while the rear was filled with bright and spacious rooms.

In the garden, a lake had been dug. It was surrounded by pavilions, towers, rockeries, and arched bridges, with water flowing gently throughout. The surroundings created a peaceful and serene atmosphere. The architecture here had a softer, more tranquil vibe, reminiscent of the graceful style of Ebonflow, in contrast to the rigid designs typical of the capital.

Kiera's personal courtyard was called Harmony Meadow, which had a lovely meaning. As Logan's name meant "small meadow", the courtyard's name incorporated that and symbolized the idea of the couple harmoniously supporting each other.

As Carissa and Helen entered, they found the courtyard fully furnished. There were partition screens, a large cherry wood bed, a chaise lounge draped in luxurious silks-everything one could need, and all of the highest quality.

After looking around, Helen remarked, "There's plenty of furniture already. We don't need to bring any more from her dowry."

Carissa disagreed gently, "Since it's already been cataloged, we should still bring it over. This estate is so large, there's certainly enough space to use it all."

"The items you chose for her dowry are excellent. It would be a shame to not let Kiera use them," Helen mused as she took a thoughtful turn around the courtyard. "Although, it wouldn't go to waste either way. The prince consort will occasionally stay here too, so we could always place some in his quarters."

According to Starhaven's customs, a prince consort didn't typically live with the princess and was permitted to return to his own family's residence. If the princess wanted to summon him, she would simply light a lantern and someone would be sent to fetch him. However, given how affectionate Kiera and Logan were, it was likely that after the wedding, they would share quarters anyway. Even if they kept separate courtyards, it would probably be more for show than necessity.

"Perhaps we could prepare a small courtyard here for you. That way, you could stay for a few days when you miss Kiera," Carissa suggested.

Helen waved her off, laughing. "I wouldn't come. I have my son's estate. What would it look like if I left it to stay at my daughter's?"

Helen had never been especially

close to her children, but Kiera had made a concerted effort to bond with her. It was Kiera who had initiated conversations, who clung to her mother affectionately, who sought out hugs and closeness. Their relationship had grown warm entirely because of Kiera's persistence.

Over time, this persistent closeness awakened a maternal instinct in Helen.

When she gave birth to Rafael, she had still felt like a child herself. All her life, she had been coddled and cherished by her family, especially her elder sister. She had enjoyed being pampered and treated like a treasure by those around her.

But one day, someone told her that she was a mom now. Everyone doted on the soft, pale little baby. They glossed over the struggles of pregnancy and childbirth with a few words of encouragement, simply telling Helen to take good care of herself.

Yet, every time she bathed and saw

the scars on her belly, she was reminded of the agony of pregnancy and the pain of childbirth. The days when she was the one being doted on were over. In the palace, the hardships of motherhood were something no one spoke of. One was never supposed to complain about the pains of pregnancy or childbirth—it was considered a blessing.

Not only could a woman not grumble, but she had to be grateful.

Helen had once asked Victoria, "Grateful for what, exactly?"

It was the first time Victoria had ever been truly angry with her. Eyes wide with fury, nearly popping out of her head, the elder woman scolded her sister harshly. It had terrified Helen, leaving her feeling both frightened and unjustly blamed. Perhaps women simply learned to accept their lot in life.

In any case, Helen never spoke those words again. Even when Kiera was born, she didn't feel much joy. It wasn't until the little bundle clung to her day and night that she slowly grew into the role of a mom.

As for that brat... it wasn't that Helen



didn't like him Rafael grew

increasingly handsome as he aged, making her heart swell with pride every time she looked at him. But as he grew older, he became

increasingly serious and distant. It made it hard to get close to him.

However, Carissa was different. She was like Victoria, always protecting and pampering Helen. When Carissa was in the estate, Helen never had to worry about anything.

That was why, given the choice, Helen would rather live with her daughter-in-law than anyone else.

## Chapter 590

After the excitement outside died down, the members of the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team all returned to their respective homes, except for the two from Stonebrook District, Scott and Wilfred. Jacob took them to stay at Northwatch Estate, where they would await the king's summons the next day.

When Thomas stepped into the Farrell family's residence, Alice couldn't stop crying. She clung to her son, sobbing continuously until she nearly fainted from exhaustion. The other family members consoled her while shedding their own tears, and eventually managed to help Alice sit down, allowing everyone to finally speak calmly.

In the Farrell family, there weren't many sons left. Several members of the third branch of the family had fallen in battle. Thomas' return was a great comfort to everyone.

He knelt before each of his elders to greet them. The oldest member of the family, the patriarch of the third branch of the family, broke down in tears. Soon, everyone was wiping their eyes.

After discussing the general events of the past few years with the whole family, Alice and Thomas headed off to talk privately. There was something important she needed to tell him. Once they were in a room, Alice dismissed the servants. Even as she looked at her son, she still felt a sense of disbelief.

She let out a heavy sigh. "Your brother probably told you about your former wife's situation when you were at the Southern Frontier. But as your mom, I need to explain it to you myself. Your dad

died on the battlefield, so I understand the hardships of being a widow. It's not easy. But with you and your sister still with me, I had hope.

"However, Viola was different. She didn't have children yet. I thought that since you had died serving the kingdom, it would be best not to hold her back. I discussed it with your sister-in-law and the other family members. We also sent a letter to your eldest brother, and everyone agreed that it was best for Viola to return to her family. We gave her a divorce letter and allowed her to return home."

As Alice spoke, she recalled the sudden news of Thomas' death back then, and it sent waves of panic through her heart again.

She took a sip of water to calm herself before continuing, "Viola didn't want to leave. She said she would remain faithful to you for the rest of her life. Even with the divorce letter in hand, she was determined to stay. I worried that she would suffer when she returned to her family, so I gave her your death pension, along with two shops.

"She's remarried now. A few days ago, someone from the Earl of Silverstone's family came to return the money and the shops. The shops' value was converted into silver coins since we've already transferred the ownership. That marked the end of any ties between our families."

Alice looked at her son with a grave expression. "I'm telling you all this because I hope you won't go and disturb her. From now on, you have your life, and she has hers. Even if you have the chance to meet again, just act as if you don't know each other to avoid causing her any trouble."

Thomas listened quietly as his mom spoke.

After a long moment, he finally replied softly, "I have always felt that I owe her. I won't be a burden to her."

Alice looked at her son, her heart aching at his broken expression. "I'll arrange another marriage for you..."

"That's not necessary." Thomas smiled bitterly, shaking his head. "Let it be. I don't plan on remarrying."

Alice was taken aback. "You don't plan on remarrying? What are you saying? You don't have any children. How can you not remarry?"

"We can talk about it later," Thomas said gently. "Mom, I don't want to discuss this anymore."

"Is it because you feel guilty towards Viola that you don't want to marry again?" Alice asked, her voice trembling.

"Mom, I just returned, and you're already bringing up marriage. It's really not appropriate."

Hearing the sadness in her son's tone, Alice felt her own heart grow heavy. She had never even dared to

dream that he would come back, so whatever he said now was what mattered.

Why should she add to his unhappiness?

"Just remember what I told you don't seek Viola out. Don't disrupt the life she has now," Alice reminded softly.

"I won't," Thomas replied with a bitter expression. "I promise, Mom. Please don't worry about it."

"That's good," Alice said, unable to hold back her tears. "It's my fault If I hadn't encouraged her to leave, she would still be your wife. Everyone else is reunited with their spouses, and only you..."

Thomas interrupted her gently, "Mom, I'm feeling a bit tired. I think I'll go bathe."

Alice watched him, a deep sigh escaping her lips. It seemed that it would be difficult for him to let go right now.

"I just want to add one last thing:

when Madam Zoey came to return your death pension and the money for the shops, she mentioned that the Prince family were worried about Viola clinging to you. I feel there's Something strange about it."

Thomas pondered his mother's words for a moment, then said, "Alright, I understand."