

War Song 681

Chapter 681

Eleanor smiled at Florence. "Why are you so worried? I haven't captured him yet. I've only gathered some information. On the thirtieth of September, he plans to leave for Serenvale with a coachman and servant. I'll have all of them brought back to Harmony Palace and locked up in the dungeon. Who will notice that they've gone missing? Once the Emberfest Festival is over, there'll be plenty of time for me to make my move on him." Florence felt her heart tighten. "Your Highness, General Sinclair was ungrateful and cruel to you. Why do you want to bear a child from the Sinclair family? Though Lord Henry is cowardly, he's still your rightful husband."

A bitter taste rose in Eleanor's mouth, stemming from the depth of her heart.

She pressed her fist against her temple and closed her eyes, hissing her next words through clenched teeth, "He was unfeeling and wanted nothing to do with me. I won't give him the satisfaction. I'll bear a child from the Sinclair family, so he'll never know peace." Florence sighed. "You're just setting yourself up to clash with a dead man. If you truly wanted a son, you would have done so long ago. Why wait until now? Your cycle schedule is all messed up now, and you may not even conceive.

"Please don't punish yourself like this, Your Highness. Let the dead rest. He should be long dead in your heart too, so you don't concern yourself with him any longer."

Eleanor's eyes snapped open, a fire blazing in them. It looked like anger, yet also like the heat that had stirred the first time she had seen Hector in her youth.

"Do you think I want to dwell on him? He haunts my dreams every night. He's the reason I can't find peace. Even in death, he doesn't leave me be."

Tears spilled from her eyes, and her shoulders trembled as she fought to contain the torrent of emotions surging within her.

"Sometimes, I don't even know whether I still hate him or love him. When he died, I was more heartbroken than anyone else. No one in this world loved him like I do. Melanie Sullivan's love for him paled in comparison. If I had married him, I would have died the day he died. But did Melanie do the same?"

Florence knew Eleanor well, and her heart ached fiercely for the grand princess. The older woman stepped forward to embrace her.

"Forget about the past. Whether it's love or hate, you must let it go."

Eleanor gently pushed Florence away and wiped her tears with a defiant glint in her eyes. "In this lifetime, let me be reckless just this once. Let me indulge myself without regard for the consequences. Don't try to talk me out of it anymore-I've made up my mind." Florence sighed. "Let me summon the household physician to check on you and see if there's anything that may help you. If you truly wish to have a child, you need to be in good health."

"Go ahead." Eleanor waved her hand, then closed her eyes again.

She always slept poorly at night and suffered from severe drowsiness during the day.

The household physician, Lilian, had been monitoring Eleanor's health and knew her condition better than anyone else. Hearing that the grand princess wanted to conceive a child with Henry shocked her, but she could only speak honestly

"It's not impossible, but you must follow the prescribed regimen every day without fail."

"Will my age pose any danger to my pregnancy?" Eleanor asked.

"Childbirth is a dangerous process, Your Highness. You experienced it when you gave birth to the princess. As you age, the risk increases. So, I advise you to think carefully," Lilian replied. "Just prepare the prescription," Eleanor said calmly.

She seemed to be uninterested now.

When she had mentioned wanting a son to Florence, the desire had burned brightly within her. But now that she had spoken it aloud, it felt less significant. Perhaps it had just been a fleeting impulse.

Eleanor had caught a glimpse of Daniel by chance. He had been dressed in a blue coat as he rode confidently down the street with reins in hand. His chin slightly raised, he had exuded an air of poise and vigor.

At that time, Eleanor had been seated in her carriage and had lifted the curtain just in time to see him. The instant she saw him, a rush of heat surged through her body.

It felt like she had seen a ghost come to life.

Since that encounter with Daniel, Eleanor had been plagued with dreams of the past, in which Hector remained as cold as ever. He spoke to her with polite detachment, even going so far as to deliberately avoid her gaze when she approached.

Regardless of whether she chose to bear a child or not, she would claim Daniel as her own. She would trample upon the dignity of the Sinclair family and ensure that the soul of the deceased Hector would find no peace.

So, she had sent someone to investigate Daniel.

Chapter 682

As the sun set and cast a warm glow over the city, Caspian stepped out of the Ministry of Infrastructure, where a carriage was already waiting for him.

Before he climbed aboard, he said, "Let's head to the end of Jubilant Street first. My wife mentioned a couple of days ago that she wanted to have Harold's ravioli. I want to buy some fresh ones to cook at home." "I'm afraid he won't be set up yet," the coachman, Charles, replied.

Harold's ravioli stall only opened at night. The capital was thriving, and both Jubilant Street and Beacon Street buzzed with activity when night fell.

"It's almost time. We can wait a bit once we get there," Caspian said with a wave of his hand.

Charles chuckled. "You really care for your wife, don't you, sir?"

Caspian playfully tapped Charles on the head and smiled. "She's a good woman who married me and is raising our children. How could I not treat her well? And you'd best take care of Jenny too." Charles nodded and grinned. "I understand, sir."

Charles had grown up in the Prince household, and Jenny was a girl brought into the family at a young age. A couple of years back, Caspian had arranged for the marriage, and Jenny now served at Luna's side.

As they arrived at the end of Jubilant Street, they saw vendors beginning to set up their stalls one by one. Harold was now elderly and slower in his movements, so Caspian and Charles quickly went to assist him. When Harold spotted Caspian, he smiled and said, "Mr. Prince! Back again to buy ravioli for your wife?"

"Indeed, Harold. My wife loves your ravioli. She won't touch anyone else's, not even what our chef makes. It just doesn't suit her tastes," Caspian replied.

Harold laughed and waved his hand. "No need to help. I can manage this on my own."

But Caspian and Charles continued to lend a hand, setting up the stall until it was ready. Once they finished, Harold began to prepare the ravioli, as the dough and fillings had already been made and brought over. "Why don't you sit for a moment, Mr. Prince? It'll be ready soon," Harold said. "How much are you buying this time?"

"Just five pounds again," Caspian said.

Harold sighed gently. "You and your wife have kind hearts. Good people always receive their rewards."

Harold had been running his stall for many years, but business had never been great. It wasn't that his ravioli wasn't delicious. It was just that he moved too slowly and had no one to help him. Many customers simply didn't want to wait.

When Caspian brought Luna to try Harold's ravioli, she instantly declared her fondness for it after just one taste. Even though she couldn't possibly eat that much, she insisted on buying five pounds each time and would take it home to share with the servants. Luna just wanted to support his business.

A clear, cheerful voice called out, "Harold, I'd like a serving of ravioli, please!"

Caspian looked up to see a young woman standing at the stall. She was accompanied by a maid and had her hand resting on her stomach.

"I've been busy all day and skipped lunch. I'm absolutely starving!" the woman added.

Harold glanced up, recognizing her as Ava Weaver, one of his recent regulars.

He smiled and said, "Did you just close your family's shop, Ms. Weaver? Have a seat! I need to pack up Mr. Prince's ravioli first before I can make yours."

Ava turned her head and looked slightly surprised when she saw Caspian.

She approached and curtsied. "It's nice to see you, Mr. Prince."

Caspian remembered her. On the day when Eugene Snyder hosted a banquet, she had brought coffee and Eugene had praised her family's coffee beans. Since Caspian enjoyed a good cup of coffee, he had Charles stop by to buy some when passing by her family's shop.

He nodded politely. "Ms. Weaver."

She settled down across from him, a gentle smile on her delicate face. "Would you mind if Harold serves me first, Mr. Prince? I'm just so hungry after such a busy day."

Caspian felt a bit anxious. He

wanted to buy the ravioli quickly so

the servants could prepare it for Luna's dinner that night. Otherwise, it would have to serve as a late night snack, and his wife didn't eat much at that hour.

However, since she was someone he recognized and clearly in need, he nodded reluctantly.

"Alright, then. Harold, go ahead and prepare hers first."

Ava's eyes sparkled. "Two servings, please." She turned to her maid. "Ella, why don't you sit down and eat with me?"

Ella took a seat on the other side. "I can't sit at the main table, but I'll sit here."

As night fell, the wind picked up and

the air had grown chilly. Ava shivered slightly as a gust blew against her slender shoulders, looking quite pitiful as she wrapped her arms around herself.

"It's really cold tonight."

Caspian nodded, his expression neutral. "Yes, it is."

"Mr. Prince, how are the coffee beans?" Ava asked, her playful brows arching slightly. Her eyes sparkled as she focused on him, filled with an eager light.

"I haven't had the chance to try it yet," Caspian replied, puzzled.

He had never even dismounted the carriage when he sent Charles to buy the coffee beans. How did she know he was the one who had bought it?

Chapter 683

When the freshly-cooked ravioli was served, the aroma wafted through the air.

"Thank you for letting me go first, Mr. Prince. Next time you come to my shop for coffee beans, I'll be sure to give you a discount," Ava said with a smile.

Caspian regarded her with curiosity. "How much of a discount?"

Ava blinked playfully, her eyes sparkling. "How much of a discount would you like, Mr. Prince?"

With her sweet appearance and a hint of innocent charm, she resembled a beautiful flower in full bloom. Even the most steadfast gentleman might feel his heart flutter at such a sight. However, Caspian seemed oblivious to her beauty and was instead focused on the matter at hand. "You should give me the same as whatever you give Lord Snyder," he said.

Ava giggled, her eyes twinkling. "That won't do! Since you were kind enough to let me have the ravioli first, I must repay you properly. How about this-if you come in person and buy a pound, I'll throw in half a pound for free?" "It's a deal," Caspian replied excitedly.

"You got it!"

Ava smiled at him in a calm and composed demeanor, exuding a quiet beauty that was both refreshing and captivating. But Caspian shifted his gaze away from her and landed on Harold, who was moving at a painfully slow pace. After a moment, Caspian turned back to Ava and asked, "Didn't you say you were hungry? Why aren't you eating?"

Ava tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, revealing a pair of ruby-red earrings that accentuated her shimmering gaze. "Seeing you made me so happy that I momentarily forgot I was hungry."

Caspian chuckled softly but inwardly thought, 'If you weren't hungry, you should have said so earlier. Now, I've wasted all this time by letting you go first!'

Ava Weaver was Celeste's new identity. With graceful movements, she began to eat her ravioli, her delicate lips parting as she took a delicate bite. The small ravioli were tender and flavorful, but she seemed to need two bites for every piece she ate, sometimes even three.

Caspian frowned slightly as he watched. Harold's ravioli were thin-skinned and filled with fresh ingredients. They were small enough that Luna could easily eat two in one bite. Yet, Ava was struggling with just one.

A truly hungry person would have been eager to gulp down three ravioli in one bite.

Ava didn't seem as hungry as she had claimed, yet had insisted on going first. Caspian couldn't help but feel her character was a bit questionable. Even if her coffee beans were discounted in the future, he would have to think twice before buying.

She clearly had her sights set on attracting business with that buy one pound, get half a pound free offer, but who knew what kind of goods that half-pound would be? If it turned out to be old and moldy coffee grounds that had just been unsold for a long time, he would be asking for trouble just to try to save a few coins.

Celeste continued to eat, believing herself to be the picture of grace. She knew Caspian occasionally came to buy ravioli, so she had made a point to come by recently to establish a rapport with Harold. As soon as she arrived tonight, Harold had recognized her immediately.

"It's ready, Mr. Prince," Harold called out.

Caspian quickly stood and handed over some silver coins.

Harold waved his hand. "That's too much! Let me give you your change."

Caspian chuckled. "It's not too much. It's just the right amount."

"You're always like this." Harold smiled helplessly and thanked him profusely. "Thank you, Mr. Prince."

"I'm leaving now. I'll come by again

in a few days," Caspian said as he took the ravioli. Then, he politely addressed Celeste as well, "Ms. Weaver, I'm leaving now."

Celeste looked up with a smile on her lips. The steam rising from the ravioli in front of her lent her already enchanting features an air of mystery.

"Take care, Mr. Prince. Don't forget to visit my shop."

"Of course," Caspian replied politely as he climbed into the carriage and left.

Once he was gone, the smile on Celeste's face vanished. She set down her cutlery and coldly said, "Ella, settle the bill."

Harold glanced at her bowl and noted she had hardly touched it.

He couldn't help but ask, "Ms. Weaver, didn't you say you were hungry? Why haven't you finished? Did I cook the ravioli poorly tonight?" Celeste forced a smile. "No, it's not that. Your ravioli is

especially delicious. I just starved a little too much today, and now my stomach aches a bit." Harold chuckled. "When you're too hungry, you really can't eat. You shouldn't skip meals in the future. You must take care of your health, young lady." As Ella went to settle the bill, Celeste didn't respond and simply turned to leave.

She was fuming. Caspian was not only a coward but also blind. Having met his wife, Celeste knew that Luna was an uncouth merchant's

daughter with an ordinary

appearance. At best, she was only somewhat pretty.

How could she possibly compare to Celeste?

With her looks, what prince or noble wouldn't want to take her home? Even when Eugene had seen her, he had forgotten his wife's presence and stared at her with undisguised interest.

There was no man Celeste couldn't conquer. Men like Caspian should be easy pickings. It was only a matter of how long he could hold out.

Chapter 684

Of course, Caspian had no idea that Ava was interested in him. If he had been that astute and clever, he would have held a position far beyond that of a mere junior official in the Ministry of Infrastructure.

When he returned home, everyone was waiting for him to eat. He handed the ravioli to a servant, instructing them to boil it quickly so everyone could enjoy some.

"I was wondering why you were so late. Was it because you went to buy some ravioli? Look at you—you've got your wife on your mind and have forgotten all about your mom. You left her hungry and waiting for you," Zoey teased.

Caspian quickly apologized, but feeling a bit defensive, he explained, "I could have been home earlier, but Harold was so slow. Plus, Ms. Weaver cut in line. She claimed she was starving and asked me to let her and her servant go first. That's why I was delayed." "Ms. Weaver?" Zoey repeated curiously, raising an eyebrow.

She knew her brother-in-law well-he usually didn't associate with women. Who was this lady and why was she suddenly in the picture?

She pressed for more details, asking, "Who is she?"

"The one who runs a coffee shop. She delivered coffee when Lord Snyder was hosting a banquet, and he introduced us. I had Charles buy coffee beans from her before. It's the one I brought home a few days ago." Luna chimed in, "The coffee's not bad. I've tried it. But it is a bit pricey."

Being the daughter of a merchant, Luna was quite sensitive to the value of goods, though she didn't notice much else.

Zoey asked for the name of Ava's shop and jotted it down, then said, "Alright, let's eat. Mother must be starving."

Given Viola's situation, Evelyn had been ill recently and was just starting to recover. Her appetite was still delicate, but ravioli was perfect for her now. Once it was served, she managed to eat most of her bowl.

"Harold's ravioli is really delicious. If there are any leftovers, don't cook them. Just keep them for breakfast tomorrow," said Evelyn.

"It won't taste as good tomorrow, Mother. Let the servants have whatever you can't finish," Luna suggested. "I'll wake up early tomorrow and make you some millet porridge."

"Alright."

Evelyn seemed a bit distracted as she set down her cutlery and wiped her mouth with a handkerchief. A servant came by with water for her to wash her hands.

"You all continue eating. I'll head back to my room."

"Take care, Mom."

"Walk slowly, Grandma."

Everyone stood to see Evelyn off, which was a familiar routine. The elderly lady had been in this mood lately. Once she was supported out the door, the rest settled back down to eat. Zoey glanced at Caspian but didn't say anything and resumed her meal. After finishing dinner and returning to her room, Zoey summoned the steward, Bernard, to inquire about Ava's family's coffee shop, Weaver Coffee.

"I know of Weaver Coffee, but I'm not aware of who the owner is. All I know is that there's a new young manager now, said to be the owner's daughter," Bernard replied.

Zoey mused, "Strange. You only know about the owner's daughter but not who the owner is? Who ran the shop before?"

"There was just one manager, who wasn't the owner either. His name was Adam, and he was just managing the shop for the owner. He's not around anymore."

"Can you find out who the owner is?" Zoey pressed.

Bernard hesitated, then said, "We can certainly try, but we might not be able to uncover anything. The owner has never shown themselves at the coffee house. It's always been managed by the shopkeeper. I suspect the owner might be some influential person behind the scenes."

Zoey understood this scenario all

too well. During Augustus' reign, strict orders had repeatedly been issued to prohibit nobles and officials of the fourth rank and above from engaging in business. At that time, the court had been purged, allowing only the ownership of properties for rental purposes, but prohibiting any direct involvement in business.

During Sigmund's reign, the court had loosened its restrictions somewhat as influential families grew powerful and united. However, even then, it wasn't something done openly. If any of them wanted to engage in business, they had to entrust it to a trusted family servant

while hiring a shopkeeper from

outside to run the shop.

Such situations weren't uncommon. Even the Earl of Silverstone's family had similar arrangements.

Of course, owning property was allowed-like buying a shop to collect rent or purchasing land for farming, planting, or livestock. That wasn't restricted. Now that the new king had only been on the throne for a few years, he turned a blind eye to these matters. He wouldn't touch the interests of the noble families since his foundation was still unsteady.

After pondering for a moment, Zoey said, "If that's the case, we might not be able to uncover anything, or we could find something incriminating against someone else. Just drop it. I want strict orders issued throughout the household-absolutely no private interactions with

any servants of noble families."

"Yes, Madam Zoey!"

As for her younger brother-in-law, Zoey felt she needed to give him a few reminders as well.

Chapter 685

Pigeons from Skywing Spire flew haphazardly across the land, exchanging messages relentlessly. After several days of flight, the birds arrived in the capital two evenings before the Emberfest Festival. Claire and the others sorted and compiled the messages into a letter, which was delivered to Hell Monarch Estate that night.

Claire handed the letter to Violet, who didn't even bother to open it. Instead, she called everyone to the study and asked Jacob to read it first. Since it concerned Jaina, it was more appropriate for him to see it first.

After Jacob finished reading, the veins on his forehead bulged. "This is absurd! It's clearly a conspiracy. That so-called rescue was all meticulously designed."

Rafael read the letter, then briefly summarized it, explaining. "The troublemakers were local thugs hired to cause chaos. The ones pulling the strings were the people from the largest estate in Stonebridge County, which belongs to Aunt Eleanor. She always stays there whenever she visits.

"Carissa, you asked us to investigate whether Aunt Eleanor was in Stonebridge County around the time of the performance troupe incident. She was indeed there. It seems she noticed Jaina during

their performance. And those so-called bandits? They weren't bandits at all-they were local officials. After Jaina left Stonebridge County with Eleanor, the performance troupe leader was found dead."

Carissa's expression changed slightly. "How did he die? Was it investigated thoroughly?"

"He starved to death. He was left in a small shack after they broke his legs. The neighbors only reported it when the stench from the corpse became unbearable," Rafael replied in an icy tone, clenching the letter in his hand.

Violet seethed with anger. "In other words, that vile woman didn't give him medical attention. She even broke his legs and let him starve alone in that shack! How cruel!"

Carissa's face turned cold with rage. "Jaina left him money. If they hadn't broken his legs, he wouldn't have starved."

"How could there be such a wicked woman? And Jaina-how could she trust that monster?" Violent exclaimed, her cheeks flushed with indignation.

Carissa looked at her friend and

said, "You can't blame Jaina. She doesn't know what Grand Princess

County, Grand Princess Eleanor must have a reputation for being generous and kind. Also, she was Jaina's savior, and she even called a physician to look at Lucas. How

Eleanor is truly like. In

could Jaina suspect it was all part of a scheme?

"As someone who had to forage for herbs and hunt in the mountains, I doubt Jaina ever imagined she would become a target. She felt indebted to Grand Princess Eleanor for saving her and believed she also owed her a debt for the medical expenses. She thought that following the grand princess to the capital was just a way to repay her

by serving as a maid.

"But in the end, she was confined to the inner palace. Although Grand Princess Eleanor didn't mistreat her, I'm sure she occasionally told Jaina that she had received word about Lucas from the officials in Stonebridge County, which reassured Jaina and allowed her to stay with peace of mind until now."

Violet, who had been caught up in

her emotions, realized she had misspoken. She quickly turned to Jacob and said, "I'm sorry, I overreacted. Carissa is right. How could an ordinary person like Jaina even think of such a convoluted scheme aimed at her? Besides, she's someone who moves about in the world of performers, and

understands debts and favors. Once she owes a favor, she feels

compelled to repay it without

thinking too much about the

consequences."

Carissa's voice grew serious, "Exactly. While Jaina may have exercised some caution, her thoughts were merely wishful. The kindness she received was tangible, and she had no real choice in the matter." Carissa tightened her grip on the armrest, her anger boiling within her. She knew full well that Jaina had caught the attention of Eleanor because she resembled Melanie Sullivan.

Jaina's true savior was the performance troupe leader, Lucas, who had died because of this.

How could Jaina come to terms with that?

Just thinking about it filled Carissa with indescribable fury and anguish. If it was this bad from an outsider's perspective, she couldn't imagine what Jaina would feel.

After a moment of silence, Jacob spoke with bloodshot eyes, "We can't tell Jaina about this for now. I can't imagine how she would react upon learning that Lucas was beaten and left to starve to

death." Everyone nodded in agreement. They understood that any one of them would find it unbearable if they were in Jaina's shoes.

Chapter 686

The Farrell family had remained silent for quite some time. After several reminders from Eleanor, Gemma had no choice but to visit the Farrell family's residence in person.

Upon arriving, she learned that Thomas had gone to Stonebrook District to visit Wilfred, a member of the former Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team. Apparently, Wilfred had encountered a mishap, so Thomas had rushed there with Felix, the adopted son of the Quinton family.

Alice expressed her apologies, "This should have been settled long ago, but that stubborn boy insisted on checking on his comrade before making any arrangements. I don't understand his thinking, but I'm very keen on Ms. Sanford. When I saw her the other day, my eyes lit up so brightly as I wished I could bring her home as a daughter-in-law right then and there." Alice's sincerity, coupled with her obvious affection for Lisette, convinced Gemma.

She said, "Even though Thomas is not in the capital, you two did have a chance to talk. Didn't you ask him if he liked her? If he does, we should settle the engagement as soon as possible. I'd feel much better knowing her marriage is secure. "Besides, marriage is a significant matter. It's determined by the wishes of the parents and the matchmaker. As long as Thomas doesn't oppose it, you can take the lead without waiting for him to return."

Alice pondered for a moment, then replied, "What you say makes sense. How about this? I'll pick a favorable day to visit and have someone check their horoscope compatibility. If everything looks good, I'll formally send someone to propose. How does that sound?" Gemma felt a weight lift off her shoulders. Eleanor was always pushing and prodding, which was exhausting.

She smiled and said, "Oh dear, it feels like I'm the one pressuring the marriage arrangements! But honestly, Lisette isn't getting any younger. If you don't think she's a good fit for Thomas, I need to find her another match soon to appease her family. It's good to settle this now. It puts my mind at ease."

Alice nodded in understanding. "Yes, I've also worried endlessly about Thomas' marriage. I hope to see it finalized soon so that our family can expand and thrive."

"Indeed, they're both getting on in years. It's best to finalize things sooner rather than later," Gemma agreed.

"Alright, I'll find someone to choose a favorable date for checking their horoscope. It shouldn't be a problem, but we'll still follow the proper procedures to ensure everything goes smoothly," Alice said. Gemma nodded in satisfaction. "In that case, I'll wait for your visit."

After she left, Alice called Opal over and asked, "Opal, do you think this matter can still be delayed? Has Lady Carissa sent word?"

Opal smiled. "Aunt Alice, regardless

of whether there's news from Lady

Carissa or not, just look at it this way-picking a date takes a few days, and arranging for their

k will

horoscope compatibility check also take a few days. All in all, it will take about a week or more. Lady Carissa wants us to drag it out for a reason. We can buy a few days without offending anyone or tarnishing Thomas' reputation."

"You're right. Hearing that makes me feel more at ease. Thomas' marriage has faced so many hurdles. It seems he's on someone's radar. If this doesn't pan out, we'll have to settle

on another match for him sooner rather than later," said Alice.

"Don't worry, Aunt Alice. He likely knows the situation and won't resist anymore after this," Opal reassured.

Alice sighed. "Let's hope that's the case."

Gemma sent word to Eleanor, letting her know that the Farrell family would be coming in a few days to check Thomas and Lisette's horoscope compatibility. So, the matter was tentatively settled. Meanwhile, Eleanor had Henry staying at Harmony Palace for discussions.

When she received the report, she looked at him with a flat look and said, "Your family is dragging their feet. This matter should have been settled Hong ago, yet they haven't even done the horoscope compatibility check. At this rate, how can I trust you with important responsibilities?"

Henry gazed at her solemn expression, then felt a wave of disgust when he recalled the lit lanterns from the past two nights. He had heard that the kitchen staff were preparing medicine for Eleanor as she planned to have another child.

Chapter 687

Given the circumstances, Henry was willing to cooperate. Their son would bear the Kingsley surname, and he would undoubtedly stand united with the Marquis of Grovehill's family in the future. "I'll talk to them when I get back," Henry promised.

"The Emberfest Festival is approaching. Have you invited Reverend Zane?" Eleanor asked.

"I have. This time, we've invited eight high priests, including Reverend Zane. I'll go personally to escort them early on the day."

Eleanor nodded and was extra gracious as she said, "Then, have your mother come as well, but you must tell her that it's an all-nighter. If she can't handle it, she shouldn't come."

"She can handle it. She's been a devout believer for many years and has always wanted to participate," Henry quickly assured.

Among the ladies attending the festival were Natalie, Mildred, and Hannah—all prominent matriarchs of distinguished families whose husbands or sons held significant positions at court.

Also, these women were known for being compassionate and generous. Since Gemma was familiar with them, her association with them could greatly benefit the sons of the Marquis of Grovehill's family in the future. It would also reduce their reliance on Eleanor's influence.

Eleanor didn't consider her mother-in-law a truly devout believer. Yet, what mattered more than belief was what one could obtain.

These ladies, except for Natalie, had relinquished their household management roles over the years. Still, whenever they stomped their feet, their sons and grandsons remained noticeably attentive and concerned. Their words carried the weight of a fortune. Thanks to the rituals performed during the

Emberfest Festival, these matriarchs had developed a deep respect for Eleanor. That is, with the exception of Natalie, who had criticized the grand princess regarding the incident involving Carissa.

The other ladies might have heard rumors, but their compassionate nature kept them from malicious speculation about others. They trusted only their own observations and dismissed outside gossip.

Such compassion was useful to Eleanor when it suited her, but she would dismiss it as foolishness when it didn't. This year, she planned to let Molly and Fiona attend the festival celebrations, hoping the kind-hearted matriarchs would see that Yuvan's wife and concubine shared the same compassionate spirit.

As for Heather, she was clueless and timid. She was also a member of the Sullivan family, which was potential trouble down the line. It would be best if she didn't make an appearance at all.

After sending Henry away, Eleanor

summoned the captain of her guards, Kurt, and commanded,

"Keep a close eye on Daniel tomorrow. As soon as he leaves the city, abduct him and take him to the carriage. Have the coachman and his servant settled at the estate outside the city, then bring Daniel back."

Outside the door, Florence listened intently, feeling a slight heaviness in her heart. She let out a nearly inaudible sigh, realizing that Eleanor had ultimately chosen this path. Hector had truly ruined Eleanor's life.

But who could she blame? Marriage required the consent of both parties, and even Augustus had not allowed their union back then.

Florence didn't believe Eleanor truly wanted to bear a son. She just saw how much Daniel looked like Hector. Since she had never had Hector, she was just trying to deceive herself.

Ever since the Duke of Northwatch's

family had been exterminated and Melanie Sullivan died, Eleanor had been unsettled. Perhaps it was because the people she loved and hated the most were gone, so everything suddenly felt so bland

and meaningless.

Once Kurt left, Florence stepped inside and gently asked, "Your Highness, are you truly going to do this? You know as well as I do that no matter how much he resembles General Sinclair, he is not him."

"Of course he isn't," Eleanor said, wrapping herself tightly in her cloak, her eyes devoid of light. "Sometimes, I wonder what the point of all this is. Even if succeed, my dad won't see it, nor will my brother. And Hector certainly won't."

Florence dared not pry into those matters or offer her opinions.

Eleanor let out a cold laugh. "So, I thought, why not bear a son? A son of the Sinclair family, just to spite him. Wouldn't that be delightful?"

"Your Highness, this is merely an impulsive decision," Florence said softly.

Eleanor's gaze turned icy. "Perhaps. But I can't think of any other way to find happiness. What I truly want to do now is this. Everything else I do will just be for someone else's benefit."

Chapter 688

A carriage rolled out of the city, carrying Daniel on a trip to Serenvale. He was in a hurry as there had been a few issues at a factory there. Though it was nothing too serious, his dad had insisted he go personally to handle it.

Daniel had been living in Serenvale for some time, but since his wife was pregnant, he had sent her back to the capital to prepare for childbirth. He figured he could hand off the factory's affairs to the shopkeeper and return to the capital to pursue some other business ventures.

Having married at twenty, he was already a father with two sons, so he hoped they would have a daughter this time. In his family, taking a concubine was rare, and he had no plans to do so. He shared a deep bond with his wife, whom he had always brought along on business trips. Now, as their focus shifted back to the capital, their little family of four-soon to be five-would settle in the city.

Daniel hadn't visited Carissa, but had gone to the academy to see Ryan. His teacher was now the main lecturer there, so he could easily visit the academy.

He hadn't gone to Hell Monarch Estate because his business had yet to stabilize. Theodore had advised him not to make any visits until his business was secure, to avoid any rumors that the Hell Monarch's household was helping the Sinclair family's business. Theodore was wise. He knew that prominent figures were often wary of too much association with merchants or powerful officials—even if they were family. Accusations could easily arise, so it was best to avoid the appearance of impropriety. If not careful, such connections could lead to ruin.

Theodore was very insightful, so everyone in the family asked for his advice when doing business and listened to what he had to say. The older man had advised them to maintain a distance during prosperous times and offered assistance when they fell on hard times. True families didn't thrive or suffer together. Each had its own strengths, which allowed them to support one another when it mattered most.

As the carriage rolled out of the city, dust kicked up behind it. The dust gradually settled, but no one noticed that the coachman had changed. When the carriage reached a secluded area, the curtain was lifted, and both Daniel and his servant gasped in unison when they saw a stranger. "Who are you?"

A couple of muffled groans followed before the carriage continued to move forward. The original coachman had taken Daniel's place in the carriage, leaving him and Daniel's servant unconscious inside.

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At Harmony Palace, Kurt reported, "Grand Princess Eleanor, the man has been brought back. Should we place him in the dungeon?"

Eleanor was copying scriptures when she looked up at Kurt. After a long pause, she said, "Don't put him in the dungeon. Place him in Orange Blossom Hall."

"Understood, Your Highness."

"Prepare some muscle-relaxing powder for him."

"I will, Your Highness. However, he hasn't woken up yet."

"Very well. Set things up first and send someone to attend to him. I'll go check on him later," Eleanor instructed.

"Yes, Your Highness!" Kurt saluted and exited the room.

Eleanor remained still for a while, then resumed her copying as she murmured, "May the gods ensure Hector Sinclair and Melanie Sullivan never meet in this life or the next..."

As she continued, her thoughts led

her to write two questions over and over-Did the gods understand the anguish of loving someone one couldn't have? Did the gods know the despair of loving what one couldn't possess?

She kept writing those lines, as if writing the words might bring her some sort of answer. When the

page was finally filled, she stared at

blankly at it for a long time. Then, she tore the paper into shreds with a flat look, crumpling the pieces into a ball and tossing it onto the floor.

Over the past two years, Eleanor had felt increasingly restless and agitated, the root of her turmoil being an overwhelming emptiness. It felt as if her heart had been hollowed out or tightly wrapped up, like a silkworm cocooned in layers of silk. She struggled desperately to break free, but no matter how hard she fought within that cocoon, she couldn't poke her head out.

The constriction was suffocating.

In Orange Blossom Hall, Daniel slowly regained consciousness, but everything around him felt foreign.

A strange bed, unfamiliar curtains, and unknown furnishings filled the room.

He had no strength in his body, and his mind was clouded and chaotic.

He opened his mouth to call for his servant, "Walter..."

He thought he had called out loudly, but the sound was barely more than a whisper. His voice was even trembling at the end.

Panic gripped his heart.

What was happening? Had he encountered thieves?

Turning his head, he scanned the lavishly furnished room. There were soft, luxurious drapes, a large partition screen adorned with peonies, and a full vanity set. The place didn't resemble a thief's lair at all. In fact, it seemed more like a woman's bedroom.

Chapter 689

Daniel struggled to rise, but his body felt weak, as if he had just recovered from a serious illness. Just then, the door creaked open, so he quickly turned his head to look.

A figure stepped around the screen and entered. It was a woman.

She wore her hair in a loose bun, adorned with a delicate hairpin, and was wearing a pale blue top with white accents. Over it was draped a smoke-colored satin coat that flowed elegantly. She appeared to be in her forties, with only faint signs of aging on her face. Yet, her expression was stern and commanding, radiating the authority of someone in power.

Behind her, another person entered and moved a chair to the bedside. The woman then slowly sat down, her cold, sharp gaze locking onto Daniel's wide, confused eyes. "Who... who are you?"

Daniel had never met Eleanor, but he knew her status must be significant.

As Eleanor observed the panic in his eyes, an unsettling feeling surged within her. It was as if a flame had been doused by a sudden downpour, leaving no embers behind.

The two men's faces bore similarities, yet their demeanor and courage were worlds apart.

"Are you afraid of me?" Eleanor asked slowly, not bothering to conceal her disdain any longer.

"Who are you? Why did you bring me here?"

Scrutinizing her attire, Daniel realized the likelihood of her bringing him here because of money was slim to none. She must have other motives.

He recalled Theodore's warnings about the Hell Monarch and the Duke of Northwatch's families being in a state of heightened tension, which would undoubtedly lead to dissatisfaction and targeting from some people. They had to tread carefully, ensuring no one could seize upon any flaws to undermine the Duke of Northwatch's family.

"Is the Sinclair family reduced to having only cowards like you left?" Eleanor said coldly.

"Who are you?" Daniel clenched his fists, a steely glint emerging in his eyes. "No matter who you are, you clearly know my identity, which means you have a purpose for abducting me. What do you plan to use me for? I'm telling you, no matter what your plan is, you won't succeed."

Eleanor watched as his fear began to fade, replaced by the distinctive pride that members of the Sinclair family were known for.

She let out a soft sigh and smiled. "Yes, this is how a member of the Sinclair family should be."

She reached out, wanting to touch the icy face before her. It was this very face-cold and distant-that rejected her and kept her at arm's length, with eyes that showed no hint of warmth.

Daniel lay on the bed, having exerted

himself to lift his head in anger.

Now, he was exhausted and panting

for breath after uttering those words. His neck could barely support his head, which slumped back onto the pillow as he stared helplessly at the hand approaching his face.

A wave of goosebumps spread across his body in an instant. He flailed his arm weakly, but missed hitting her. Instead, she leaned closer. Her eyes betrayed an emotion he couldn't comprehend, yet it made his skin crawl.

Eleanor withdrew her hand, but her gaze remained fixed on his face. The sensation of her watching him-yet seeming to look beyond him-sent shivers down his spine. There was an obsession in her eyes that was mingled with resentment. It terrified him.

"Get out!" Daniel roared from deep within his throat.

However, the command fell flat. His voice lacked any real power, and he felt utterly drained.

Eleanor only laughed, leaning back in her chair with a languid demeanor. Her elbows rested on the armrests, her eyes sparkling with a mix of allure and mockery.

"Oh, you may look alike, but the feeling when I touch you is entirely different."

She had touched Hector's face once before, but he had swatted her hand away, returning her gesture with an angry shout of "Get out!"

It was astonishing how Hector could

act so defiant. Eleanor was clearly the favored grand princess, while he couldn't even rely on anyone in the Sinclair family, and had nothing but his own military achievements. And yet he had dared to shout at her.

That kind of pride could infuriate others while also drawing them in, igniting a desire to conquer.

Eleanor suddenly spoke in a lazy

tone, "I've seen your two sons. Both look just like you. I heard your wife is pregnant again. Do you think it'll be another son? You really have a talent for fathering boys, and they all resemble you. It's quite enchanting, really."

"What?" Daniel felt a chill wash over him, fear pooling in his eyes. "What do you want?" Eleanor looked at him for a while before she sneered, then stood up and turned to leave. Her voice was cold and dismissive as she commanded, "Take him to the dungeon."

Chapter 690

As soon as Florence heard that Daniel was to be locked away in the dungeon, she hurried after Eleanor.

"Your Highness, have you changed your mind?"

"Just lock him up for now," Eleanor snapped, feeling a wave of irritation wash over her.

"Yes, of course. Please don't be angry. You must take care of yourself," Florence urged gently.

"No one can compare to Hector. Even if he looks exactly the same, if he's not him, then he's not him. Not even the slightest resemblance can stir my heart. In fact, that face only makes me furious," Eleanor ranted as she stormed back into her room, a fire burning in her eyes.

After she sat down, she still felt overwhelmingly restless.

"Bring me water and scented soap. I need to wash my hands," she ordered.

The maids hurried about, bringing in warm water.

Eleanor washed her hands repeatedly, scrubbing away the memory of touching Daniel. It was just like how after every encounter with Henry, every moment spent close to him under the flickering light of the lanterns had to be washed away-requiring her to soak in bucket after bucket of hot water to rid herself of that repugnant aura.

After dismissing the maids, Florence sighed deeply as she observed Eleanor's increasingly unhinged demeanor.

"Your Highness, do you love Hector for his face? He's dead. Even if someone looks just like him, he's not the man in your heart. Why torment yourself so?" she asked.

In the past, Eleanor couldn't stand anyone saying she loved Hector. Even Florence saying it would provoke a sharp rebuttal. But now, Eleanor didn't want to argue. She suddenly felt that aside from loving and hating Hector, she had no connection to him whatsoever. So, love and hate it would be.

Though Eleanor's eyes were dark and full of unspoken sorrow, her words were laced with venom as she said, "It's all fate. I don't want to see a face like his again. Ruin Daniel's face and kill both his sons. As for his pregnant wife... Didn't you say that pregnancy is a hellish experience for a woman? Then, just send her through the gates of hell to join her husband."

Florence's heart chilled at those words. "Your Highness, we shouldn't do that. Tomorrow is the Emberfest Festival, and you've spent days transcribing scriptures. Why not let them go? After all, we are honoring the souls of the departed..." "Then, let's honor them all at once tomorrow," Eleanor replied coldly.

Looking up to see Florence standing motionless, she erupted in anger, shouting, "What? Do you pity them? Fine, I'll indulge your kind heart. Kurt!"

Kurt stepped in quickly. "I'm here, Your Highness."

Fury flashed in Eleanor's eyes. "Bring Daniel's wife and his two sons here. Lock them all in the dungeon. Right before their eyes, destroy Daniel's face and kill them all together. I want them to die as a family."

Kurt instinctively glanced at Florence. The elderly woman looked worried but didn't say anything. So, Kurt nodded and left to carry out Eleanor's orders.

Seeing the lingering anger in the grand princess' demeanor made Florence sigh.

"Let me prepare some herbal soup that can help soothe your emotions," she said before quickly stepping out and catching up with Kurt.

"Kurt, wait a moment."

Kurt turned around and respectfully greeted, "Madam Florence."

Then, he lowered his voice and

asked, "Should we really go through with this? Her Highness' mind changes like the wind. If we destroy that man's face and she blames us later, what will we do? Finding another face that bears such *résemblance* will be nearly impossible."

"I know you've had a difficult time dealing with her whims over the past two years. She often changes her mind, which has led to you facing a lot of blame. For now, let's just keep him in the dungeon. Bring his wife and two children there too. Her Highness insists on going through with it after a few days, then we'll act," Florence replied.

Kurt hesitated. "But if she gets angry because we're not following her wishes now, you have to protect us."

"Don't worry," Florence reassured. "I know her temper. She really shouldn't be bothered by these matters right now. Once she takes her medication and calms down, I'll talk to her."

"Alright, we'll do as you say. You really care for us. I consider you like a godmother," Kurt said gratefully.

Florence chuckled. "You're quite the charmer. At your age, you could easily be my grandson."

"I don't mind being either, as long as you protect us," Kurt replied with a solemn nod.

Florence smiled and waved him off. "Go on, then. Tend to your duties."

As she watched him leave, she noted how he looked back with a hint of worry. Florence sighed softly. Perhaps she was getting old and wasn't as ruthless as she had been in her youth. Killing an entire family felt too harsh.

Eleanor shouldn't be so fixated on old grievances and start a war. If she wanted to act boldly, she should have followed Yuvan out of the capital or returned to Stonebridge County to live her own life.