

War Song 141

Chapter 141

Lulu was the happiest and the most tearful.

She practically flew as she chased after the king's carriage, crying out, "My lady! My lady...!"

Carissa glanced at her helplessly. Lulu was laughing and crying at the same time, showing no restraint at all.

Sitting beside Carissa, Rafael glanced at Lulu and said thoughtfully, "Her name is Lulu, isn't it?"

"You still remember her, Your Highness?" Carissa asked in surprise.

"Yes," Rafael replied with a slight smile. "I remember one year when I went to the Pathfinders Guild, I saw that girl picking apples from a tree. When she saw your senior and I, she was so frightened she fell off the tree."

Carissa was even more surprised, "You've been to the Pathfinders Guild before?"

"Yes. Before I was deployed to the Southern Frontier battlefield, I used to go to the guild once a year," he said softly..

The June sunlight shone brightly in his eyes, but his gaze quickly dimmed as he continued, "I haven't been there since."

"I didn't know about that. I've never seen you there," Carissa said, astonished. "Why did you visit the Pathfinders Guild every year?"

"To travel and also to seek guidance on martial arts from your master and uncle. It's no wonder you never saw me. I was always in and out quickly, and I stayed at Treasure Emporium, which you usually avoided."

Carissa gasped.

He even knew that she avoided Treasure Emporium?! It seemed her master and uncle must have frequently talked about her

embarrassing moments in front of the prince!

Treasure Emporium was her uncle's residence, which had secret rooms for confinement. Carissa was often locked in those rooms whenever she made a mistake, so she avoided that place as much as possible.

Moreover, at the Pathfinders Guild, she feared nothing and no one but her uncle. He had a perpetually stern face and was the enforcer of the guild's punishments. Everyone feared him-even her master, who was her uncle's senior, showed him some respect.

Carissa was inwardly astonished. So, Rafael used to visit the Pathfinders Guild every year. That meant they had known each other since childhood-so why didn't he ever seek her out to catch up? After the procession, the Protocol Department's vice minister took them into the palace for the celebration feast. However, not everyone was invited. Barrett was on the guest list, but Aurora was

not.

In the past, Aurora would have certainly asked the Protocol

Department's vice minister about it. But now, with her spirit broken, she turned and left without a word after seeing that her name was not on the list.

Inside the palace, the royal family members as well as civil and military officials were in attendance. The empress dowager, Victoria, even sent over fine wine and ordered for Carissa to visit her In Serenity Palace after the celebration feast.

Since her marriage to Barrett, Carissa had not visited Victoria in the palace.

Firstly, she was occupied with the household and taking care of her

ailing mother-in-law.

Secondly, she was aware of her in-laws' motivations. If they learned that Victoria favored her, they might entertain different thoughts, and she preferred to avoid stirring up trouble.

The celebration feast was rather dull, filled with empty flattery.

The most praise was directed towards Rafael, followed by the seasoned generals who had spent many years on the Southern Frontier battlefield. Surprisingly, even a new general like Carissa received praise for her courage and resemblance to her father.

There were some awkward moments too.

Troy, who was slightly tipsy after having a few drinks, jokingly asked Barrett if he regretted his marriage to Aurora.

Barrett glanced at Carissa, his eyes dim and hesitant. He wanted to speak but kept pausing. He couldn't admit regret, because he had requested a marriage edict from the king. So, he dared not voice his thoughts. However, his expression spoke volumes.

Did he really regret it?

The atmosphere turned uncomfortable. Though Carissa maintained a calm exterior, she felt that Troy was indeed drunk. Such questions were inappropriate in any setting, especially this one.

Rafael stepped in to defuse the situation, saying, "I must thank the Ministry of Defense for promptly sending winter clothing. Otherwise, the campaign would have been much more difficult. Here's to you, Minister Llyod."

Rafael raised his glass and cast a cold glance at Davis, the Minister of Defense.

Looking visibly uncomfortable, Davis stood up to respond, "Your

Highness, it is all thanks to your valor that the Southern Frontier was

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reclaimed. Supplying military resources is the Ministry of Defense's duty and does not warrant your gratitude."

Troy's behavior, influenced by his drunken state, had been inappropriate. It looked like Davis would have to scold him. tomorrow.

Meanwhile, at Valor Estate, Rebecca had just heard the rumors circulating outside when someone reported that Aurora had

returned. But instead of coming to pay her respects to her mother-in-law, Aurora went straight to her quarters.

Rebecca was so enraged that she clutched her chest. "Bring her to

me at once!"

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Aurora returned to the capital in a state of dejection.

Barrett kept his distance from her, even though he was injured and could have used her support. He was adamant about avoiding any physical contact with her. Even the others who had been captured with her glared at her with hatred.

They knew why they had been castrated-it was because in Fawnrun City, Aurora had tortured that young general and ordered his castration, humiliating him.

Now, the eighteen soldiers who were captured had been treated the same way by the Westhaven soldiers, and they couldn't voice their suffering or express their grievances. Their hatred for Aurora ran deep. Throughout the journey, they avoided her as much as possible. They didn't want to speak to her, and even when they saw her, they kept

their distance.

Aurora remembered her earlier enthusiasm, believing she would achieve great things in this war. Instead, she had returned with half her face disfigured and despised by everyone. She could barely tolerate these things, but what she found most unbearable was seeing how the soldiers idolized Carissa, how the generals protected her, and how even Rafael praised her.

Even after returning to the capital, Carissa was able to ride in the king's carriage to receive the citizens' congratulations, and she was also able to attend the victory feast. Meanwhile, Aurora had to slink back to her own residence in disgrace.

Her mood was at rock bottom.

Back at Valor Estate, she refused to see anyone. She covered her face and went straight to her room, locking the door behind her. She

sat in front of a bronze mirror, scrutinizing her redeka

Her appearance had never held a candle to Carissa's, and now, with half her face disfigured and the remaining skin dark and rough, she looked like a village woman. Without her former confidence, Aurora felt as though she was no different from a peasant woman. #

As her thoughts swirled aimlessly, she reminded herself that she was married and that Barrett cared for her, even if he was struggling to come to terms with her appearance. He might have thought she had been defiled, but she was innocent.

Her burns had been inflicted by Barrett himself, proving that he did not despise her looks. After all, if he valued appearances, he would have seen that Carissa was far more beautiful and would have had no reason to marry Aurora.

Their feelings for each other were genuine. They deeply loved one another, having declared their intentions and surrendering

everything to each other at Victory Pass.

Their bond was unbreakable. Once they got through this trial, they would live happier lives than Carissa. As long as Carissa's life was worse than hers, Aurora could find some balance within herself. True, Carissa was now a highly sought-after general, with the added prestige of her family. But in the end, she was still second-hand goods. Noble families and people of high moral character wouldn't marry her; only those desperate for a title would come courting.

But given Carissa's arrogance, she wouldn't like any of those suitors either. It seemed she was destined for a life of solitude.

Thinking this, Aurora felt a bit more at ease.

A knock sounded at the door. "Madam Aurora, Madam Rebecca requests your presence."

Aurora frowned, her mood souring at the thought of the ailing old

woman. She hastily covered her face with a piece of brocade fabric and went to Rebecca's residence. Inside, her father in law, Jonathan, was also present. She gave a respectful curtsy. Jonathan nodded slightly. "It's good that you've returned safely."

Jonathan was known for his indecision and lack of ambition, which had kept him from securing a prominent official position.

But when Rebecca heard his words, she frowned. "What do you mean by that? She didn't achieve anything, nor did Barrett. Wasn't it all for nothing? And why are you covering your face, Aurora?" Aurora felt a pang of frustration. When she first married into the family, Rebecca had been so warm and loving. Now, her tone was sharp and disdainful, much like how she spoke to Amelia. "My face is still healing from my injuries," Aurora replied coolly.

Rebecca slammed her hand on the edge of the bed. "Is it just healing wounds, or did the people of Westhaven torture you? Tell me, were you defiled by the Westhaven soldiers?!"

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Aurora froze for a moment, then snapped, "Who said that? Who said I was defiled?"

"Just answer the question," Rebecca said, her face turning dark with anger. "Word has already spread all over town. Who needs to ask? Everyone is talking about it!"

Aurora hadn't expected news of the Southern Frontier events to reach the capital. Her mind went blank.

She raised her voice defensively, "I wasn't defiled. Yes, I was captured, but I only endured physical suffering. My purity remains intact."

Jonathan interjected, "Then, you should find someone to vouch for you. Weren't there others with you when you were captured? They can testify for you."

Aurora's frustration grew as she thought about her cousin and the other soldiers. Barrett had questioned them, but they all claimed ignorance. They had all been locked up together in the wooden hut, so how could they not know?

Their claims of ignorance led Barrett and everyone else to believe that Aurora had been defiled.

Unable to find anyone to prove her innocence, she coldly replied to her father-in-law, "There's no need to go out of one's way to prove one's innocence to others. People can say whatever they want. I don't care."

"You may not care, but we do," Rebecca retorted, her face flushed with indignation. "We're the ones who face scorn and ridicule every day. We've become a laughingstock in the capital. We allowed you to marry into our family in hopes of you bringing honor to us, not disgrace."

Rebecca was seething with regret, feeling as if she were in turmoil. With Aurora's great achievements at Victory Pass, Rebecca had been expecting a bright future. Instead, the disaster at the Southern Frontier had dragged the Warren family into the abyss.

Rebecca still had her young son and daughter to marry off. Bryan and Serena were of marriageable age, but their mother had been delaying making arrangements for their respective marriages, hoping to find more prestigious matches after Barrett and Aurora gained achievements at the Southern Frontier.

Now, with this scandal, who would want to align with the Warren family?

Furthermore, Barrett and Aurora's names weren't even on the list of military achievements!

Aurora had already endured countless whispers on the battlefield. Coming home to face criticism from her mother-in-law and father-in-law was the last straw. Her pent-up anger erupted.

"When I married into the family, you were overjoyed and eager to get rid of Carissa. Now, I've faced defeat and capture at the Southern Frontier. Do you think I wanted this? You don't care about

the suffering I endured or the injuries I sustained. You're only focusing on blaming me. Even when I say I haven't been defiled, you don't believe me. Is this what family is like? If I had known you were so hypocritical, I wouldn't have entered your home no matter what!"

Having said that, Aurora stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

Rebecca clutched her chest, stunned by her daughter-in-law's audacity. "She... she still thinks she's in the right?!"

Jonathan sighed. "It's done now. Let's wait until Barrett returns. Although his name isn't on the list of achievements, he was still invited to the palace for the celebration. That suggests he must

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To be honest, she's not even worth a finger compared to Carissa"

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Jonathan gave his wife a look "Weet youther who had issues with Caness back then? I thought Garises was quite good. At least duning her year here, she served you aligently. She also spent her money without hesitation, and bought a lot of jewelry and clothing for you and Serena Those brocade garments you have-she's the one who got them for your

Rebecce shot him a cold glance. Why didn't you say anything back then? What good does it do to bring it up now

Jonathan sat down and patted her back gently. "You're being silly. The king's edict was for Aurore to be Barrett's secondary wife, not the principal one. Although Barrett and Carissa are divorced, she must still have feelings for him.

"Otherwise, why would she have married him in the first place?"

Besides, Carson's late mother chose Barrett, and Carissa was very respectful towards her mother's wishes. If we could bring up her mother's memory and persuade her, there's a chance she might reconcile with Barrett.

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After hearing Jonathan's words, Rebecca began to seriously consider the possibility.

Carissa was now the esteemed young lady of a duke's family. If Barrett married her, he would immediately inherit a title. Rebecca had considered this before, but at the time, she believed Aurora and Barrett could forge a successful career together.

In that case, why bother letting her son be the subject of public gossip? But what was the difference between that and what they were facing now?

With the scandal surrounding Aurora, there was no shortage of gossip. A defiled woman tarnished the family name and jeopardized the marriage prospects of the younger relatives. If Barrett inherited a title, at least the marriages of Bryan and Serena could be given some consideration due to the prestige of the duke's household.

Moreover, if Carissa returned, the vast wealth she brought with her would also return. The Warren family had been impoverished lately; they couldn't even afford medicine. Plus, Carissa was known for her devoted and respectful nature. She would undoubtedly handle household matters meticulously, sparing Rebecca the trouble of managing everything herself.

Besides, Carissa had never mentioned how Victoria, the empress dowager, held her in high regard. Had Rebecca known, perhaps Jonathan and Benjamin could have secured better positions instead of being relegated to minor official's roles. In the capital, such positions were scorned.

Rebecca mulled over the advantages she could gain from Carissa's return but wasn't entirely optimistic.

"The problem is, after everything that happened, Carissa might not

be willing to return the mused

"But why wouldn't she? She's dutiful, and she definitely has feelings for Barrett Jonathan replied

Rebecca nodded slightly. "That makes sense, but I'm worried that because she's achieved success now, she might become aloof and be unwilling to care for the household or me as she did before." "You'd be her mother-in-law. For the sake of being dutiful, she should care for you. Even if she's unwilling to do it personally, she'll return with money and staff. Must she personally attend to you?" asked Jonathan.

Rebecca replied, "That's true, but a daughter-in-law should serve her in-laws. It's something she's always done."

"Aurora didn't serve you when she came in, and you didn't criticize her."

Pondering this, Rebecca thought about Carissa's past obedience and demeanor compared to Aurora's arrogance. For some reason, she felt that Carissa should serve her, but it didn't matter as much if Aurora didn't.

Rebecca asserted dismissively. "The two are different in

temperament. Besides, when Carissa first married into our family, I didn't set any strict rules for her or make things difficult. If she's willing to return this time, I'll certainly treat her even better.

"Besides, who could she find that's better than Barrett? Even if someone has a prominent family background and military achievements, a woman who's served as a general is bound to be coarse and unrefined. The dignity she once had is long gone. No noble family would want someone like that. Finding someone better than Barrett would be nearly impossible."

Jonathan reflected on Rebecca and Carissa's past interactions.

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which had been warm and harmonious. He agreed that his wife had a point.

Having been divorced, Carissa would no longer be acceptable to high-ranking noble families and would only be suited to lower-tier individuals. Such opportunists couldn't compare to Barrett.

"But the problem is, who should we ask to help?" Jonathan asked. Rebecca considered for a moment, then said, "Perhaps we should approach Charlotte. She has a good relationship with Carissa. When Amelia went to Northwatch Estate to see Carissa, she didn't get a response. It was only when Charlotte went that the door was opened."

Jonathan shook his head. "She's an outsider, and might not agree to help. I think it would be more sincere if you, the matriarch of our family, visited Northwatch Estate yourself. If Carissa refuses to welcome you, it will only damage her reputation further."

Rebecca frowned. "Why should I seek her out? Wouldn't that make us look weak?"

"We're already in a weak position. Do you think Carissa is naive?"

Despite her husband's reasoning, Rebecca was still very reluctant. Having the mother-in-law go personally to plead with her former daughter-in-law seemed to diminish the Warren family's standing even more!

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Moreover, if Carissa agreed to come back, that would be fine. But if she refused, it would be quite embarrassing!

After considering, Rebecca decided, "Let's send Charlotte first. If she refuses, we'll think of another way."

Rebecca was unwilling to go herself. If Carissa were to truly reconcile with Barrett, Rebecca wouldn't be able to maintain her position as a strict mother-in-law. The Warren family already had enough trouble with Aurora—they couldn't afford to have another difficult situation.

While Rebecca was mulling over her predicament, Carissa had already gone to Serenity Palace to meet Victoria.

The empress dowager was in her early fifties, but she had taken very good care of herself. Despite a few wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, she appeared youthful. Her black hair was speckled with a few strands of white, but they were not very noticeable.

She exuded an air of grandeur and elegance, and her demeanor became even more gentle and approachable when she looked at Carissa.

"Oh, child. You ran off to the battlefield without a word. If something had happened to you, how would I explain it to your mother when I see her again?"

Victoria's eyes showed a hint of redness, revealing her concern and affection for Carissa. Perhaps looking at Carissa reminded her of Melanie, which made her heart ache a bit more.

"I'm sorry to have worried you, Your Majesty. It was my fault," Carissa said, accepting the blame obediently.

"You may rise. Come closer so I can take a good look at you,"

Victoria chided with a tender glance

Carissa stood and moved in front of the empress dowager. As she was about to kneel, Victoria stopped her.

"Come sit beside me.

Carissa sat down gracefully with a proper smile on her face, her demeanor that of a refined young lady.

Victoria took Carissa's hand and studied her face. "Oh, you've turned into a monkey again. Whenever you returned from Meadow Ridge, you always had a mischievous demeanor and a layer of dirt on you, like a monkey. You're not mischievous anymore, just covered in dirt and dust."

Victoria pinched Carissa's cheek lightly. "During the year you stayed in the capital, your skin was so well-hydrated that it could practically produce water. Now, with just this pinch, my hand is covered in dust." Carissa laughed awkwardly. "I didn't have a chance to bathe or change clothes since I came straight to the palace after my journey to the capital. I'm still quite smelly. I'll sit a little farther away so you won't smell it, Your Majesty."

"It's fine," Victoria said kindly. "I spend all my time in this palace, surrounded by scented candles. I wouldn't mind a whiff of your sweat for a change."

Victoria managed to distance herself from the memories of Melanie and spoke to Carissa with the authority of the empress dowager.

"You've returned from the battlefield as a hero. I've heard Salvador speak of your deeds for the third time now, and I am very pleased with your accomplishments. You've brought honor to women like us. "Aurora also earned my praise, but she pales in comparison to you!

know a little about her situation and won't comment further let's just say I was blind at the time,"

Victoria looked a bit annoyed when she talked about Aurora.

However, since she had previously praised her and considering the past conflicts between Aurora and Carissa, Victoria didn't want to say much

"You're too kind, Your Majesty. The achievements are not mine alone, they are due to the marshal's strategic brilliance. I merely shared in the glory. Compared to those who have fought on the battlefield for years, my contributions are truly insignificant," Carissa responded humbly.

"It's always difficult, but even more so for women," Victoria said, her eyes filled with compassion as she looked at Carissa. "Now that the war has ended, what are your plans? If you wish, I could help arrange a marriage for you."

Carissa quickly replied, "I am grateful for your kindness, Your

Majesty. But what I want most right now is to return home, take a good bath, and have a proper rest. I'm not thinking about marriage for now."

Victoria sighed. "I understand that a woman's path is not limited to marriage. Your mother once told me she hoped you would marry and have children.

"Personally, I would prefer to see you become a renowned

Starhaven general. However, I can't let your mother be unable to rest in peace in the afterlife because she fears for you. She... she was Truly terrified of the battlefield. It took almost everything from her."

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Victoria's voice was choked with emotion.

When Carissa was very young, she often accompanied Melanie to the palace. At that time, Victoria was still the queen consort.

Victoria and Melanie's most frequent topic of conversation was that women should strive for themselves, and not spend their entire lives being subservient to men. They should have their own thoughts and live their lives to the fullest.

Whenever this topic came up, Victoria would sigh, saying that she was trapped within the high walls of the harem. Though it appeared she lived a life of luxury and wealth, it was also a life without freedom.

Melanie would agree, saying that women didn't necessarily have to marry and bear children; they could also venture into the world and carve out their own path.

That was why, when Carissa was seven, she was allowed to leave home and join the Pathfinders Guild to learn martial arts. With the skills to defend herself, she could explore the world without fearing for her safety.

In an ordinary family, who would be willing to send their precious daughter to learn martial arts?

However, Melanie was different. She even told Hector that perhaps one day, their daughter might stand on the battlefield.

But later, after the deaths of Hector and his sons in battle, Melanie's fear of the battlefield grew to an extreme. She began to think that marrying and having children wasn't such a bad thing. At least it ensured safety and a stable life, which was better than anything else.

Carissa didn't know how to respond to Victoria's words. So, she

remained silent.

During her time at the Pathfinders Guild, she was lively and enthusiastic. She caused a ruckus every day like a mischievous monkey, believing that the future held endless possibilities. After the series of tragedies at home, her heart seemed to have died. Every day, she lived according to the world's expectations for

women.

After a long pause, Carissa said quietly, "Let's talk about this some other time."

Victoria looked at her gently. "Yes, we'll talk another time. Your

should go now. Go and wash up. The stench on you is making my eyes sting a little."

Victoria's eyes were truly red. However, she had always been resolute and didn't easily shed tears.

Even though she wanted to say more to Carissa, the mention of the Sinclair family brought a particular sorrow to her heart. Once some pains rose to the surface, they were hard to suppress.

Carissa took her leave.

After the celebration feast ended, Salvador called Rafael to his study for a private conversation.

Rafael had already submitted a report on the Southern Frontier battles, but it was a lengthy war over more than twenty cities. spanning several years. The comprehensive details couldn't be explained in a single report.

Salvador wasn't only interested in the outcome; he also wanted to know which military officers could be entrusted with significant responsibilities. Most importantly, he needed clarity on the matters. concerning Aurora and Westhaven.

He had already investigated some details, but the matter was so shocking that he needed to confirm it from multiple sources.

Rafael, naturally, didn't hide anything and shared all he knew, which matched Salvador's investigation.

Salvador was furious. He slammed the report so hard on the desk that it wobbled dangerously.

"So, I can't punish Aurora for this?" he seetred.

Rafael replied, "Westhaven has already avenged themselves, but they are unwilling to make it public. Since that's the case, how can we rush to acknowledge it? Liam probably thought Aurora would succumb to the rumors and take her own life, but he didn't anticipate that she would never consider suicide."

"Did Liam not mention the destruction of the villages, either? Even on the battlefield against Westhaven, he didn't say a word?"

Rafael shook his head.

"Not a word, but everyone was aware of it. Either way, their crown prince is dead, and their king is gravely ill. On top of that, the crown prince had no heirs. The succession struggle is already causing them enough distress. They value the royal family's reputation above all, and to this day, they haven't publicly announced the crown. prince's death. They are likely still crafting a narrative on how to inform the Westhaven citizens of their crown prince's demise."

Salvador sighed deeply, his expression inscrutable.

"If it becomes public, Westhaven would be pressed to send their forces to Victory Pass. At that point, with their army pressing in, we would be spread too thin. We have General Sullivan at Victory Pass, but he still hasn't recovered. Most of our forces have been deployed to the Southern Frontier. Westhaven seizing this opportunity to

launch a massive invasion of Victory Pass would be their best move. If I were in their shoes, I would do that."

Rafael responded, "If they invade Victory Pass under the pretext of avenging their crown prince and the massacred villagers, the Westhaven soldiers might massacre the civilians of Victory Pass in return.

"The Southern Frontier battlefield was different. Until we reclaimed the Southern Frontier, it didn't belong to us. Even after reclaiming it, the region had endured years of warfare.

"Till the end, Liam was reluctant to harm civilians, adhering to his principle of sparing non-combatants. He is a true warrior."

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Liam was indeed admirable. But if Westhaven's second prince seized the throne and discovered the truth behind the crown prince's death, he might not hesitate to send troops to Victory Pass again. The man was a warmonger, and Liam couldn't restrain him.

After discussing these frustrating matters, the conversation shifted to Carissa and her friends. Salvador was quite pleased, and praised Carissa highly.

Looking at Rafael, Salvador said, "I have already spoken with the queen about bringing Carissa into the palace as a concubine."

Rafael was still worried about the succession struggle in Westhaven, so he nodded absentmindedly. "Good... Wait, what?"

He sprang to his feet, instantly sober despite all the alcohol he had consumed. His eyes widened in shock as he stared at Salvador. "Salvador, did you say you want Carissa to enter the palace as a concubine?"

"Why are you so agitated?" Salvador gave him a sideways glance. She has now achieved military merit and is the legitimate daughter of the Duke of Northwatch. She manages the entire duke's estate. In time, her father's generals will obey her commands. Women can sometimes be easily swayed. If someone tries to manipulate her, she might act in ways that hurt her father's reputation for loyalty and integrity. Bringing her into the palace is the best option."

Rafael was visibly agitated, and his voice shook as he said, "I never expected you to be so worried about that, Salvador. This is her first time on the battlefield. For the next two or three years, there will be no wars in the kingdom. Why are you so apprehensive?"

"Preparing for a rainy day is always better than mending the fold after the sheep are lost."

Salvador's expression darkened as he looked at Rafael.

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"Also, you're overreacting. Though she is under your command, her marriage is not for you to decide. If I want to take a concubine, you have no right to oppose it."

Rafael's handsome face clouded with anger. "Have you asked her for her opinion? Does she want to enter the palace? Can a woman like her be confined in the harem? If you truly fear her amassing power, then edict a marriage for her!"

He paced anxiously.

"Besides, her amassing power is an unfounded concern. Why go to such lengths?"

"A marriage edict? To whom? She wouldn't look favorably upon an ordinary family, and if she were to marry into a prominent family, wouldn't that create another powerful alliance? I have only just ascended the throne. I can't afford to take such risks," Salvador said.

"But there are no outstanding young generals in the army. If you bring her into the palace, wouldn't that be a waste of her talents?" Rafael argued.

"If there is a war, she can still lead troops into battle. I'm only taking her as a concubine. I never said I wouldn't send her to the battlefield if needed," Salvador said.

Rafael stared at him in disbelief, unable to comprehend his brother's absurd decision.

"She won't agree to this." Rafael stood resolutely before Salvador. And I also believe it's inappropriate."

"What is inappropriate? Look around the capital-who is worthy of her?" Salvador countered.

"There are certainly suitable candidates, but she just recently ended her marriage. There's no need to rush into arranging another one for her."

Salvador sneered. "You contradict yourself. Just now, you

suggested that I arrange a marriage for her. Yet now, you say there's no rush?"

Salvador gestured for him to sit.

"I know you value talent, but the kingdom is currently at peace. I trust you can cultivate excellent generals during this time. As for whether Carissa is willing, once the edict is issued, she will have no choice but to enter the palace, regardless of her personal wishes." "Isn't that forcing her into a difficult situation?" Rafael was agitated. I think you should ask Carissa first."

Salvador stared at him for a long time. "Rafael, don't tell me you've fallen for her? Do you plan to marry her instead?"

"I..." Rafael hesitated, remembering the earlier accusation of amassing power. If he married Carissa, Salvador's suspicion toward him would only deepen.

"If you have no such intentions, then you have no grounds for opposition. She is one of your subordinates, so go ask her. But tell her this: it is already decided, and I will issue the edict soon."

Rafael was exasperated, a bitter smile forming on his lips. "Mother won't agree, will she? She dotes on Carissa. She would never consent to her becoming a concubine."

Looking determined, Salvador replied, "I will convince Mother. That's not for you to worry about. Tomorrow, go to Northwatch Estate and ask her."

He fixed his gaze on Rafael and said firmly "De

edict."

Rafael's mind was in turmoil. Staring at his brother for what felt like an eternity, he realized that no matter his achievements, they were nothing against a single royal edict

Amidst the myriad of thoughts swirling in Rafael's mind, one thing stood out under no circumstances could he allow Salvador to take

Carissa into the harem as a concubine.

Even if she wasn't riding on the battlefield, a woman like Carissa shouldn't be confined within the deep palace walls.

"Salvador, she can't enter the palace. I won't allow it! She is under my command; you cannot just take her away without even asking her opinion," Rafael argued.

"That's not a valid reason," Salvador countered.

"She has just come out of such a miserable marriage. At the very least, give her time to recover and rebuild her confidence in men. We should care for her feelings, not forcibly take her..."

Salvador looked at Rafael, his gaze hardening. "Do you fight wars like this? Letting the enemy recover? Caring for the enemy's feelings?"

Rafael didn't back down. "She's not the enemy."

His battlefield ferocity seemed to have returned as he stood before Salvador. He made no secret of his desire to protect Carissa.

"Besides, her family was tragically wiped out, and she has now made meritorious contributions to the country. Can you really bear to force her into the harem just because of some ridiculous concerns?" Salvador stared back. After a long silence, he sighed. "To be honest, with you, it's not really about fearing her amassing power. That's just an excuse. I genuinely like her and admire her. I want her as my concubine to keep her by my side."

"Your harem isn't lacking in beauties or those you admire. To imprison her for life just because of your affection is unfair to her."

Salvador slammed his hand on the desk. "Rafael, whom I choose as my concubine is none of your business! Don't think you can interfere in my harem affairs just because you've earned some

military merit." "I will interfere, and I will do so to the end!" Rafael houted back, his handsome face flushed with anger.

Salvador coldly declared, "I will issue the edict tomorrow!"

Rafael returned his glare. "Then I will stay in the palace. I won't leave. I'll beat up whoever dares to write that edict!"

Salvador glared back. "I'll write it myself! Dare you to hit even me?"

Rafael raised his voice. "Derek! Send someone to my residence and tell Andy to pack some clothes. I'll be staying here for the next few days. I'll break Salvador's pen if he tries to write the concubine edict!" Salvador looked at him in exasperation. "Aren't you just being childish?"

*Carissa is under my command. If I don't protect her, who will?" Rafael asserted.

"How do you know she doesn't want to enter the palace?" Salvador retorted.

"And how do you know she does?"

The two brothers were locked in a fierce standoff.

Outside, Derek seemed accustomed to these disputes. He merely smiled and gestured for others to keep their distance.

In the end, Salvador relented. "Fine, go back to your residence. Your stench is making me sick. I promise to have the queen ask Carissa +15 BONUS

first. If she's unwilling, I won't force her. But if she agrees and you try to interfere, I'll have you sent to guard the Southern Frontier." Rafael finally sank into a chair, and stretched out his legs. "I'm not going back tonight. I'll stay here and drink myself to sleep."

His cheeks were flushed, and the combined effects of anger and alcohol made him dizzy.

Salvador was exasperated, but he couldn't do anything about it. He called for someone to take Rafael to Helen Lancaster's palace.

Helen was Rafael's mother, and Victoria's sister. Helen had planned to move to Rafael's residence after the birth of the princess, by which time Rafael's marriage should also have been arranged.

After Rafael was taken away, Salvador shook his head with a bitter smile. That brother of his was invincible on the battlefield, but utterly hopeless when it came to matters of the heart. He certainly didn't behave like a valiant general in these situations.

"Clean this place up and burn some scented candles. That smelly rascal really stinks," Salvador instructed Derek.

Once Derek had summoned people to clean the room, he asked, "Will you be visiting the queen tonight, Your Majesty?"

"I'll rest for a while first. Then I'll go to the royal chapel. I need to share this good news with our ancestors."

Salvador sat on his throne with his eyes closed. Despite his

composed demeanor, his heart was still surging with excitement.

The Southern Frontier had finally been reclaimed!

Chapter 149

After drinking some water and waiting for the alcohol to wear off, Derek accompanied Salvador to the royal chapel.

Derek asked cautiously, "Your Majesty, you don't really intend to take Lady Sinclair as a concubine, do you?"

Salvador gave him a sidelong glance. "Do you think I would actually steal a woman from my own brother? Even if I did have such thoughts, my mother wouldn't agree. She and Melanie were as close as sisters. How could she allow Carissa to become a concubine?"

Derek chuckled. "I knew it. You were just trying to push them a little, Your Majesty. How could you bear to confine Lady Sinclair within the palace walls?"

As he spoke, he stole a glance at Salvador. Though Derek was smiling, there was a hint of worry in his expression. Salvador sighed.

"When Hector died in battle, Rafael went to Northwatch Estate before going to the Southern Frontier battlefield as ordered. He asked Melanie to wait for him, promising to propose to Carissa once he reclaimed the Souther Frontier. But Melanie married Carissa to Barrett. I couldn't bear to tell him at first, fearing it would distract him on the battlefield. Even then, Andy sent him a letter. He must have been devastated."

Salvador rubbed his forehead, and paused.

"Who could have predicted that things would turn out this way? Barrett didn't truly care for her. No sooner had he returned with military merits that he asked me for a marriage edict.

"Surprisingly, Carissa showed no attachment to him. She immediately came to the palace to request a divorce edict. Initially, I didn't believe her, thinking it was just impulsive. What wife doesn't love her husband? But I underestimated Carissa. I started to think maybe Rafael still had a chance with her, but I was worried he might mind that she had been married."

Derek quickly interjected, "Your Majesty, by probing just now, you confirmed that the prince still has feelings for Lady Sinclair."

Salvador snorted. "What good does that do? We argued so fiercely, and he kept repeating that Carissa was under his command, without daring to admit he still loved her. I must push him a bit further. Tomorrow, I'll have the queen summon Carissa to the palace."

Derek smiled. "Your Majesty, he wouldn't dare to admit his feelings when you said you wanted to take Lady Sinclair as a concubine. That would be openly challenging you. He couldn't commit such insubordination."

"Insubordination? When he glared at me, he looked like he wanted to punch me." Salvador stopped, and swayed a little. "Help me steady myself. Arguing with him has made me dizzy. If he continues to drag his feet, I might really marry Carissa myself."

"Your Majesty, you must be happy today since you drank so much. That's why you're dizzy. Arguing wouldn't make you like this," Derek said as he supported Salvador.

Behind them, the royal guards followed while palace attendants lit the way with lanterns, guiding them toward the royal chapel.

Before Carissa reached Northwatch Estate, she could already see Frederick leading everyone to wait at the gates from a distance.

As soon as she appeared, Lulu ran towards her, tears streaming down her face. "My lady, you finally returned! We were so worried about you!"

Carissa flicked her forehead playfully, smiling brightly. "It was just a war. What's there to worry about?"

Everyone gathered around her. Frederick couldn't hide the excitement and tears in his eyes.

"My lady," he said, "you have achieved great merit and continued the honor of the Duke of Northwatch's family."

"Frederick, thank you for managing the household while I was away." Carissa said softly, her features gentle in the lamplight.

These were the only people she viewed as family members left.

"It's no trouble. As long as you're safe, my lady," Frederick said, wiping away his tears and stepping aside. Welcome home, General Sinclair."

Lily and Holly were also wiping their tears, repeatedly asking if Carissa had been injured on the battlefield. Carissa reassured them again and again, saying any injuries were minor and had long since healed. Only after repeated assurances did they finally believe her.

Inside the main hall, after tea was served, Carissa asked, "Where are my friends?"

Violet and the others could have attended the celebration feast at the palace, but they declined. As martial artists, they didn't want too many entanglements with the royal family and officials. While Carissa went to the palace, they returned to Northwatch Estate.

Frederick smiled, and replied, "After a big meal, they bathed and fell asleep in the bath. It took a lot to wake them up and get them to their rooms. They're sleeping soundly now."

Everyone was exhausted from the journey.

Lulu was concerned, and said, "My lady, the hot water is ready. Let me help you with your bath."

Finally, Carissa could take a hot bath.

Chapter 150

When Carissa woke up, it was already noon the next day. She could have slept longer, but a summons from the palace required her presence, forcing her to get up.

As she yawned and got ready, she asked, "Lulu have Violet and the others woken up yet?"

"Not yet, they're still sleeping," Lulu replied. She had spent the night on the soft couch in Carissa's room, feeling at ease being close to her mistress.

"Don't wake them. Let them sleep as long as they need. Even if they sleep for three days and nights, just let them be," Carissa said, understanding how exhausted they were. She herself felt like she could sleep until the next day.

Lulu finished braiding Carissa's hair, and placed a jeweled hairpin in it. Seeing the dark circles under Carissa's eyes, she felt a pang of sympathy.

"Got it. Mr. Carter also told me that. He said when the late master and young masters returned from the battlefield, they were similarly exhausted and slept for days," Lulu replied.

"Good." Carissa nodded, steering the conversation away from the topic. "Did the summons come from the empress dowager, or the king?"

"Neither. It was from the queen," Lulu answered.

Carissa was surprised. "The queen?"

She had little interaction with the queen, Kylie Quinton. Carissa had only met her years ago when she returned from Meadow Ridge and paid her respects to Victoria, briefly greeting Kylie in

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She had little interaction with the queen, Kylie Quinton. Carissa had only met her years ago when she returned from Meadow Ridge and paid her respects to Victoria, briefly greeting Kylie in passing.

Carissa didn't even look clearly at Kylie's face.

Kylie's father was the Minister of the Civil Department. The Quinton family had been a prestigious family for over a century, producing many virtuous officials and scholars.

Kylie herself was renowned as a talented woman in the capital even before her engagement to the then-crown prince, now the king. Her reputation was well-known, but Carissa had never met her because she had gone to Meadow Ridge at a young age and hadn't attended any social events after returning.

Carissa was unfamiliar with Kylie, so why had Kyle summoned her to the palace?

Rather than speculate, Carissa knew she would find out once she arrived. After dressing and eating a light breakfast, she headed to the palace with Lulu.

At the palace gates, Kylie's head-maid, Lydia, was waiting for her. Upon seeing Carissa, Lydia smiled and congratulated her on her recent success in the Southern Frontier. Before Carissa could respond, Lydia turned and led Carissa and Lulu towards Kylie's residence, Evergreen Palace.

Carissa fell silent, and slowly followed behind Lydia. The walk from the palace gates to the inner palace of Evergreen Palace was a long one. Lydia walked ahead without speaking, her posture cold and distant.

Carissa exchanged a glance with Lulu, sensing that the queen's summons might not bode well.

Despite her reservations, Carissa remained calm. She recalled Kylie's reputation for kindness and virtue. Having met her once, Carissa believed the queen wouldn't make things difficult for her, especially considering her recent military achievements.

Upon reaching Evergreen Palace, they weren't led into the main hall, but rather a side hall. Only then did Lydia speak, "Lady Sinclair,

please wait here. Her Majesty will arrive shortly."

"Thank you, Lydia," Carissa replied, nodding respectfully.

Lydia returned the gesture and left the room.

Lulu looked around the side hall, noting its elegant and simple decor. She whispered to Carissa, "I've heard that the queen leads a very simple and plain life. It seems true."

"Don't speak without permission," Carissa admonished softly.

Lulu straightened up. "Yes, my lady!"

They waited for approximately thirty minutes, but the queen had not yet arrived. Tea was served, but it was of poor quality, tasting somewhat stale. Carissa drank half a cup before setting it down, not wanting to drink more and risk having to accept a refill.

After a while longer, they heard a call from outside, "Her Majesty, the queen, has arrived."

Carissa quickly stood and bowed her head, waiting.

Footsteps approached, and soon, a young noblewoman dressed in a finely embroidered robe entered, surrounded by attendants. Carissa kept her head lowered, noticing the delicate shoes adorned with jewels peeking from beneath the queen's hem.

Despite Lulu's earlier comment about the queen's simple tastes, Carissa knew better. She had visited the main hall of Evergreen Palace before, and although it wasn't flashy, every item was of high quality. The furniture was made of precious wood, and even the teacups were made from rare glass.

Kylie's attire was elegant and understated, but it was always

accented with a few pieces of exquisite