

Wrath 971

Chapter 971:

Aiden contemplated this information, a shadow of suspicion briefly darkening his gaze. “Is that really the case?”

“Whatever transpires within the Payne family remains their affair. We needn’t involve ourselves excessively,” Janice shrugged with elegant indifference. Whether Oliver’s physical disability was authentic or fabricated held no significance for her. Her paramount objective was the downfall of the Welch family.

As long as Oliver refrained from interfering with her plans, she would not entangle herself in their family matters.

Noting Janice’s disinterest in Oliver, Aiden restrained further comment, though his wariness persisted. If Oliver was indeed disabled, was there a possibility that he had deliberately harmed himself to make his condition more convincing?

Though this hypothesis bordered on the absurd, Aiden couldn’t dismiss it entirely. If proven accurate, Oliver would emerge as a far more dangerous adversary than they had anticipated.

Just then, Leah’s name flashed on the screen as her call came through. Janice raised a finger to Aiden, signaling him to stay silent before picking up the call.

“Leah, what’s going on? Is something wrong at the company?”

Leah responded, “Nothing’s wrong. At the current pace, once the banquet concludes, we can officially start operations. But there’s a situation that needs your attention.”

“What is it?”

Leah sighed. “The Welch family just reached out. They want to book a banquet hall at the Eternity Building—for Mateo’s birthday bash.”

Janice's gaze sharpened, and a slow, knowing smile crept onto her lips. "They're not even trying to be subtle, are they?"

"So, do we shut them down or let them have it?" Leah asked, knowing either choice meant stepping into a battle.

"Let them have it."

Janice's answer sent a rush of adrenaline through Leah. Her breathing quickened, and a spark of excitement laced her voice.

"Janice, are you absolutely sure about this?"

"Obviously. We drew the battle lines the moment we stepped into Cloverhill. Backing down now isn't an option."

"Understood. I'll handle it."

Janice's unwavering confidence sent a thrill through Leah—this was going to be interesting.

Janice exhaled slowly as she set her phone down, her eyes glinting with an unshakable resolve.

"Janice, you sure you're ready for this?" Aiden asked, casually taking the cup from her hand and sipping from the exact spot where her lips had been. Maybe it was all in his head, but somehow, the coffee tasted better.

"I've been ready since the moment I set foot in Cloverhill," Janice murmured, a slow, satisfied smirk curling her lips. "And I can't wait to see them seething."

Three days slipped by in a blur.

The eighteenth floor of the Eternity Building housed two grand banquet halls, each designed to host lavish gatherings. One bore the name “Prosperity Hall,” while the other was called “Fortune Hall.”

Janice’s grand opening was set to unfold in Prosperity Hall, while Mateo’s birthday extravaganza would take place in Fortune Hall. Positioned directly across from each other, the two halls stood like rival kingdoms. With their doors wide open, each event was in full view of the other. Calvin and Jensen arrived early to oversee preparations. Their eyes flicked to the other side, where the opening banquet seemed eerily underwhelming. Smirking, they exchanged mocking glances.

Chapter 972:

“Calvin, Janice sure has some nerve, snatching our booking like that,” Jensen muttered, his voice laced with disdain. “In all of Cloverhill, what respectable family would dare go against us? Even if she’s JE and MO, she’s playing a game she can’t possibly win on our turf.”

Calvin let out a slow shake of his head. “No matter what they choose, it all ends the same—complete destruction. The only question is how deep their fall will be. If they refuse, they’ll be shamed by Cloverhill’s elite, their reputation in ruins for good. If they accept, they’ll humiliate themselves, reduced to nothing more than extras in our grand spectacle.”

In his mind, he could already picture the farce unfolding—Janice’s banquet drowning in silence while theirs thrived in a whirlwind of chatter, laughter, and clinking glasses.

“Jensen, Calvin, it’s nearly time,” Alissa said, stepping forward. “Oh, and Mr. Vance has sent over his gift for Dad. It should be arriving any moment.”

“Perfect,” Calvin said, a satisfied smile curling his lips as he gave Alissa a light pat on the shoulder. “Once tonight’s banquet is a success, I might just overlook your past mistakes.”

Alissa’s eyes brightened with relief. She dipped her head quickly. “Thank you, Calvin. I promise, everything will be flawless—no mistakes, not even the tiniest one.”

“Looks like the guests from the major families are starting to arrive. Go make sure everything is in place to greet them. Dad and Uncle will be here any minute.”

“Got it.”

The Welch family’s banquet exuded pure opulence, every detail screaming extravagance. Lavish dishes and the finest wines adorned the tables, each a testament to their wealth and status.

By contrast, Janice’s opening banquet carried a quieter charm—reserved, yet refined. It didn’t flaunt wealth; it whispered sophistication.

Janice, with her designer’s eye, had meticulously crafted the banquet’s atmosphere—understated yet undeniably luxurious, a beauty only the discerning could fully grasp.

“Janice, I’m getting nervous.” Clinging to Janice’s arm, Sierra stole a wary glance at the Welch family’s celebration. “Do you think any of Cloverhill’s elite will actually show up for ours?”

Janice gently patted Sierra’s hand, her smile unwavering. “Relax. By the end of the night, our banquet will be the talk of the city.”

“You really think so?” Sierra’s eyes shone with pure belief. So far, Janice had never let her down. There was something unshakable about Janice—an effortless confidence, a mind always five steps ahead.

“Janice, everything’s set. Now, all that’s left is for the guests to start arriving,” Nellie reported, stepping up.

Janice gave a small nod, her gaze drifting toward the Welch family’s banquet, only to lock eyes with Calvin.

Calvin smirked, swirling his glass of red wine before lifting it in a mock toast to Janice. His eyes glinted with provocation, as if he were savoring the moment before her inevitable downfall.

But Janice remained unbothered. She glanced at her watch, estimating that Aiden had already secured the item from Herbert and was en route to the banquet.

“Bring me a glass of red wine,” she instructed.

Chapter 973:

Sierra hurried to the bar, grabbed a glass, and handed it over. Janice took it without hesitation, downed the wine in one go, then turned the empty glass upside down and tilted it towards Calvin.

Calvin’s pupils narrowed at Janice’s daring move, a sharp gleam flashing in his eyes. How audacious! Did she still believe that founding JE Consortium gave her the right to run wild in Cloverhill?

“Today, we’ll prove that against true power, your honor and pride mean nothing,” he muttered under his breath.

The streets of Cloverhill glittered under a sea of lights in the night, alive with activity. Tonight, the main road past the Eternity Building gleamed exceptionally bright as luxury cars converged, all heading for the grand banquet hosted by two top-tier powers.

“Tonight is truly exciting! One banquet marks the rise of a new power in Cloverhill, while the other celebrates the birthday of the Welch family head. Both are happening on the same day, at the same venue. Isn’t this a direct showdown?”

“Which one are you going to?”

“The Welch family’s, obviously. You’d have to be suicidal to go against them in Cloverhill.”

“I’m attending the Welch family’s birthday banquet as well! I can’t wait to see this new power make a fool of themselves in public tonight.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if, barely after the banquet began, they’ll already be sneaking away.”

Most elite and influential figures gathered for the Welch family’s birthday banquet.

They fully understood the Welch family's power and status in Cloverhill and wouldn't dare cross them. They wondered what gave this new power the audacity to challenge the Welch family, but none dared to oppose them directly.

Inside the banquet hall, Janice sat at the head table, her expression serene as she sipped her wine, utterly unbothered by the tension in the air. In contrast, Sierra was visibly anxious, and even Nellie felt a hint of unease. Though she maintained her composure, she occasionally glanced towards the Welch family's banquet hall.

So far, most of Cloverhill's elite had flocked to the Welch family's banquet, leaving their side practically deserted.

"The Mendoza family has arrived!" a voice announced, making Sierra's and Nellie's eyes light up as they finally had guests at their banquet.

But when they saw Bain and Conley, their expressions darkened. They were their own people.

Bain approached Janice with a practiced smile. "Congratulations, Ms. Edwards."

"Mr. Mendoza, you're quite early," Janice responded, faintly smiling. "I figured you might show up later, just in time to slip away to the other banquet."

Bain's face stiffened with embarrassment, but he quickly said, "You must be joking. The Mendoza family pledged loyalty to you. We wouldn't dare betray that."

"Please, have a seat," Janice said, her expression stoic, showing no emotion.

Bain glanced towards the Welch family's bustling banquet, concern creeping into his features. "The Welch family is making things difficult for you today, trying to intimidate you. Do you have a plan?"

"A plan?" Janice paused, tapping her finger lightly against her glass before shaking her head. "No."

“No?” Bain and Conley exchanged uneasy glances.

They had assumed Janice’s calm demeanor was a sign that she had a plan, but this was not what they had anticipated.

Chapter 974:

“Then what’s our next move? If the Welch family crushes us tonight, every move we make in Cloverhill from now on will be met with resistance.”

“Mr. Mendoza, aren’t you overthinking this?”

“You’re just a subordinate. If I’m not worried, why should you be?” Janice sneered. Her words struck Bain like a blade, cutting deep.

“I genuinely care about you,” he said earnestly, clutching his chest. “Our Mendoza family has made many mistakes before and paid the price, but thanks to your support, we were able to return to Cloverhill. So, I truly hope you can secure your place.”

His heartfelt words carried sincerity and logic, moving Sierra deeply. Janice, however, remained unmoved by Bain’s words, her expression unreadable.

“Please sit, Mr. Mendoza. Just watch and see how the night unfolds,” Nellie said, noticing a hint of impatience crossing Janice’s face.

Bain was momentarily taken aback, then let out a quiet sigh and sat with Conley at a nearby table.

Sierra, ever the optimist, leaned closer to Janice. “The Mendoza family seems sincere.”

“Sierra, don’t be naive,” Nellie said, frowning. “To these elites, sincerity only exists when there’s something to gain. Bain’s heartfelt words only come because he knows their success is tied to Janice’s.”

Sierra hesitated, surprise flickering in her eyes. “Is that really the case?”

Janice put her glass down and reached out to pat Sierra's head lightly. "Your sister's right. In this game, words mean nothing, no matter how sweet they sound. To them, only interests last forever."

Sierra sighed. "Can't things ever be simpler?"

"Sierra, just stay the way you are. Your sister and I will protect you," Janice said reassuringly.

Sierra was deeply touched. She was well aware of her own naivety and how easily she could be deceived. Without her sister and Janice, she might not even realize how she met her end.

The crowd at the Welch family's banquet swelled by the minute, the air buzzing with conversation and laughter. Calvin and Alissa moved through the gathering with practiced ease, greeting guests with effortless charm.

"Mr. Ramos, right this way! Please, make yourself comfortable."

"Calvin, you're quite the talent! With you at the helm, the Welch family's future looks unstoppable."

"You flatter me, Mr. Ramos. It's my father's leadership that has brought the Welch family to where it is today."

Seth Ramos let out a chuckle, his gaze drifting towards the rival banquet with thinly veiled amusement. "Some people just don't know their limits. Overreaching like that? It never ends well."

"Mr. Ramos, what words of wisdom are you sharing with my son?"

Just then, Mateo made his entrance, commanding the room's attention with effortless authority. Dressed in a strikingly bold suit, Mateo exuded vibrancy, as if deliberately setting himself apart from the more subdued gathering across the way.

"Congratulations, Mr. Welch."

Seth stepped forward with a polished smile. “You only seem to grow younger with time. And with both your sons standing beside you, the Welch family is bound to dominate Cloverhill’s high society.” The remark, though wrapped in praise, carried an unspoken jab at the Payne family—a detail that didn’t escape Mateo. His smirk deepened, thoroughly pleased.

Chapter 975:

“Mr. Ramos, be sure to enjoy yourself tonight. I’ve arranged something special—a live performance by none other than the renowned pianist, Helen Larson.”

“Helen? Truly? She’s second only to Nolan himself! Her standards are incredibly high—she rarely plays at private events. That you managed to book her is no small feat.”

“All credit goes to Calvin,” Mateo declared, clapping his son’s shoulder with pride. “He crossed paths with Helen during his business ventures overseas—luck was on our side.”

The guests applauded Calvin’s accomplishment, though a few couldn’t help but probe further. “What about Nolan? Or even RAIN? Were they not invited?”

A flicker of cold disdain passed through Mateo’s expression as he prepared to respond.

Through Mateo’s gaze, he locked onto the unfortunate man who had dared to question him. The man instantly regretted his words, swallowing hard under the weight of Mateo’s stare.

“We did extend an invitation to Nolan, but he’s currently on a world tour. As for RAIN—well, you all know how elusive she is. She avoids crowds, and we saw no reason to pressure her.”

Calvin’s quick thinking eased the moment, though it was doubtful that the man who had spoken so boldly would escape unscathed.

“Rumor has it that Mr. Vance has written something as a gift for Mr. Welch. Is that true?” someone asked with keen interest.

“That’s correct,” Mateo confirmed, casting a glance toward Alissa. “She was the one who made the request. A truly devoted daughter.”

He deliberately omitted any mention of the jade pendant, while Alissa silently reveled in the praise, relishing the moment when all the credit belonged to her alone.

“Dad, your birthday is an occasion worthy of the finest tribute. As your daughter, how could I settle for anything less?” Alissa beamed.

Her words struck just the right chord, earning her a fresh wave of admiration and further elevating Mateo’s standing among his peers.

“Wait, aren’t they from the Payne family?”

A stir ran through the crowd as heads turned toward the entrance.

Minnie, draped in a striking red evening gown, strode in with effortless grace, accompanied by Tricia, whose sleek black attire added to the air of intrigue. Murmurs rippled through the crowd, a wave of bewilderment spreading as they struggled to grasp the unfolding situation.

For years, the Welch and Payne families had walked a tightrope of civility—polite in public, ruthless in private. Their rivalry was a well-known but unspoken truth. No one in the room was naive enough to think the Payne family had come bearing good wishes for the Welch family.

Instinctively, heads turned to the rival banquet hall, silent questions hanging in the air. Was the Payne family here to lend their support to the rising power in Cloverhill?

A ripple of unease passed through the guests, the implications weighing heavily on their minds. If this upstart force had the audacity to stand against the Welch family, then they weren’t acting alone. The Payne family’s presence all but confirmed it.

And not just anyone—Minnie herself, the future leader of the Payne family, had come to personally extend her congratulations. Her presence was no trivial gesture; it spoke volumes about the weight of this alliance.

A sudden hesitation gripped the lingering guests, their previous certainty now clouded with doubt. Many had strong connections with the Payne family and had previously assumed that the Welch family's banquet wouldn't interfere with the Payne family's affairs this time. As a result, they believed attending the Welch family's event was a safe and inconsequential decision.

Chapter 976:

With Minnie's entrance shifting the scales, attending the Welch family's gathering suddenly felt like stepping onto dangerous ground.

"Minnie, what an honor." Janice rose gracefully to meet Minnie, a poised smile on her lips. "Please, join us."

"Congratulations, Janice," Minnie said with a measured smile, exchanging a glance with Tricia. "I've brought you a gift. I hope you'll like it."

With practiced elegance, Tricia stepped forward, lifting the lid of a polished box for all to see.

A collective gasp swept through the room. It was a piece of jade that Walter treasured. The jade's exquisite translucence, rich green hue, and flawless surface left no doubt—it was a rare treasure. A gift of this caliber was more than a gesture; it was a statement.

"Oh, this is truly generous of you," Janice remarked, her gaze lingering on the jade—a symbol of fortune and status. With a subtle nod, she signaled to Nellie. Nellie stepped forward with steady hands, receiving the jade with the reverence it deserved.

"Come, let's share a drink," Janice said warmly, slipping her arm around Minnie's as they walked in together—a public display of camaraderie that did not go unnoticed.

The sight of their easy familiarity sent a clear message. The guests exchanged uneasy glances. A decision had to be made—and fast.

“Ms. Edwards, congratulations!”

“Congratulations, Ms. Edwards!”

A few elite families of Cloverhill attended Janice’s banquet.

The once serene banquet hall now thrummed with life as Nellie and Sierra eagerly greeted the arriving guests.

With a slight, knowing grin, Janice observed the lively scene unfold, appearing as if she had predicted every moment. She passed a glass of red wine to Minnie.

“Minnie, these guests came because of you.”

Minnie accepted the wine, a smile playing on her lips.

Their combined presence, two striking figures, naturally drew the crowd’s attention.

“Please, Janice, you’re flattering me. This event would’ve shone regardless of my attendance,” Minnie remarked.

The response from Janice was a knowing silence; the women’s mutual understanding went unspoken.

“By the way, where is Aiden?” Minnie asked casually, taking a sip of her wine. “I thought he was usually by your side.”

Janice arched an eyebrow slightly, replying with ease, “Aiden is tied up with some business, but he should arrive shortly.”

“Actually, I’ve always been curious,” Minnie said, looking at Janice with a puzzled expression. “Why did you decide to divorce him? It was obvious he was devoted to you. I wouldn’t have let go of such a man so easily.”

“You’re quite the curious one, aren’t you?” Janice laughed softly.

“Well, who can resist a good piece of gossip? Despite being a Payne, at heart, I’m just like anyone else,” Minnie replied, her tone relatable and down-to-earth. Janice admired Minnie’s knack for reading a room and managing her social connections with such ease, always knowing how to present herself. This quality alone made Janice regard Minnie with respect.

Chapter 977:

“He was somewhat naive, easily swayed by a cunning woman. The divorce served as his lesson,” Janice explained with a touch of melancholy, her tone tinged with gentle criticism, yet her eyes betrayed a softness filled with lingering affection—a warmth that briefly caught Minnie off guard.

“He’s learned much since then and is no longer fooled by such games,” Janice added, smiling warmly at Minnie.

Minnie returned the smile with a reserved expression. “Your relationship with him has certainly been a roller coaster. However, I have faith in his decision-making; he will choose whoever is best for him.” Her comment was tactfully composed.

On the surface, her words seemed to celebrate Janice and Aiden’s connection, yet a deeper analysis hinted that Aiden could potentially select another, opening the door to new opportunities.

“Really?” Janice responded, sipping her wine with a poised smile, her gaze sharp with an assertive gleam. “Yet, I’m convinced he has only one real option.”

Minnie toasted to that, their glasses clinking. On the surface, they seemed amicable, but the air was charged with subtle competition. “I eagerly await his wedding day.”

“As do I.”

Their smiles concealed the strategic exchanges they had just navigated. Sierra, while tending to other guests, kept an eye on them. Despite their amiable expressions, she sensed the tension was thick.

“Why hasn’t Aiden returned yet?” Sierra looked outside, her concern evident. “Leaving Janice alone with the Payne family seems risky.” The party continued to grow as more guests arrived.

Bain and Conley were also engrossed in conversations with attendees. Observing the animated atmosphere around Janice, Mateo’s expression was cold, filled with silent threats.

“These individuals are ungrateful,” Calvin muttered angrily, his hands balled into fists. “We need to address this disrespect after today.”

“There’s no rush,” Mateo replied calmly, his anger controlled. “Many here are aligned with the Payne family. Any rash actions could provoke a backlash. Our own Welch family is not at its strongest internally. Should the Payne family exploit our disunity, it could spell disaster.”

“Dad, are we just going to stand by?” Calvin’s brow furrowed in frustration. “Shouldn’t we at least make them feel some consequence?”

“Absolutely,” Mateo said with a cold smirk. “While they may be allied with the Payne family, remember, our roots in Cloverhill run deep. These families’ fortunes are intertwined with ours. You know what steps to take next, don’t you?”

A sinister smile crept across Calvin’s face. “Understood, Dad. I’ll ensure they comprehend the steep cost of crossing the Welch family.”

“Dad, the gift from Mr. Vance has just arrived,” Alissa announced, gliding forward with a gift box cradled in her hands.

“Congratulations, Mr. Welch! It’s been ages since Mr. Vance has sent out gifts. This is such an honor.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense—let’s see what masterpiece Mr. Vance has penned for you!”

The room buzzed with excitement as the guests clustered around, their eyes alight with curiosity.

Herbert's renown in Cloverhill was the stuff of legend. Though the attendees were no strangers to influence, they lacked the clout to commission a piece from him. This subtle fact cast Mateo's stature in a dazzling light.

Chapter 978:

The calligraphy wasn't merely a birthday trinket; it was a badge of prestige, a feather in his cap.

With the crowd practically holding its breath, Mateo accepted the box from Alissa and unfurled the scroll with deliberate grace.

The inscription revealed itself—bold, flowing characters that danced across the page.

"May you enjoy a lengthy life filled with endless abundance."

The letters were crafted with such vigor and poise that any discerning eye could see they were the fruit of decades spent perfecting the art.

"Vance's handwriting is nothing short of breathtaking—brimming with vigor and vision."

"Today marks Mr. Welch's grand birthday celebration, and to receive such a treasure from Mr. Vance? It's a double stroke of fortune!"

The chorus of accolades washed over Mateo, who basked in the glow of their flattery. This was the sweet reward of power—people bending over backwards to curry favor, their honeyed words flying for the tiniest nod of approval.

"I heard whispers that the rival banquet across also begged Mr. Vance for a piece. Could that be true?"

“Oh, surely that’s just smoke and mirrors. Given Mr. Vance’s lofty standards, he would hardly deign to scribble for some upstart family new to Cloverhill.”

“Quite right! Some folks need to know their place. Putting on airs only invites a fall from grace.”

The guests’ remarks dripped with subtle jabs at Janice, and Mateo couldn’t help but revel in the satisfaction they brought him.

This very day, he schemed to tarnish Janice and Stephen’s good name, turning them into a laughingstock, before crushing their spirits beyond any hope of redemption.

He aimed to drill into these unscrupulous souls a stark truth: defying the Welch dynasty led down a single, inescapable road—utter ruin.

“Distinguished guests,” Mateo proclaimed, his tone rich with magnanimity, “at tonight’s festivities, indulge to your heart’s delight. My son has pulled out all the stops, securing the renowned pianist, Helen Larson, to grace us with her signature melody—a little sparkle to elevate the evening.”

“Helen? My idol! I’ve got to snag a prime perch to savor her brilliance!”

“I once tried to book Helen for my firm’s gala, but her calendar was a fortress. Only Mr. Welch could work such magic!”

A fresh wave of compliments soon cascaded in.

Mateo, riding high on a wave of delight, suddenly paused to ponder: might pitting his lavish banquet against Janice’s fledgling affair risk casting his own celebration as a touch too garish?

The comparison was laughably lopsided—like a sparrow challenging an eagle.

Even if Minnie threw her weight behind them, what could she possibly change? Outsiders stood no chance against the Welch family, whose roots ran deep in Cloverhill's soil. It was akin to showing up to a duel armed with a mere twig.

Just then, a woman in a shimmering golden gown swept into the room. Her cascading chestnut hair and piercing blue eyes radiated refinement, an air of aristocracy swirling about her like a perfumed breeze.

"It is Helen!"

In an instant, every gaze swiveled to Helen.

Chapter 979:

She glided onto the modest stage, offered a graceful bow to the crowd, and settled at the piano.

The first note rang out, crisp and enchanting, weaving a spell that held the audience in rapturous thrall.

Meanwhile, at Janice's gathering, the turnout was respectable but paled beside the grandeur of the Welch family's extravaganza.

With Herbert's gift and Helen's mesmerizing chords lifting the mood to celestial heights, many wavering guests found themselves irresistibly drawn to Mateo's orbit.

"Janice, shall I lend a hand?" Minnie asked, casting a sidelong glance toward the Welch family banquet.

Janice, idly swirling her wine glass, met the question with a cool, unruffled gaze, as if the rival banquet's clamor were a distant murmur. "Do I strike you as someone in need of rescue?"

Minnie arched a brow. Janice's poise remained unshaken, her demeanor as steady as a lighthouse in a storm. Despite the Welch family's uproar, she savored her wine with the leisurely grace of someone entirely at ease.

Minnie couldn't help but wonder—what ace did Janice hold up her sleeve to face such taunts with serene indifference?

"Prince Lancelot has arrived!"

A booming proclamation sliced through the air, startling the room into a hushed pause.

Janice's lips curved into a knowing smile as she rose with languid confidence. "The curtain is about to rise."

Prince Lancelot? Could it truly be Prince Lancelot of the Aerith royal lineage?

Minnie shot to her feet, her gaze snapping toward the entrance. There, a dashing figure strode in—blond hair glinting like sunlight, blue eyes sparkling with quiet command—his tailored tailcoat accentuating an air of effortless poise. Flanking him were a cadre of towering bodyguards, their imposing presence adding a touch of gravitas to his arrival.

One glance was enough for Minnie to confirm it; the man was none other than Prince Lancelot.

"Janice, it's been far too long." Lancelot's face lit up the moment he spotted Janice. With open arms, he moved in for a warm embrace.

But Janice didn't return the gesture. Instead, she extended a hand, offering only a handshake.

Lancelot's smile faltered for a split second before he sighed, a touch deflated.

"Janice, it's only been a month. Why the cold shoulder?"

"Cut it out, Lancelot." Janice rolled her eyes, subtly nodding toward Braylen, who lingered in the shadows, watching like a hawk. "Are you in the mood for another beating?"

Lancelot's gaze flickered to Braylen, whose eyes bore into him with a fierce scowl. The sight stirred memories of Aiden and a past skirmish where he had taken a sound drubbing. Hastily tucking his arms back, he opted for decorum, extending a courteous handshake to Janice instead.

"Well, if it weren't for some pesky family matters dragging me back, he wouldn't have had the chance."

"Enough chit-chat. Please, take your seat," Janice said, brushing past him. By now, their exchange had turned a few heads, especially among the Welch family. Murmurs spread like wildfire through the crowd.

Chapter 980:

"Is that Prince Lancelot? No way!"

"How on earth did a newcomer like her manage to get chummy with him?"

"More than just friendly! The way Prince Lancelot is acting, he might even be one of her suitors."

A hum of awe rippled through the crowd, electrifying the air. Lancelot's arrival tossed a spark into the simmering feud between the two banquets, fanning the flames of competition to a roaring blaze.

For years, the Welch family had been itching to expand their reach overseas, only to hit wall after wall. The only ones who had managed even a sliver of success were Calvin and Jensen—two exiles whose achievements barely made a dent in the family's ambitions.

The Welches had tried, time and again, to establish a connection with Prince Lancelot, hoping his influence could be their golden ticket. But despite all their efforts, the prince had remained out of reach. A humbling failure for the mighty Welch family.

They ruled Cloverhill with an iron grip, yet beyond their borders, they were little more than an afterthought.

And now? Janice—the very woman they had dismissed and looked down upon—had not only crossed paths with Lancelot but had seemingly earned his favor. It was a slap in the face, plain and simple.

“The envoys from Cherriton have arrived!” Another announcement rang through the hall.

Heads snapped towards the entrance as a group dressed in the distinct, regal garb of Cherriton strode in, exuding an air of authority and importance.

“Cherriton’s envoys? Don’t tell me they’re here for Janice too?”

“First, Prince Lancelot, now Cherriton’s envoys? Who is Janice, really?”

“Has anyone else noticed? Janice still hasn’t officially declared her standing in Cloverhill.”

A ripple of uncertainty spread through the crowd. It was becoming clear—Janice wasn’t just here to make a name for herself. She was playing a much bigger game.

With Lancelot and Cherriton’s envoys in Janice’s corner, the balance of power had shifted. Those who once backed the Welch family fell silent.

All eyes were on Janice, waiting to see what other cards she might have up her sleeve. With both Lancelot and the envoys from Cherriton by her side, she already had enough leverage to stand toe-to-toe with the powerful Welch family.

The envoys represented none other than the emperor of Cherriton himself. Anyone acknowledged by the emperor carried undeniable influence, and that fact was not lost on the gathered guests.

“We hope we’re not too late,” the envoys greeted Janice respectfully. “His Majesty heard of your banquet and insisted I bring gifts on his behalf to extend his congratulations.”

“Thank you.” Janice returned his smile, her expression poised and unreadable, a picture of effortless composure. The sheer grace with which she handled the moment left the crowd in quiet awe.

It was clear the envoys weren’t here to throw their weight around—they were here to curry favor.

“Lancelot,” Janice said smoothly, “why don’t you sit with them?”

“No way! I don’t want to sit with these guys,” Lancelot scoffed, his face twisted in disdain. But under Janice’s sharp gaze, he had no choice but to swallow his pride and comply!