

War Song 671

Chapter 671

The snacks at Glimmering Tower were numerous and exquisite, each more delicious than the last. Even a simple pound cake was sweet without being cloying, with a fragrant and chewy texture that melted in the mouth. Violet took a bite, and said with a smile, "This was my favorite treat when I was little. Our chef didn't make it, so my brother would sneak out to buy it for me. We loved hiding under the apple tree and eating pound cakes together." She gazed out the window as sunlight streamed in and illuminated her face, which was alight with smiles and memories.

"It was often on bright autumn days like this one. But back then, in September, it didn't get as cool as it does in the capital. Sometimes, it was quite hot. The sunlight would filter through the tree branches and cast a warm glow on my brother's face."

As Violet spoke, her hand brushed over the rabbit figurine beside her, and she sighed softly. "But it's been so long since I've seen him."

Darin was momentarily stunned. The scene Violet described vividly appeared in her mind, and her gaze lingered on the rabbit figurine.

For some reason, her chest felt tight. It was as if something were stuck there, making her uncomfortable.

Darin couldn't help but ask, "Ms. Spencer, is this a rabbit figurine?"

Violet nodded, a smile still gracing her lips. "Yes, this is a gift from my brother. One year after I fell from the apple tree, my mother grounded me, and I couldn't go out to watch the lantern show during the Starlight Harvest Festival. So my brother made this little rabbit for me with his own hands. Isn't it ugly? I didn't like it at the time, and I even threw it. Do you see the ear? That's where it broke when I threw it on the ground in my anger."

She pushed the rabbit figurine toward Darin. "Here, take a look."

Darin stared at the rather unsightly rabbit figurine that had been thrust into her view, and it felt as if a voice echoed in her ears.

"You're a young lady! Why are you climbing trees? Who taught you that? It hurt when you fell, right? Why are you crying? You're grounded! You won't come with us to the Starlight Harvest Festival to watch the lantern show!" "Don't cry. Didn't you want a rabbit figurine? I'll make you one."

"I don't want it! It's too ugly! This isn't even a rabbit! I don't want it! I don't want it..."

Crash!

"Jaina, I made it myself..."

"I don't want it! I don't want it..."

The little girl's cries echoed in Darin's ears, and Darin was filled with immense grievance. She instinctively recoiled her hand, realizing too late that her face was streaked with tears.

Taking advantage of the fact that Tamara hadn't noticed, Darin quickly wiped her cheeks. But inside, it felt as if her heart was being pricked by a thousand needles, each sharp sting of pain slowly building up.

Violet watched her, then reached out to reclaim the rabbit figurine. Darin instinctively clutched it close, her voice thick with emotion as she protested, "It's mine."

Darin stood and moved toward the window, which faced the southern river port. The wind was fierce, sending waves crashing against the boats in the harbor. Taking a deep breath memories flooded back to her like the tide. The rabbit figurine and Violet's words had torn open a wound, releasing buried memories deep within her heart.

She didn't recall much, but she remembered the day the performance troupe leader, Lucas, found her. She had been on the brink of death, and had been abandoned on a small hill outside Stonebridge County. Even though it was pouring rain, her body felt as if it were being consumed by fire.

The only clear memory she had was

of Lucas' voice, telling her that as long as she still had breath, it was up to her whether she would survive. In the end, Darin did survive, but a high fever caused her to forget much. She only vaguely

remembered being tossed off a cart when she fell ill.

She had thought it was her family who had abandoned her, so she never considered looking for them. Anyway, she also forgot everything.

Now, she recalled being taken from

the alley where she had been

playing. Her memories of being snatched away and tossed onto a cart came back to her. There had been another child with her-she couldn't remember their name, but she distinctly remembered being slapped twice upon getting on the cart.

The pain had been excruciating. But beyond that, everything was a blur.

However, there were some hazy memories before her abduction that she could grasp, flickering just out of reach.

Chapter 672

Darin had been abducted. But before that, she had parents and a brother. They had all doted on her. She had been mischievous, but her family had always indulged her. This rabbit figurine hadn't been made by Violet's brother. It had been made by Darin's own brother.

Yet, so many things had slipped from her memory. She couldn't remember what her parents or brother looked like. Yes, she had grandparents too-both of whom loved her dearly. She could almost hear the gentle, loving voice from her memories. "Oh, my little darling, when will you grow up? When will you learn to be more sensible?"

Violet quietly stood beside her, gazing at the beautiful scenery of the southern river port, and remarked softly, "What a lovely river view."

The mention of the river felt like lightning striking Darin's mind.

"River York! You spoil her so much that she thinks she can get away with anything. What will people say in the future?"

"River, come here quickly! Jaina has fallen and hurt her leg!"

Darin's chest heaved with agitation. It was a cold day, yet she was drenched in sweat, the moisture trickling down her forehead. "I..."

She struggled to speak, her voice barely above a whisper. "My father's name is River York. My brother made this little rabbit figurine. The things you just said happened to me. You know where my brother and my parents are, don't you? They didn't abandon me. I was kidnapped..."

Tears slipped down her fair cheeks, but she quickly wiped them away and took several deep breaths. She could only stare out the window. She didn't dare look at Violet or turn back, afraid her tears would spill over again.

"Your brother's name is Jacob York. He currently works at Hell Monarch Estate as the head archivist. He entered the Hell Monarch's service in hopes of using his powers and connections to find you. After you went missing, your father resigned from his post to search for you for a full decade. He only stopped when your grandmother passed away. After that, the task of finding you fell to your brother.

"To this day, your father is still waiting for you in Cloud County. He can no longer move easily or search for you. He simply waits at home just in case you return, so that you would still have someone waiting for you there.

"As for your mother and grandfather, Jacob brought them to the capital because of their poor health. I wasn't sure you were Jaina York before I came here, but now I'm certain. You're not Darin or Lisette Sanford. You are Jaina York, River's daughter, and Jacob's sister." Tears streamed down Jaina's face.

Lucas had given her the name

"Darin". He said it was a miracle she

had survived, and that she was a precious child that was a gift from the heavens. He said she should cherish herself, and that was why he gave her a name that meant "precious gift".

"Ms. Spencer, could you do me a favor? I have so many questions to ask you. Can we find a place to talk privately?"

Violet nodded, understanding her concern about Tamara, who was sitting outside the door.

Violet loudly said, "There's another floor up here where we can see even further. Would you like to go up and take a look, Ms. Sanford?" Though Jaina's voice was choked with emotion, she still managed to ask. "We can still go up? How do we get there? Are there stairs?"

Violet smiled brightly. "If you trust me, I'll take you up-we'll just fly!"

"What?" Jaina gasped in shock. "Doesn't that sound a little dangerous?"

Violet raised her chin, exuding a haughty air reminiscent of a little sister being particularly sharp-tongued. "You're going to marry my godbrother. He's a warrior. How could his wife lack courage? If you don't want to go, then fine. We'll just stay here."

Tamara peeked inside, and felt anxious. It was obvious that Violet was testing Darin's bravery.

Why was she hesitating? Just go already!

From the doorway, Tamara urged, "Ms. Sanford, why not follow Ms. Spencer up to see? The view up there must be much better than from this little window."

Jaina had her back to Tamara, and she hesitated for a moment. Then, she turned to Violet and extended her hand. "Since you'd like to show me the view, it would be rude of me to refuse."

Violet grinned, and took Jaina's arm. With a powerful push, Violet leaped onto the windowsill and soared upward with Jaina.

The floor on the rooftop was actually a platform beneath a spire. It stood about ten feet above the private room they had just left. Even while carrying someone, that distance was easy for Violet to manage. Typically, hardly anyone came up to the rooftop platform because the owner of the tower hadn't installed stairs. The only way up was to fly like Violet.

However, the two levels were only

ten feet apart, and the lower level had four large platforms that offered views of the city from all the different directions. There was simply no need to go up to the platform beneath the spire.

The rooftop platform felt entirely unnecessary.

Chapter 673

Even though hardly anyone came up here, the place was kept remarkably clean. There was even a swing set on the small platform, large enough for two or three people to sit on together. However, there were no guardrails, and the entire platform lacked any kind of barrier. If the swing swung out too far and the person on it couldn't hold on tight, they could easily fall off. Violet invited Jaina to sit on the swing and began to gently rock it back and forth, facing the river view.

Jaina felt a flutter of fear in her heart. Her martial arts skills weren't very good, and her Lightfoot Skill was mediocre at best. She clutched the rope next to her in a death grip.

"When I met you at Grovehill Estate, you didn't know my identity. How could you be so sure afterward?" Jaina was puzzled. Everything felt too coincidental, as if it had been carefully orchestrated.

Violet replied, "That day, you seemed somewhat familiar to me because of the mole on your lip. The Hell Monarch's princess consort's mother also had a mole at the corner of her mouth. Plus, you bear a resemblance to the Hell Monarch's wife, and there were some familiar mannerisms about you. I felt I knew you, but I couldn't quite place who you reminded me of. Now I realize it was Jacob."

"Jacob?" Jaina repeated the name, feeling a strange sense of unfamiliarity. She vaguely recalled a boy who once brought her pound cakes under an apple tree. The sunlight shone on his face, and his smile was broad and bright.

Yet, she couldn't recall what he looked like. And now, that boy had grown up and became the head archivist at Hell Monarch Estate.

"You still haven't told me how you knew I was Jaina," Jaina said again.

Violet continued, "Actually, we already knew that Eleanor intended to betroth someone to Thomas, who happens to be my godbrother. They want to place their people within the military. I imagine

she didn't keep that from you. If she wanted you to carry out a task, she'd naturally need to inform you."

Jaina nodded. "Yes, you're right about that."

"From the moment I laid eyes on you, something felt off. You've lived in Harmony Palace for so long, right? Have you seen any women there who bear a resemblance to you? Those concubines of Henry's?"

Jaina frowned and shook her head. "I've never seen them."

"When Eleanor was younger, she was infatuated with the Duke of Northwatch. You would know him as Hector Sinclair, the grand general who lost his life on the battlefield. He was a marquis back then. However, the duke married Melanie, a lady from the Sullivan family.

"That made Eleanor hate anyone

who resembled Melanie. She went to great lengths to gather those who looked similar to Melanie and made them Henry's concubines, forcing them to bear children only to mistreat them later. You also bear some resemblance, especially with that beauty mark on your lip.

"When we discovered that she had rescued you in Stonebridge County, we suspected there might be more to the story. So, I thought about having Kyle paint your portrait and send someone to Stonebridge County to investigate. But then..." Violet paused for a moment, and Jaina felt a rush of anxiety. She quickly pressed, "But then what?"

"But then I saw many portraits in the study when I went to see Kyle. In his search for you, Jacob had Kyle infer what you might look like now. This calculation was made based on your childhood appearance and your parent's looks.

"When I opened the study door, I

saw a painting that looked exactly like you. That's why I asked to meet you today. It's possible that people resembled each other, so we weren't entirely sure you were Jacob's sister. So, I brought out that rabbit figurine and told you that story. Everything I mentioned actually happened to you and Jacob. It

seems that you truly are Jaina York."

After hearing this, Jaina fell silent for a long time. She didn't understand art, and couldn't grasp how someone could predict her current appearance based on how she looked like when she was younger and that of her parents. However, memories didn't lie.

Jaina remembered fragments, though they were blurry. As those memories surged back, a deep pain and bitterness filled her heart, mingled with a flicker of warmth.

She had always believed that she was abandoned by her parents because she was sick, and resentment had built up against them over the years. Because of her abandonment, she wanted to repay anyone who showed her even the slightest kindness, often with a vengeance.

Eleanor had saved her. The gratitude

she felt was akin to being reborn through new parents. So when

Eleanor offered to take her back to the capital, Jaina didn't object. She obediently followed, thinking she would work as a servant in the grand princess' residence to her repay grace.

After returning to the capital, however, Eleanor treated her exceptionally well. She pampered Jaina and sent people to teach her the proper ways, claiming she would find a good marriage for Jaina in the future.

Chapter 674

But Jaina had spent her childhood navigating the world alongside Lucas, and she had learned that human nature was far more complex. She had no familial ties with Eleanor, yet the latter had saved her and was supposedly looking for a husband for her. It all felt improbable.

Jaina had been in the capital for a while, and Eleanor never mentioned anything about a marriage proposal. Jaina was 25 years old now, and if Eleanor genuinely intended to arrange a match for her, Eleanor would have brought it up by now.

In truth, Jaina wasn't entirely sure how old she was. Lucas had said she was around seven or eight when he rescued her, so by that estimation, she must be in her mid-twenties now.

Furthermore, Eleanor held many banquets held at her palace. If she had any desire to present Jaina, she would have done so by now.

Yet every time, Jaina found herself locked away in the courtyard. She couldn't even step outside her room. The old maid explained that she hadn't learned the proper etiquette yet, and that going out might offend their esteemed guests.

"Do you really think there's more to the story of how Grand Princess Eleanor saved me?" Jaina asked, her breath coming in labored gasps.

"I'm not sure, which is why we need to investigate. Can you tell me what happened at that time? And what about the dissolution of your performance troupe?"

Jaina nodded, and recounted everything that had transpired in Stonebridge County.

Violet asked her detailed questions, knowing she would have to report back to Rafael and Jacob. She probed until she had every detail. Jaina explained everything thoroughly, especially about her struggles to survive after the performance troupe disbanded, right down to her encounters with the bandits.

When Jaina finished, her throat felt parched. After a moment of silence, she nervously asked, "When can I meet them?"

"You're currently staying at Grovehill Estate, so it's not convenient for you to go out. Besides, the Farrell family members can't keep inviting you out. I'll go back and discuss this with Jacob. He's more eager than anyone to meet you. Your grandfather and mother are also in the capital, and your father is waiting for you in Cloud County. Once Jacob confirms your identity, he'll certainly send someone to bring your father to the capital to see you."

Jaina covered her face as tears slipped through her fingers. She had never imagined she would have the chance to meet her family again in this lifetime.

No, she had thought about it before.

She thought that If she ever saw her family again, she would demand to know why they had abandoned her. But as she grew older, those feelings began to seem unreasonable.

"Actually, over the years," Jaina

lowered her hands and wiped her tears, "I've wondered myself. It felt weird, because I was thrown from a carriage was sick and disoriented at the time, but I still remember the person who tossed me out saying something about not wanting bad luck from a corpse in their carriage."

Violet handed Jaina a handkerchief, but she didn't take it. Instead, she pulled out her own to dry her tears.

"If it had been their own child sick

and near death, they could have at least waited until I passed away before burying me, even if I was an unwanted daughter. It wouldn't have delayed anything. Why throw me away while I was still alive? It was pouring rain then, and my heart aches every time I recall that scene, and I can't bear to think about it further."

Violet could only imagine the torment Jaina had endured. She must have been terrified after being abducted, and then fallen gravely ill during the journey. Human traffickers wouldn't help her. They feared exposure and didn't want to spend money on her. If someone fell ill, they would simply abandon them.

At that time, Jaina had been in such a haze of sickness that she mistakenly believed her parents had thrown her away.

It must have been painful for Jaina—who would want to confront such memories?

Jaina cried again. "I still have family! They didn't abandon me! They've been searching and waiting for me. You have no idea what this means to me, Ms. Spencer. After our performance troupe disbanded, the troupe leader left Stonebridge County without taking me with him. I thought I was completely alone, and that I had no one in this world. Being all alone like that is truly terrifying."

Violet reached out and embraced Jaina, tears spilling down her own cheeks.

Now that Violet knew Jaina was Jacob's sister, she felt a deeper sense of connection, which only heightened her sympathy for Jaina.

Although she felt for her, Violet urged her to be patient. She held back the information that Jaina could reunite with her family after the Emberfest Festival. That plan had to remain confidential. Otherwise, Carissa would have a fit.

Chapter 675

When Jaina returned to Grovehill Estate, Gemma immediately approached her, eager to know what had transpired.

Gemma was a respected lady of a marquis' family, and she would normally never treat a troupe performer with such kindness. She only did it because it was a favor to Eleanor. However, Jaina's eyes were red, which was clearly a sign of losing her composure. Gemma couldn't help but ask sharply, "Have you been crying? Did you do it in front of them?" Jaina pressed her hand to her chest, looking as though she was still shaken.

"Madam Gemma, you don't understand. We went to Glimmering Tower, and we had a private room on the top floor. It was supposed to be the highest floor in the building, but Ms. Spencer wanted to test my courage. She said that since Thomas comes from a military background, I must be brave if I was to be his wife. She took my hand and flew to the very top! It was terrifying! I didn't cry in front of her, but the wind up there was so strong it made my eyes water. I only cried after we left and were in the carriage. If you don't believe me, you can ask Tamara."

Gemma looked up at Tamara and asked, "Is what she says true?"

Tamara nodded, and replied honestly, "Yes, Madam Gemma. When Ms. Spencer looked out the window, she provocatively asked Ms. Sanford if she dared to join her. She said a proper wife shouldn't lack courage. I told Ms. Sanford to go with her, as I thought Ms. Spencer wouldn't endanger her. When they came back down, their hair was tousled from the wind, and their eyes were both red."

Gemma's expression eased slightly, and she asked, "Were you there the entire time?"

"I couldn't follow when they went up, but I was at the door of the private room the whole time. I could hear them talking, and see them."

Gemma hummed thoughtfully, but then frowned. "Ms. Spencer... To be frank, even though she calls Thomas her godbrother and Alice her godmother, they've never formalized their bond. It's possible that Violet is harboring thoughts of marrying Thomas, and is using this to make things difficult for you."

"Is that possible?" Jaina asked, her eyes wide in shock as she stared at Gemma. "Did she really do this on purpose? It does make sense. I was minding my own business and enjoying some snacks in the private room when she suddenly insisted on taking me up."

"Be wary of her. If she invites you again, you mustn't go," Gemma instructed firmly.

"Understood, I won't," Jaina replied with a nod.

Gemma shot her a sideways glance. Then, she sighed and added, "Let's face it, you're getting on in years. Thomas claiming he wants someone older and more

composed? That's probably il

l. Who wouldn't want to marry a sixteen-year-old girl? You're twenty-six this year, right? If fate had been kinder, you might already have a child nearing ten."

Gemma looked down on Jaina's background, especially knowing where Jaina came from. To her, a mere farm girl was of higher status.

Someone who performed tricks on the streets? In essence, that was a lower-class life-unworthy of being considered among decent company, just like those entertainers.

Such a background was an embarrassment to the Sanford family.

"You're right, Madam Gemma," Jaina murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Enough. You may return to your room. Stay out of sight to avoid offending anyone through your ignorance of the rules," Gemma ordered.

"Yes, Madam Gemma," Jaina replied, bowing respectfully as she followed Tamara back inside.

Jaina couldn't miss the disdain and contempt in Gemma's gaze. She understood that in the eyes of a noble family, acknowledging a

traveling performer as a relative was

a disgrace.

In the past, Jaina had kept silent about her lowly status. Now that she knew her true identity, she felt even less inclined to speak out. It was best to remain cautious.

Once they investigated the matter of

the bandits in Stonebridge County,

they would discover whether Eleanor had genuinely helped Jaina out of a sense of justice-or had ulterior motives.

Chapter 676

Violet returned to the palace, and called Carissa and Jacob to the study. Rafael was still not back at the time. Jacob was anxious to hear the news, so he didn't want to wait for Rafael to return. Violet's first words brought tears to Jacob's eyes. "Jacob, I'm sure she's your sister."

Since Violet had left, he had been restless. He hadn't been able to sleep the night before, and dark circles hung under his eyes. When Violet returned, he had just gathered himself to ask her about it when she spoke up first.

He was momentarily stunned-then, tears streamed down his face.

Carissa and Violet were still present, and he trembled as he made his way to the desk. He sat down, and rested his forehead against the surface for what felt like an eternity.

Finally, he looked up with red-rimmed eyes and asked, "Are you sure, Ms. Spencer? You must take responsibility for your words."

"I'm sure of it. She even mentioned some past events, and shared many memories she remembered. There were some details you never told me, either. Did your mom ever hit you with a feather duster? Did you fall into a ditch and struggle to get out? Did you sell your grandmother's chickens to buy a candied apple? And did you once put a pile of dog poop at your dad's study door?"

Jacob whimpered, and shook from the overwhelming emotions. "H-How could she have remembered wrongly? None of those things happened! She must have mixed things up! That was another child, not me."

Seeing his reaction, Carissa and Violet exchanged knowing glances. They knew the child in the stories was indeed Jacob, and they basically confirmed that Darin was Jaina. Such embarrassing childhood stories couldn't be told unless they were witnessed firsthand.

Jacob was overwhelmed with excitement. He had never dreamed that his sister was in the capital, and had been living in Harmony Palace for so long. He had always wanted to find her, but he had convinced himself that it was hopeless deep down. Continuing the search had just been a way to comfort himself and give his family a glimmer of hope.

Tears brimmed in his eyes, and his voice trembled as he asked, "How did she escape from those traffickers? And how did she end up in the performance troupe? Did she tell you any of these things?" "She did."

Carissa planned to have a detailed discussion, so she asked Lulu to prepare some refreshments. Once the drinks and food were ready, they closed the study door, and Violet began to share the story.

"She never remembered her true

identity. The last thing she recalled

was being abandoned on a small hill in Stonebridge City. She was thrown there by the traffickers during heavy rain because she was running a high fever. The performance troupe leader, Lucas, found her and noticed she was still alive, so he took her in.

"In a stroke of luck, she survived. Lucas named her Darin, which means 'precious gift'. Because she had that memory, she always believed she had been abandoned by her parents. Over the years, she harbored resentment towards them and never thought about searching for them."

"Oh my god." Jacob's lips quivered, his eyes reflecting deep fear and pain. "She must have been terrified when she was taken. She's always been such a timid girl, and would scream when she got scared. She probably got beaten a lot. She must have been really hurt or traumatized."

He took a deep breath.

"What has tormented us all these years is this uncertainty. We often wonder what kind of suffering she endured. I dream about her crying and calling for help. When Lord Ryan was rescued, I had nightmares for a long time. I imagined she was treated the same way back then, and I feared she wouldn't have survived it."

Carissa and Violet couldn't help but feel a pang of sorrow at his words.

After sighing deeply, Violet

continued, "Though Lucas found her in Stonebridge County, he took her to Wexford County as soon as she recovered. She grew up there, and the performance troupe performed in Wexford County to make a living. e But as she blossomed into a beautiful young woman, some local Scoundrels took notice of her. One particularly nasty one even led a group to try to abduct her, but they were beaten up by her fellow performers and Lucas. After that, the performance troupe feared those scoundrels would retaliate, so they fled to Stonebridge County overnight.

"When they arrived in Stonebridge County, things went alright at first. But over the years, they faced a lot of trouble. The performance troupe struggled to stay afloat. There were days when they performed tirelessly, yet they couldn't even earn enough for a few buns. Realizing he was getting old, Lucas eventually disbanded the group and urged everyone to find their own paths."

Chapter 677

Carissa interrupted, "You mentioned that the performance troupe was repeatedly disrupted a few years ago. How exactly were they disrupted? Did she say anything about it?"

"Yes, some scoundrels smashed up their equipment. They bought replacements several times, only to have them destroyed again. It made Lucas so furious, he was nearly foaming at his mouth."

"When did this happen?" Carissa pressed.

"She said it was five years ago, and it went on for about six months."

"I see. Make a note that Eleanor might have visited Stonebridge County five years ago, or she could have sent someone there," Carissa instructed Jacob.

Jacob nodded. "Thank you for reminding me, Your Grace. I was so focused on Ms. Spencer's story that I completely forgot we still need to investigate Grand Princess Eleanor's so-called rescue." Jacob had never been so careless before. He realized he was too excited this time.

Violet continued, "After the performance troupe disbanded, everyone scattered for a few months. Jaina was left alone, and felt lost and helpless. But later, Lucas returned due to health issues, and she stayed in Stonebridge County to take care of him. At least she had someone she could call family by her side. During that time, there wasn't much she could do. She had to go up the mountain to gather herbs and hunt. If she found something rare, she could sell it for a good price.

"At first, things went well. She earned some money from collecting herbs and hunting, and she used some of the money for Lucas' treatment. She even managed to save some money for herself. She mentioned she had planned to save up to ten silver coins to rent her own place, since they were living in a shared and crowded courtyard then. It was noisy, and there was only one kitchen. Sometimes, people would even steal her harvest from the mountain, so she wanted her own space.

"But soon after, while she was collecting herbs on the mountain, she ran into bandits. She was outnumbered, and couldn't defend herself. Just then, Eleanor happened to be passing through and ordered her guards to rescue Jaina. Seeing that Jaina was injured, Eleanor even called for a physician to treat her. During her recovery, Eleanor also sent someone to care for Lucas and hired a physician, which helped him improve.

"This deeply touched Jaina, and she felt compelled to repay Eleanor's kindness. However, Eleanor said they were fated to meet and had taken a liking to her. She wanted to bring Jaina back to the capital, and even contacted the local authorities to ensure they took good care of Lucas and got treated for his illness.

"And so, Jaina followed Eleanor back to the capital. It was to express her gratitude for saving her, and also to show her appreciation for the care given to Lucas. Jaina thought she would go to the capital and serve as Eleanor's maid. Yet once she arrived, Eleanor placed her in a separate

courtyard. She lived there for six

months before being moved to

Harmony Palace.

"After that, Jaina was hardly allowed to go out. When she did, she had to wear a veil or a hood to cover her face, and she was usually accompanied by four to six guards. Even though she was dressed in finery and lived a luxurious life, Jaina didn't have any money on her. "She could stroll around occasionally, and most of the news she received was from the servants in Harmony Palace. Even Thomas' achievements were recently told to her by a maid who had been serving her. It seemed Eleanor had intentionally instructed someone to talk about Thomas in her presence multiple times."

Violet continued to share other less significant details. For instance, one night, when Jaina was at Harmony Palace, Henry entered her room. He had barely spoken a couple of words before Eleanor's people called him away, and he never came back after that.

As for Jessica, Jaina had only seen her once or twice. Other than the maids and servants in the inner courtyard, she hadn't encountered anyone else. However, she had occasionally heard some screams.

After listening, Jacob felt a mix of sympathy and anger. "Isn't that just house arrest? That's clearly house arrest! It seems Grand Princess Eleanor brought her back from the other courtyard to be defiled by Henry, but she somehow changed her mind after." Jacob was tormented by the situation. He desperately wanted to see his sister, but that meeting was still out of reach. Furthermore, he couldn't inform his mother or grandfather. If they found out and still couldn't see her, that would be unbearable. All Jacob could do was send someone to Cloud County to fetch his father. He couldn't tell him that Jaina had been found. He could only say that there were leads, and ask him to come to the capital.

Chapter 678

The pressing issue at hand was how Thomas intended to delay the engagement.

The Marquis of Grovehill's family would undoubtedly push hard for a resolution, and it would depend on how Thomas handled the situation by dragging things out.

According to their speculation, Jaina would become a pawn for Eleanor if Thomas refused. There were two options-either Jaina would be married off as a concubine to Henry, or wed to an elderly man as a secondary wife or a concubine in his household. As for asking Thomas to agree to the engagement first, that wouldn't work either. Thomas clearly had no interest. Alice might have liked the idea at first, but once she realized it was a setup, she certainly wouldn't agree.

Even if the two families ultimately saw eye to eye and genuinely wanted to arrange a marriage, Jaina's representative for her family should be Jacob, not someone from the Marquis of Grovehill's family.

Jacob would never allow his sister to be mistreated again.

After the emotional rollercoaster, Jacob contemplated this issue and spoke first.

"I don't care what happens to me. Even if you ask me to, I'd gladly give my life for her sake. But she can't be treated that way. She's an innocent girl, and shouldn't be casually compromised due to a scheme that would tarnish her reputation." Having regained what he thought he had lost, he couldn't allow his sister to suffer even a little injustice.

Carissa replied, "We never thought of doing that, Jacob. For now, we can only wait and see how Thomas delays things. We should send someone to Stonebridge County immediately to investigate this so-called rescue that Eleanor had carried out. If it turns out there was no such saving grace, Jaina can leave Harmony Palace without a second thought. We at Hell Monarch Estate will protect her."

Soon, it would be time for the Emberfest Festival. After that, Eleanor would lose her standing in the capital.

But if the matter wasn't cleared up, Jaina would always regard Eleanor as her savior. It was crucial that the inquiry be swift. If Eleanor fell from grace and asked Jaina to undertake some risky endeavor in gratitude for her supposed rescue, Jaina would certainly comply.

Even though Violet had suggested

that this so-called saving grace

might be a deception, there was still no concrete evidence for Jaina

Re

see. And given Jaina's strong sense of loyalty and affection, she would

feel compelled to repay the C

supposed favor, even if she still had doubts about it.

"I need to think about who to contact," Carissa said.

Having woken from a nap, Kyle strolled lazily to the door of the study and leaned against the frame. "Call Winona. She's the quickest and most thorough for this kind of investigation."

Violet immediately chimed in, "I'll contact Claire, and have her send a letter to Skywing Spire. Using Winona's network there would be the fastest way to get information."

By the time Rafael returned in the evening, everything had been arranged. After discovering that Jacob had found his sister, Rafael brought a bottle of wine to celebrate with Jacob.

Jacob had been unable to hold back his tears even in Carissa's presence, and he didn't bother doing so before Rafael. After a few glasses, he grasped Rafael's hand and said through his sobs, "It's been so hard these years, Your Highness! I've thought every night about what I would do to those traffickers if I ever

caught them. I'd skin them alive and

tear their flesh from their bones! Then, I would chop them into

pieces!"

"I know, Jacob. I know," Rafael said as he patted the other man's shoulder. "Those hard days are over now. From here out, things will get better."

Jacob cried, tears and snot mingling

on his face. "It's been 18 years! I

didn't know if she was dead or alive, what kind

or how people might have mistreated her! It's all left to my imagination, and the more I think about it, the more horrific it

f suffering she not

becomes! Every time she crosses my mind, it feels like a thousand needles are stabbing my heart."

Rafael understood that kind of pain. As harsh as it sounded, when someone died, the grief only lasted for a year or two. Sometimes, it hurt when they crossed one's mind, but it was never an agony that was this relentless.

"Come, have another glass. After this, we'll sleep," Rafael said, pouring Jacob another glass. "I'll drink with you."

Jacob waved his hand as he cried. Even though he felt a pleasant buzz from the wine and his thoughts were swirling with a mixture of joy and sorrow, he knew he had responsibilities to attend to.

"I can't drink anymore. I can't! The shopkeepers from all over will be coming tomorrow, and I have to arrange everything that needs to be done. Autumn is upon us, and there's so much to do. Lady Carissa needs to plan things, and I can't delay any important matters," he said.

Chapter 679

Henry emerged from the dungeon of Harmony Palace, dragging his heavy feet toward the side hall where Eleanor awaited him.

After meeting Carissa and learning about their plans, he shared them with Eleanor, which gave him the opportunity to visit the dungeon. He managed to bring some food and clothing for Melanie Lester, and even took her on a stroll in the courtyard outside the dungeon. However, informing Eleanor of Carissa's plan meant he had already abandoned Carmen.

Henry had no choice but to proceed this way. Initially, he had been forced into the situation, but now, he was in too deep to turn back. The Marquis of Grovehill's family and Eleanor's household were tightly intertwined, leaving Henry with no option but to obey Eleanor's orders.

As he entered the side hall, Eleanor dismissed those around her with a wave of her hand and said coolly, "Have a seat."

Henry sat down. "Thank you, Your Highness."

Eleanor sipped her coffee, and said nothing. Henry didn't say anything, either.

"You've seen her, so you must feel at ease now," Eleanor calmly said as she blew the froth off her coffee.

"Thank you for the medicine, Your Highness," Henry replied.

Eleanor raised her gaze to look at him with a cold expression. Though she understood what was really going on, there were moments when she couldn't resist exposing the facade of the hypocritical man before her. "What's this? Do you really care about Melanie Lester? Stop pretending. This is just your way of controlling those two little wretches."

Henry remained silent. He knew that in the face of Eleanor's sarcasm, silence was his best defense.

"Make sure to meet with Carissa as much as possible and get more information out of her. Also, tell her about our plans for the fifteenth of October. It's crucial to understand how their plan will be executed." "Understood. I'll ask Carmen to arrange a meeting with them again," Henry said.

"Make sure your mother pushes for the marriage between Lisette and Thomas. We can't let that drag on."

Henry hesitated momentarily. "I

don't think Thomas will be interested in Darin. After all, she's just some performer. She'll never be able to rise into a higher position. From what I've seen of her actions and demeanor, she doesn't have the slightest air of a refined lady."

Eleanor sneered, seeing right through her prince consort's petty thoughts. "Florence personally trained her, and she has been confined to the inner courtyard of Harmony Palace for so long. She's had no contact with the outside world, and whatever rebellious habits she had from the streets are long gone. If she can't act properly now, then no one can."

Henry remained silent. He knew he could never outwit Eleanor, nor could he hide his intentions from her. All he could do was occasionally speak a few words in favor of his family. Beyond that, he was powerless. "How's Celeste doing? Has Caspian shown any interest in her?" Eleanor asked.

Henry placed his hands on his knees, and frowned. "They've met twice-once at Lord Snyder's birthday banquet, and another time at Cloudveil Lounge. But Caspian didn't pay her any attention."

"How is that possible? Didn't we have her change her appearance? Could it be that Caspian recognized her as Ruby?"

Eleanor had confidence in Celeste's beauty. Caspian wasn't much of a man to begin with, having married a merchant's daughter. While his wife hadn't completely lost her charm, she was far from the youthful, radiant girl she once was.

"It's unlikely he recognized her. She

has a new identity now, and has slightly altered her appearance. In fact, she looks even better and more innocent than when she was Ruby Plus, she's now the daughter of a coffee merchant and has learned to brew coffee beautifully. Even Lord Snyder couldn't stop praising her. Considering Lord Snyder is Caspian's superior and

recommended her highly, Caspian should've paid attention. But at Cloudveil Lounge, he only spared Celeste a nod and left."

"Was his wife with him?" Eleanor asked.

"No, he was there to buy a hairpin for her and only brought a servant with him."

Eleanor frowned. "Could it be that Celeste hasn't learned her lesson and refuses to seduce Caspian?"

"No, that's not it. I can assure you that she's obeying your order," Henry quickly assured her.

Eleanor's expression darkened. "Then make sure she takes this seriously. Within half a month, she must establish a connection with Caspian. The ideal outcome would be for her to enter the Earl of Silverstone's family as a concubine." "I'll let her know," Henry said, his hands still resting on his knees. "Is there anything else you need from me, Your Highness? If not, I'll go tend to it."

"The lamps will be lit tonight," Eleanor said casually.

Henry lowered his eyes, and suppressed the disgust he felt rising within him. "Yes, Your Highness."

Chapter 680

Eleanor waved her hand, and dismissed Henry.

Did he think she couldn't see the disdain in his eyes? The more he loathed her, the more she wanted him to remember that he and Grovehill Estate would forever be her subordinates.

Once Henry left, Eleanor summoned Florence. "Henry is coming tonight. Light the lamps early, and don't forget to burn the incense. Also, make sure he drinks the herbal tonic before he enters the room." "I understand, Your Highness," Florence replied.

Eleanor closed her eyes, her expression uncertain. Florence hesitated before speaking again, "Your Highness, you've never been fond of getting intimate with the prince consort. Why force yourself?" Still keeping her eyes shut, Eleanor let out a barely audible sigh. "I just suddenly thought of someone."

"Lord Henry is who he is, and that other person is simply that. Every time you share a bed with the prince consort, you never seem happy," Florence pointed out. Having been her wet nurse, Florence held a high position and could speak her mind. Eleanor opened her eyes, a hint of mockery dancing in her gaze. "Do you think I should keep some lovers around to amuse myself?"

"That's not what I meant. I only worry about you," Florence said, waving her hands dismissively. She sighed. "You and Lord Henry can't stand each other. You even avoid looking at him most days, yet you still have to share a bed with him. It's truly unfair to you." Eleanor straightened up slightly, and asked, "Do you think I can still have children?"

Florence gasped in shock. "You still want to have children? You said you wouldn't bear any more after giving birth to the princess."

Eleanor said softly, "I used to think that way, but if my elder brother succeeds, who will inherit my family's legacy? Jessica has no children. Wouldn't that all go to the Marquis of Ironridge's family?"

"If you want to have children, then why make the prince consort drink the herbal tonic?" Florence asked, confused.

Eleanor pressed her fingers against her temples. A cold smile curled on her lips, and her eyes filled with disdain. "As if I would bear his child! If I had a son to inherit the family's legacy, there's no way I'd let it have any connection to the Marquis of Grovehill's family. Of course, a superficial relationship is necessary to maintain my reputation.

"I would never bear the child of any man other than my husband. However, Henry knows the truth, and so does the Marquis of Grovehill's family. And in time, my future son will know as well."

"Do you really want to find a lover?" Florence asked, slightly taken aback. For so many years, Eleanor had never entertained such thoughts and lived like a widow. Why was she considering it now?

Eleanor looked up and asked, "Do you know Daniel Sinclair?"

A man from the Sinclair family?

Florence's heart sank as she shook her head. "I don't. The Sinclair family doesn't have many members serving in the court. Is Daniel a rising star among their family?" "He's not much of a rising star. He's merely been trading out of the city with his dad. He only returned to the capital this year. I've met him once."

"And how is he related to Hector?" Florence asked cautiously.

Eleanor extended her hand, examining the orchid designs painted on her nails. She replied nonchalantly, "In a way, he's Hector's cousin. They share the same great-grandfather. In Hector's family, Ryan is the only male descendant left. Daniel is 27 this year, and is the youngest among Hector's generation."

"Have you taken a liking to him? What makes him stand out?"

Eleanor scoffed. "Stand out? Nothing at all."

She twirled a strand of hair, her tone turning contemplative. "If I had to say he had one redeeming quality, it would only be that he resembles Hector quite a bit."

Florence sensed the direction this was heading, and hesitated before speaking. "Your Highness, the Sinclair family is known for their pride. I fear he wouldn't want to become your lover."

Eleanor laughed derisively. "What

good is pride? But I suppose it's good that he has it. Besides, I don't intend to seek his consent. I'll have someone bring him here by force. Once the drug takes effect, I look like a goddess in his eyes."

Florence was taken aback. "You've already brought him here? With the Emberfest Festival approaching, there will be high priests and various ladies visiting. If he's not kept under strict watch, things could easily go wrong. And if he disappears, the Sinclair family will surely come looking for him."