

War Song 161

Chapter 161

in the following days, the threshold of Northwatch Estate was nearly worn Bat

Once rarely visited by the wives of noble families and officials, the estate now saw a steady stream of visitors

wasn't because Salvador had issued an edict, but because Carissa had returned in triumph. Though only the remain of the Duke of Northwatch's family, it was clear she was capable of upholding its prestige. During her divorce, the wives of officials had often discussed

Carissa in private gatherings. She had become a topic of their idle chatter. Now, the conversations about her were no longer casual gossip but carried a respectful undertone.

For Carissa, entertaining guests wasn't a challenge. Before she married into the Warren family, Melanie had arranged for her to receive a year's worth of training. Socializing was just a matter of playing the part—smiling, chatting, godding, and following along with the conversation

Everyone enjoyed themselves, laughing and chatting, and when it was time to part ways, there was a hint of reluctance. Once the door closed behind the departing guests, smiles would fade, sore jaws would be rubbed, and a sip of water would be taken before preparing for the next round of guests.

That evening, Heather and Leona also arrived.

Recalling the wedding gifts that had been returned, Carissa maintained her gentle smile and greeted them, "Hello, Aunt Heather, Leona. Please, come in."

Heather felt a weight lift off her heart when she heard Carissa still address her as her aunt. She took Carissa's hand, her eyes slightly

reddened.

"Cari, I want to apologize. When you sent gifts to your cousin, I know it was your heartfelt intention. But I thought you might be short of funds after your divorce, so I had the gifts returned. Please don't hold it against me."

Carissa smiled reassuringly. "You were just considering my situation and looking out for me, Aunt Heather. How could I possibly be upset with you? Please, don't worry about it."

She turned to the servants. "Bring out the refreshments."

Without further ado, Carissa subtly guided Heather to a seat and withdrew her hand.

With sincere gratitude, Heather said, "I'm glad you're not upset, Cari. That puts my mind at ease."

"Cari," Leona began.

She was in tears. Instead of sitting down, she stepped forward and held Carissa's arm.

"I didn't know about this at all. When you were divorced, I wanted to visit you, but I was busy planning my own wedding and couldn't get away. Please don't be angry with me." Compared to Heather's insincere gestures, Leona's tears were genuine.

Leona had always admired her cousin greatly. They had grown up playing together, and even after Carissa went to Meadow Ridge, she would always bring gifts whenever she returned. Their bond had always been deep.

When Leona was conferred the title of a princess, Carissa had returned from Meadow Ridge specifically to give her

congratulations.

Carissa smiled, and wiped away Leona's tears. "Silly girl. Even after you're married, you're still crying. How could I possibly be angry with you?"

"Really?" Leona looked at her with tearful eyes.

"Of course." Carissa, noticing Leona's pale complexion, asked, "How does your husband treat you?"

Leona wiped her tears, but her nose grew red and she began to cry again. "It's not like he would dare to mistreat me."

Carissa knew Leona had married the heir of the Earl of Gracehold, Samuel Langley.

Samuel achieved the third-highest score in the final stage of the national exam two years ago, and received the third-ranked scholar title. He was handsome, charming, and highly talented. It was said that when he was paraded through the streets upon receiving his title, he was showered with hundreds of gifts from admiring young women.

Leona had also given him a gift, and had fallen for him at first sight.

Though Harvey and Yuvan were idle princes, they were of royal blood. Even so, Samuel had a prestigious title when Leona married into the Earl of Gracehold's family. Thus, Samuel was considered to have married beneath his rank.

The Earl of Gracehold's family was a well-established noble family with a long history in the capital. Many of its members held official positions, and with Samuel's distinguished title, his future was indeed promising.

In contrast, Harvey, despite being a prince, would either live off the royal treasury, hold a minor position, or be sent to a distant fief. His fief was in Lumoria, a region plagued by harmful air and thousands of miles away from the capital. He was unwilling to go.

Thus, he remained in the capital, doing little of note. It was unlikely he would achieve anything significant, and serving in the court was often seen as inviting trouble. After all, being too close to Salvador could be both a blessing and a curse.

From Leona's expression, it was clear Samuel's treatment of her was less than ideal. Her eyes were dimmed with unhappiness.

What was the point of marriage for women? Why did Melanie believe that marriage would bring stability?

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Heather and Leona stayed for an hour before leaving. Carissa accompanied them to the gates of the estate, maintaining a demeanor of complete friendliness and lack of resentment.

Lulu, feeling upset on her behalf, said, "My lady, you sent gifts to the princess, but the princess's mother had them returned. Clearly, she looked down on you at that time. Why are you being so kind to them today?"

Sitting in front of the vanity, Carissa instructed Lulu to remove her hairpins. "Isn't socializing just a matter of putting on a smile and exchanging pleasantries? Aunt Heather has always been kind to me. I was indeed thoughtless before-sending gifts to my cousin while I was the one who had divorced."

"But you didn't personally go. Besides, you were granted a divorce by the king. It wasn't like your husband unilaterally divorced you. Why were the gifts returned?"

"Lulu, don't dwell on these things. It's exhausting to be so petty about everything."

Carissa glanced at her weary reflection in the mirror.

The past few days had been busy non-stop, with a steady stream of visitors.

She was astonished at how many official families and noblewomen resided in the capital. But thinking about it, she shouldn't be, as the most esteemed people from across the land gathered in this city. "It's impressive how open-minded you are, my lady," Lulu said.

Carissa smiled at her reflection in the mirror. If she weren't open-minded, she wouldn't have survived this long.

She treated Heather the same way she did any other visitor-without any genuine sentiment.

Human nature was inherently selfish. When she had returned to Northwatch Estate after her divorce, the house had been left in ruins. Even though she was backed by her father's title, its decline seemed inevitable.

At that time, Barrett and Aurora were in the limelight. Heather had kept her distance to avoid offending the Warrens, as the principle in Harvey's household was to offend as few people as possible. If an offense was unavoidable, they preferred to go easier targets.

With Carissa's success and Aurora facing military punishment with no achievements of her own, it seemed that the Warren family had little hope of rising.

Heather came to curry favor, recognizing that despite everything, they still shared a family connection. Even if Carissa held some grudge, she had to accept and forgive for the sake of familial ties. Just as Carissa had removed her hairpins and planned to rest for a while, Joy rushed in breathlessly. "My lady! The Warren family's matriarch has arrived! She collapsed right at our doorstep!"

Lulu's eyes flared with anger. "She dares to come here? What nerve. does she have? Collapsing at our doorstep-what is she trying to achieve?"

"She came with a few people, including someone claiming to be

your former sister-in-law. She's outside, shouting that her mother is gravely ill and is begging you to lift the ban and allow Sebastian to treat her!" Joy replied.

Lulu's eyebrows furrowed deeply. "How outrageous! Sebastian. refused to treat her because of their family's own misconduct! How could this be blamed on Lady Sinclair?"

Carissa booked up, and asked, "What about Frederick? Has he gone to handle it?"

"A. Carter went out. He asked me to inform you, and advised your not to get involved," Joy said, clearly agitated. She took a deep breath. "They're causing a huge commotion outside, and they've attracted a large crowd of onlookers."

"Has Barrett come?" Carissa inquired.

"No, he hasn't been seen. Neither has General Yates."

Carissa gathered her hair into a ponytail. "Let's have a look from a distance and see what they're up to."

"My lady, you shouldn't go! They won't say anything good, and it will only upset you," Lulu protested,

"It's no trouble. When they sought to have Barrett divorce me, they said all sorts of things to me. What's a bit of unpleasantness now?"

With that, Carissa casually strode out. Lulu and the other maids had no choice but to follow closely behind.

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with Benjamin Amplia, and Serena in tow

As soon as she alighted from the carriage, she twisted her ankle and hek She xat right in front of Northwatch Estate, and began to wall

Tasa

e altars treated you like my own daughter! You've never test any barchap when you were married to our family! I've www.eposest any rules on your Your divorce was granted by the KATAN ANNAst. How could you hold such a grudge against me? You know Feed Sebastian's medicine to survive, but you refuse to let him come and treat me! Are you trying to kill me

Seven join in the crying

"That's right, Carissal" she said. "You shouldn't forget the kindness we showed you! When your family was wiped out, Mom was worried you would be depressed. She stayed by your side day and night, even sleeping with you to help you through those hard times. How can you be so heartless now?"

Rebecca outched her chest, sobbing in a heartbroken mar

Despite that she still spoke clearly

"Carissa, on the day of your divorce, you promised you would always consider me as your mother. That's why, when you left our family, I emptied our entire fortune as compensation, tearing you

would suffer. How could you turn around and forget all that? And now, you refuse to let Sebastian come and treat me

When Carissa divorced and moved out of Valor Estate, it was true that many items were taken. The common people had witnessed it Jarge and small items, including partition screens, stools, chairs, and even daily necessities, were all carried away by the Sinclair family's servants

Rebecca's dramatic display convinced the onlookers, who began to murmur among themselves.

"If it's a divorce, then it should be a clean break. Why make things difficult for the Warren family's matriarch? Banning Sebastian from treating her is practically condemning her to death!" "This is too cruel! The Warren family's matriarch was not

unreasonable. She didn't impose any rules on the new bride. When the Duke of Northwatch's family was wiped out, she still cared for and comforted her then daughter-in-law. That is truly are."

"Isn't that the truth? General Warren and General Yates were granted a marriage edict, but it was just a secondary marriage. It didn't affect the position of the primary wife. I don't understand why this has become such a big issue. Lady Sinclair is so narrow-minded!"

"The Duke of Northwatch was always upright and honorable, and his sons were all loyal and righteous. How is it that she's so different from her father and brothers? Her actions are too extreme! She should be careful of retribution."

Frederick and the two senior maids stood at the gate of Northwatch Estate, showing no hurry to argue. They listened with cold.

detachment as the crowd murmured and criticized.

Gradually, Rebecca's cries turned to silent sobs. With only the crowd's comments filling the air, Frederick took a step forward and spoke.

"Madam Warren," he began, "I am Frederick, the steward of

Northwatch Estate. Since you're unwell, it would be best if you didn't sit on the ground. Please return to your carriage, and I will ask a few questions."

Although Frederick had difficulty moving, he stood straight, his voice calm and unassertive.

Rebecca looked up at him, her gaze fiery. "You're just a steward! How can you represent her and respond to me? Bring her out so I can ask her directly if she intends to drive my family to its end!" Frederick smiled. "I manage the affairs of the estate, both inside and out. If every issue and person requires Lady Sinclair to appear, then I would be failing in my duties as a steward."

He took a lengthy list from Lily's hand, which unfurled and dragged on the ground.

"This is the dowry list for Lady Sinclair's marriage to General Barrett. It includes gold, silver, jewelry, fertile lands, and all manner of furniture and daily necessities. Everything is on record with the government. What was taken away at the time of the divorce was part of the dowry.

"Madam Warren, you claimed you emptied your family's entire

fortune as compensation. May I ask what exactly you compensated us with?"

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Rebecca had no way to respond.

After all, she hadn't provided even a single item of compensation! There wasn't a stitch or thread to account for!

She could only continue to wail, "Whether there was any

compensation, Carissa knows in her heart. Just ask her, and you'll find out."

*Madam Warren, there's no need to cry," Frederic continued in a calm voice. "If there was compensation, just state the items and the amount of gold and silver involved. There were officials present during the divorce, so it's easy to verify."

"Furthermore," Frederick went on, still speaking in a measured tone, you said you treated Lady Sinclair like your own daughter. When the Duke of Northwatch's family was annihilated, you claim you stayed by her side day and night.

"While this may be partly true, it's not the whole story. At that time, you were ill. It was Lady Sinclair who stayed with you day and night, attending to your every need. From the moment she married into your family, she cared for you while General Warren was away on campaign. She scarcely had time to stay in her own quarters.

"Moreover, the Warren family has had financial difficulties, and there was no money for expenses. Throughout the year, the clothes for the master and the mistresses of the house were all paid for with Lady Sinclair's dowry. From Mr. Warren to your youngest daughter, every single item from hairpins to shoes was covered by Lady Sinclair's dowry. Even the second branch of the family was included.

"Lastly, the claim that Lady Sinclair forbade Sebastian from treating you is even more absurd. When she married into your family, your illness was already worsening. It was she who invited Sebastian to come and treat you. Your illness required Snowdrop Pills made by Sebastian, which cost several silver coins per pill, not to mention other medicines. If you don't have a record of how many pills you took, Sebastian does. Would you like me to have him come over to clarify?"

Frederick paused, then continued, "Perhaps it would be good to have him come. We can ask whether Lady Sinclair barred him from treating you, or if it's because he despised your family's immoral behavior and was unwilling to sell you Snowdrop Pills. In the end, it was your second daughter-in-law who had to kneel at the physician's office to beg for the pills, and only then did Sebastian agree to sell them to your family. However, he said that because of your disrespectful behavior, he would no longer visit you."

Frederick glanced at the crowd.

"What Madam Warren has said so far is nothing but baseless accusations without evidence. However, everything I've mentioned can be verified. Please don't leave just yet. I will send someone to invite the officials, Lord Sinclair, and Sebastian to come and clarify

the matter."

Rebecca choked for a moment before bursting into tears again. Carissa has achieved military honors, so naturally, everyone will side with you. It's useless to bring anyone here! She was never wronged during her time in my family."

Frederick sneered. "Did you not wrong her, or did she not wrong you? The divorce was meant to sever all ties between our families, but you come here today, wailing and accusing Lady Sinclair of

being ungrateful and unfaithful. You initiated this disturbance, so don't be surprised if I expose your attempts to tarnish her name and seize her dowry under the pretense of accusing her of disloyalty."

Rebecca shivered. "Don't make false accusations! When did I ever try to seize her dowry?"

"There's no need for you to deny it so anxiously, Madam Warren," Frederick replied.

Then, he turned and instructed one of the servants, "Invite Lord Sinclair and the officials over. Also, bring the neighbors who were present when General Warren and Lady Sinclair divorced. Let them give their fair judgment."

"Wait!" Rebecca cried.

She slowly stood up, her body swaying as she smiled miserably.

"The situation has come to this, so the past grudges should be set aside. But I genuinely cared for Carissa! If she doesn't appreciate that, I won't hold it against her. Although it was a marriage edict granted by the king, it's also true that my family failed her first. Alas, she wasn't willing to accept a concubine..."

"Enough!"

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Lily stepped forward to interrupt Rebecca's pitiful display, her expression fierce.

"What do you mean, it was a marriage edict granted by the king? Wasn't it General Warren who requested the marriage through his military achievements?"

"And don't talk about concubines! What General Warren wanted was a legitimate wife! When the royal edict was issued, General Warren and General Yates came to see Lady Sinclair. Would you like me to repeat what heartless words they uttered?"

"General Warren said that after marrying General Yates, he would never set foot in Lady Sinclair's room again. She was only to

manage the household and continue using her dowry to support the Warren family. They expected Lady Sinclair to care for any children General Warren and General Yates had, which would give Lady Sinclair some form of purpose.

"Also, General Yates demanded a high dowry. Since the Warren family couldn't provide it, they demanded Lady Sinclair to lend them the money. She was willing, but she wouldn't give it outright. Because of that, you accused her of being heartless and ungrateful.

"Eventually, when you couldn't get what you wanted, you tried to claim that Lady Sinclair was disrespectful, unable to bear children, and that your son should unilaterally divorce her. Once a woman is unilaterally divorced, she can't reclaim her dowry. What a malicious scheme!

"How could you claim Lady Sinclair was disrespectful? Since marrying into the Warren family, has there been a day she hasn't been caring for your illness? Then you claim Lady Sinclair is unable to bear children? That's absurd! On their wedding night, General Warren left for the battlefield and returned with the intention to

marry General Yates. From the start to the end, he n

touched a finger of Lady Sinclair in that case, how could there be any children?

After Frederick and Lily said their piece, the crowd engaged wra

"Does this mean Lady Sinclair is still pure?

"The Warren family is too excessive, aren't they? General Warren himself requested the marriage, but now, they're scheming to seize Lady Sinclair's dowry,"

"The entire family is shameless! It's truly a calam

Tysay. The Duke of Northwatch's family is known for their integrity, and General Sinclair achieved military success in the Southern Frontier. She wouldn't be this kind of person!"

"I heard that when the divorce was happening, Lord Sinclair was furious, saying that the Warren family was going too far."

"Speaking of Sebastian, I remember now. Last year, when I went to the physician's office, I saw one of the Warren family's lady kneeling at the door, begging him to sell her medicine. The physician at the office told me that he was unwilling to sell the medicine because the Warren family's matriarch had questionable conduct"

The crowd buzzed with renewed outrage and disbelief as the scandal continued to unfold.

"They treated Lady Sinclair like trash, and swept her out of their lives. Who would have thought the king would honor the Duke of Northwatch with a posthumous title? In fact, the duke's family estate can still be passed down through three generations. The Warren family must regret it now!"

"Who wouldn't? If it were me, I'd be so remorseful I'd hit my head against a wall. How dare they come back and try to reconcile their

old ties?"

"Although the Duke of Northwatch's family is a military family, they haven't been overbearing. They respond with reason and evidence. Now look at the Warren family's matriarch-she's just wailing and acting as if she's suffered a great injustice! What injustice could she have suffered? Isn't it all because General Warren wanted to marry General Yates?"

"Speaking of General Yates, have you heard? She got herself captured on the battlefield because of her greed and over

eagerness. When they found her, she was without pants and lying in a pool of blood!"

"I heard about that too! I also heard she caused trouble for the -others who were captured with her... They were castrated. Can they

still be a soldier now? They might as well become a monk!"

"Shut up, all of you! Shut up!" Rebecca's face turned pale with rage, her trembling finger pointed at everyone. "It's not like that at all! It's all rumors! Just shut up!"

However, her frantic denial only confirmed the rumors. The crowd grew more animated.

Some even started arguing with her, questioning what nerve she had to come to Northwatch Estate and make a scene.

Rebecca bickered with the crowd, while Serena and Amelia

remained silent.

Although Serena had shouted a few times earlier, she was now too scared to speak further as the situation turned against them. She still hadn't married, and her reputation was important to her.

As for Amelia, she had been dragged along unwillingly in the first place. She didn't want to get involved, and was deeply embarrassed. Why would she speak in such a situation?

Being a man, Benjamin found it even harder to speak up. Seeing that the situation was spiraling out of control, he hurriedly stepped forward to persuade his mother. "Let's go. Justice will prevail on its own."

At this moment, Frederick's voice rang out firmly, "Yes, justice will prevail! The vile and sinister cannot withstand the light of day. You may leave. Lady Sinclair hopes never to have any dealings with the Warren family again, and the past grievances are hereby settled." He saluted in thanks to the crowd.

"Thank you all for standing up for what's right. Everyone here

understands the truth. The right and wrong will become clear upon investigation. Lady Sinclair's misfortune was her fate, and we accept

it.

"However, we will not engage with the Warren family again. If they dare to cause trouble once more, we are not afraid. We've handled the situation in a transparent and straightforward manner. Any attempts to distort the truth are futile, because everything is clearly visible!"

Having heard Frederick's strong words, the crowd began to disperse, their murmurs a mix of agreement and concern.

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Frederick's words, laced with flattery, worked their charm on the crowd. Everyone loved to hear sweet talk-Frederick's compliments ignited the people's sense of justice, leading them to vocally denounce those from the Warren family.

It seemed moral coercion wouldn't work on Carissa. She hadn't even appeared to address the matter, and Rebecca realized her efforts were futile. With that, she had no choice but to leave in disgrace. Rebecca had initially planned to have Carissa return to the Warren family, but Barrett adamantly refused. Given the overwhelming gossip about Aurora, Rebecca then thought to create a commotion to redirect the public's ire. She hoped that by stirring up trouble, the people would shift their criticism away from the Warren family, thus giving them a break from the public's scorn.

She had hoped her antics would at least drag Carissa into a mess of accusations. Rebecca figured that if they confronted or pushed people around, the Duke of Northwatch's family wouldn't have a leg to stand

on.

To her surprise, Frederick and his team countered her claims with clear evidence. They even stated they would call upon witnesses.

Those matters couldn't withstand close scrutiny!

Left with no other options, Rebecca had to leave.

Carissa was seated in the main hall, sipping tea. She could hear all the commotion outside.

She was no longer surprised by the antics of the Warrens. Long had she seen through their true nature.

She understood their motive was to deflect attention from Aurora's faults, and shift public opinion to protect both Aurora and the

Warren family. They sought to garner public sympathy to counteract the criticism of Aurora's greed and recklessness on the battlefield.

In the face of such deceit and manipulation, if one were to take offense at every slight, life would become unbearable.

In the sweltering heat outside, Lulu had prepared some cold drinks to help cool down the summer heat and ease any lingering anger.

After a few days of rest, Carissa's complexion had noticeably improved, her skin looking much fairer and more refined,

Carissa smiled. "Prepare a cup for Frederick, Lily, and Holly. They need it to cool off more than anyone."

"Already done. We stored plenty of ice in the cellar last year, so we have more than enough," Lulu said.

When Frederick and the two senior maids returned, their

expressions were somber. But upon entering the room and seeing Carissa, their faces immediately brightened.

Frederick said, "My lady, don't let those shameless people get to you. They aren't worth the trouble."

Carissa invited them to sit down. "I'm not upset. Consider it just a lively spectacle."

"I've already sent someone to the physician's office to have their attending physician clarify the situation. The matter of cutting off someone's livelihood is serious, and requires a clear understanding from everyone. We can't just dismiss those idle rumors. We need to set the record straight," Frederick said.

Carissa nodded. "Frederick, you handle things with thoroughness. I trust you."

Ly was fuming. Ever since the divorce, I've been holding onto a grudge it's fitting they've come to our door seeking rebuke, just as I wanted it's a shame we couldn't vent our frustrations more thoroughly it's truly regrettable!"

Regardless, Carissa's reputation had to be protected. Otherwise, Lily would have blasted the old, sickly woman without restraint. She would make sure Rebecca was thoroughly discredited!

In just a few days news of why Sebastian refused to treat Rebecca spread throughout the capital. It wasn't from the attending physician but from Sebastian himself, who mentioned it during a consultation with an official

Sebastian simply said, "One who is ungrateful and harsh is beneath my consideration."

He refused to accept the fee and medication costs, clearly intending for the official and his family to spread his words.

Barrett only learned later that his mother and elder brother had caused a scene at Northwatch Estate. Furious, he spent two days away from home, staying at an inn.

Even there, he couldn't find peace; the news of his family's troubles spread throughout the capital, and the inn was no exception.

Meanwhile, Aurora was shunned at Valor Estate and avoided by everyone. She eventually decided to return to her parents' home for a few days, hoping to escape the situation.

Upon arriving, she discovered that her parents had sold their house and left the capital.

She asked her neighbor, who, upon seeing Aurora's veiled face, responded curtly. "Who wouldn't leave under such circumstances? Every day, people point fingers and insult them. If your parents didn't die from how furious they were with you, count yourself lucky!"

Aurora had never imagined her parents would act so swiftly. They had likely sold the house at a low price.

It also made sense. With the gifts and money the Warrens had given them for her and Barrett's marriage, her parents were set for life. They no longer needed to endure the scorn of the people in

the capital. Yet, Aurora felt a pang of sadness. She understood her parents' decision, but being abandoned by them was a painful blow.

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Rafael had secluded himself, refusing visitors for several days. During this time, many would-be guests had come knocking. However, he was unwilling to see any of them. When he left the palace, he put aside his usual cheerful demeanor with his elder brother.

Rafael understood the meaning behind the royal edict

The order was clear: Carissa must marry within three months, or she would have to enter the palace as a concubine. Salvador was forcing him to make a choice.

The jests and scoldings exchanged in the palace's study weren't just idle chatter; each word carried hidden intentions.

Whether Carissa entered the palace was of no real concern to Salvador. It was a matter of showcasing his power-whether to allow her to remain free or to summon her to the palace was just a matter of issuing an edict.

Years earlier, Salvador had known of Rafael's feelings for Carissa. Before Rafael headed to the Southern Frontier battlefield, he had approached Melanie, asking her to delay Carissa's marriage. He promised to present the victory in the Southern Frontier as a dowry.

Salvador was aware of this promise. Now that the conflict in the Southern Frontier was over, Salvador expected him to marry Carissa.

The facade of brotherly affection and respect was clear, at least on the surface. However, a crucial remark made in the palace's study held a deeper meaning.

It was suggested that Carissa's marriage to any noble family could pose a threat to the kingdom's military power.

That statement was aimed directly at Rafael. If he wished to marry Carissa, he would need to relinquish his military command,

surrender the Hell Monarch Army, and cease to be its commander.

Salvador had always been wary of him. When the situation in the Southern Frontier became dire, Salvador hesitated to send him and the Hell Monarch Army to support the region. Salvador hoped Hector would be able to recapture the Southern Frontier as he had before, and resist Sandoria's resurgence..

However, the war had dragged on for a long time. The kingdom was left in a state of emptiness- food, weapons, and warm clothing were all in short supply. Despite their best efforts, Hector and his forces. had been unable to hold out much longer without reinforcements.

It was only after Hector and his sons had sacrificed their lives that Salvador agreed to deploy Rafael and the Hell Monarch Army to the Southern Frontier battlefield, taking command of all the military forces there.

Could Salvador not be wary of him?

The Hell Monarch Army was Rafael's own creation. Before their father passed away, he had been granted the medal of command for the Hell Monarch Army, an honor that could never be revoked.

Now, the Mystic Army was made up of soldiers from the Hell Monarch Army, and some soldiers Hector had trained.

Though Rafael held the title of commander, the king could still mobilize them, which was a concession he made to the king.

Since childhood, Salvador had treated him well. The position of crown prince was decided early on, without any dissent. Salvador was indeed an exceptional heir apparent-he was well-versed in both civil and military matters, had been on the battlefield, and had received meticulous guidance from the royal chancellor.

However, being the crown prince was vastly different from being the king. While Salvador's outward attitude remained unchanged and he showed Rafael continued affection/the underlying wariness had dent for the past three or four years.

"Your Highness, have some tea and take a break, the steward Luke said, entering the study with a servant carrying a pot.

Rafael nodded slightly. "Set it down Where's Jacob now?"

Luke replied, "Mr. York and Deputy Ziegler have gone to the military camp. The king is rewarding the troops, and they are assisting the Ministry of Defense with their duties and helping to handle the compensation for the fallen soldiers."

Luke had the pot and cups set down and dismissed the servant,

leaving only himself to attend to Rafael.

Rafael was dressed in white, and his dark hair was tied back. His eyes still carried the fierce aura of someone who had recently returned from the battlefield. The killing intent embedded in his bones had not yet faded.

Yet his brow was furrowed, showing clear distress.

He didn't avoid discussing matters with his trusted aides, so Luke was also aware of the royal edict and knew of Rafael's earlier proposal to Melanie regarding Carissa.

"Have you made any decisions, Your Highness?" Luke asked softly.

Rafael replied with a hint of bitterness, "There's nothing to consider. The war is over, and I was expected to relinquish my military command anyway. Still, my brother's approach is unsettling." Rafael had no ambitions for the throne, but holding significant military power always made Salvador uneasy.

Relinquishing command of the Hell Monarch Army and the medal of command bestowed by their father could be accomplished with just one word from him. There was no need for such a method. It left Rafael feeling as if he had a lump in his throat. He was unable to speak or swallow, and he felt deeply upset for Carissa.

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Rafael often reminisced about the past when he and Salvador shared an open, candid relationship. In those days, any advice or guidance Salvador had to offer was direct and straightforward, without any need for deception.

Luke recalled something, and said, "Your Highness, by His Majesty's grace, your mother will be moving into the estate in a few days. I've already arranged for Elysian Hall to be cleaned and furnished according to her specifications. The total cost came to thirty thousand silver coins."

Rafael furrowed his brow. "Thirty thousand silver coins? What kind of furniture costs that much?"

He decided to visit Elysian Hall himself. When he arrived, he saw that various types of peonies had been planted in the garden, and a special greenhouse had been constructed. Though it was unnecessary in the summer, it would be useful in winter.

Rafael's frown deepened. "Have all the orchids been removed?"

Luke followed behind Rafael, and answered cautiously, "They've all been relocated. Lady Helen said she doesn't like orchids because they are prone to mold. She doesn't want any mildew in her residence."

Since Rafael had moved into this estate, he had filled the garden with orchids-white orchids, pink orchids, purple orchids, and so on. The air was filled with the delicate fragrance of orchids, reminiscent of being in Meadow Ridge.

Inside the residence, the furniture was neatly arranged and entirely made of mahogany wood. It was hard to believe it would cost thirty thousand silver coins. However, the truly expensive items were the antiques on the display shelves and the paintings on the walls.

The bedroom featured a vanity, a canopied bed, a soft couch, and a chaise lounge, all crafted from mahogany wood with exquisite carvings, matching the quality of the palace furnishings. It was evident Luke had heavily negotiated the thirty thousand silver coins to obtain all these items.

Rafael wasn't the type to disregard money. He spent wisely and saved when possible. Spending thirty thousand silver coins to decorate a residence seemed excessively lavish to him.

In truth, he had no desire to live with his mother. However, before he set out for his campaign, Salvador had promised that once he had reclaimed the Southern Frontier, it would be a royal favor to allow Helen to reside outside the palace.

While it might sound like a royal favor, the truth was that Salvador was also displeased with how lavishly Helen spent money and her constant interference in the inner palace affairs.

As Helen was Salvador's aunt and also a concubine of their late father, Salvador couldn't argue or control her actions; he could only turn a blind eye.

Now that Rafael had returned victorious, he eagerly wished for Helen to move out of the palace as soon as possible, to avoid further trouble within the royal harem.

Helen had been pampered since childhood. Being the youngest daughter in her family, she was cherished by her grandparents and numerous uncles and aunts. After entering the palace, her elder sister, the then-queen consort, showed her extra care. Helen never experienced hardship or suffering in her life.

This indulgence had made her proud and demanding, always wanting the best in everything.

For instance, she couldn't wear clothes with peony patterns because only the empress dowager and the queen were permitted such decorations. So, she filled her garden with peonies to feel that same sense of honor and status.

"Princess Kiera will likely be coming to the residence with Lady Helen, Luke said. "Should we consider bringing in additional maidservants and servants to attend to them?"

"No need," Rafael replied. "They aren't accustomed to outsiders. The current staff know their temperaments and will assist them well."

Those who had served them for a long time had been thoroughly tested. Randomly selecting new maidservants would not suffice to meet their standards.

"Have preparations been made for Kiera's residence?" Rafael inquired.

"Yes, it has been arranged. It's the adjacent Inkwood Hall, and it cost twenty thousand silver coins to decorate."

At the mention of such substantial amounts, Rafael's head ached. He had no desire to see it, and replied, 'Return to the study. When Jacob returns, have him come find me there.'

"Won't you rest for a while? You've just returned from the battlefield, and you haven't slept much," Luke urged.

"I won't be sleeping," Rafael said flatly.

He couldn't rest. His mind was too troubled.

Chapter 169

Two days later, Dylan and Rafael's strategist, Jacob York, returned.

It was raining heavily earlier, so Jacob had changed into a fresh set of clothes before he hurried to the study to see Rafael.

Jacob was direct and to the point..

"The king's intention is to strip you of your military command. Since you're willing to relinquish it, then let it go. However, you mustn't allow your marriage to be used as leverage.

"The king knows you once sought to marry Lady Sinclair. He wants. to

use her as compensation, to ease his own conscience. However, I believe it is unnecessary. Once you surrender your command, request him to retract his edict. Whether or not you marry Lady Sinclair should be a matter between you and her, not tainted by the royal family's interference.

"If the king inserts himself into the matter, it will complicate things and turn it into something more than just a marriage. Both you and Lady Sinclair will be put in a very awkward position."

Marriage should be purely about affection, not a matter of profits and interests. To marry for gain would be to betray the true feelings. involved.

Rafael's brows furrowed deeply. "That was my thought as well. However, the Hell Monarch Army's medal of command was given to me by the late king. He declared the Hell Monarch Army would forever be under my command to protect the realm. The entire court was aware of this.

"If I now relinquish the Hell Monarch Army's medal, the king will surely feel the need to reward me handsomely to account for the late king's wishes and the court's expectations. At the very least, he needs to maintain his image. I worry he might grant a marriage as a

form of reward. To make it clear that it is a reward, he will likely inform the officials that I sought to marry Carissa before my campaign."

Jacob frowned in concern. "In that case, people might speculate Madam Sinclair would rather marry her daughter to General Warren. than wait for you to reclaim the Southern Frontier. Or they might think that Madam Warren doubted your ability to reclaim it. All sorts of speculation could arise."

"That is precisely what troubles me the most," Rafael said, pushing aside a paperweight on the desk. "The king's actions have caused me significant distress."

Jacob pondered for a moment, then a new thought occurred to him. "Your Highness, is it possible that the king is not necessarily forcing you to surrender your command... What I mean is, perhaps he might be willing to accommodate whatever choice you make."

Rafael's expression grew somber, "Are you suggesting that the king genuinely wants to make Carissa a consort?"

"It could be he wants both-your military command and Lady Sinclair. If you insist on having him retract the edict, he might still seek to have both. As for rewarding you, it could be in other forms-gold, silver, treasures, or even the return of the Mystic Army to you," Jacob replied.

Rafael had never considered this before. He had never heard of Salvador showing any interest in Carissa. If he had, he would have asked Victoria to intervene when Melanie arranged Carissa's marriage to Barrett.

But perhaps Salvador hadn't been interested before, only to change his mind after the Southern Frontier battle?

His harem included all kinds of women, but none like Carissa, who was both capable in both literature and martial arts, and dignified.

enough to be a matriarch.

Moreover, Carissa had proven her ability to lead the Hell Monarch Army. If Carissa became Salvador's concubine, his troubles would be greatly eased. Also, Carissa had proven her worth before the soldiers who had followed Hector before this. The generals who used to serve under Hector would also follow her commands.

The king's few simple words must have hidden intentions.

With this thought in mind, Rafael's eyes grew colder. "So, at this point, I must surrender the medal of command and formally propose to Carissa. There are no other options."

Jacob sighed. "It seems so. It's up to you to find a suitable reason for the proposal, whether as a strategic move or a heartfelt declaration. Either way, you have to settle this marriage. The three-month deadline

is likely troubling for Lady Sinclair, but no one would dare propose without the king's approval. The choice of a suitable candidate for the title is not something to be taken lightly." Rafael's gaze deepened. "I understand."

Jacob thought for a moment, and added, "I fear that Lady Helen might not favor Lady Sinclair.

In Helen's eyes, her son deserved the best. No noblewoman, especially one who had been married before, could be deemed worthy.

Given Helen's penchant for creating difficulties, it was likely Carissa wouldn't have a peaceful life after the marriage.

Rafael was known for his decisive actions. Since he had already decided, he resolved to act quickly.

"Send a notice to Northwatch Estate. I will visit tomorrow."

Chapter 170

Jacob sent Dylan to deliver the letter in person.

Dylan was puzzled, and secretly asked Jacob, "Mr. York, His

Highness could ask for Lady Sinclair's hand without surrendering his military command, couldn't he?"

Jacob gave him a light tap on the head. "Are you an idiot? If His Highness doesn't surrender his medal of command, the king will immediately have Lady Helen intervene to stop the marriage."

Dylan thought the choice of words was apt, but he still didn't fully grasp the situation.

"But won't Lady Helen try to stop it now?" Dylan argued. Everyone knew how Helen was.

"Even if she does it now, no one would have instructed her to do so..

It would be her own decision, and the situation would be different because of it," Jacob explained tersely. "Just go and deliver the

letter. Don't say anything else."

Watching Dylan lead his horse away, Jacob sighed slightly. Although Rafael was dutiful to his mother, without Salvador's support, he would still face opposition from Helen in marrying Carissa.

At Northwatch Estate, Carissa was somewhat surprised to receive a letter from Rafael.

If Rafael had military matters to discuss with her, he would have sent someone to summon her directly.

Why the personal visit and a notification in advance?

Clearly, it wasn't about military affairs.

Carissa suspected it was because Rafael had asked her whether she wanted to take up a formal post. She instructed Frederick to prepare for Rafael's visit the following day, but her thoughts drifted to Sebastian and her aunt Avis's health.

Yuvan's estate was located a hundred miles from the capital in Valken. Avis had acted as the intermediary for Carissa's marriage to

Barrett.

When Carissa divorced, Avis didn't send any letters. She was likely unaware of the situation.

Sebastian's female apprentice, Jasmine, had been in Valken taking care of Avis. Sebastian would likely be informed about Avis's condition.

Sebastian had probably informed Jasmine about what happened with Carissa, but Jasmine didn't inform Avis about it. Carissa was worried that her aunt's illness had worsened.

She sent Lulu to the physician's office. At this critical juncture, with her constantly surrounded and pursued whenever she went out, the title of being a hero had indeed become a significant burden. Added to that, the commotion caused by the Warrens had only given idle talkers more to gossip about.

Lulu returned after more than two hours, carrying a large bundle of items. She chattered nonstop as she unpacked.

"Sebastian said the medicine he gave you before must be used up. On the battlefield, it's impossible not to get injured. When injured, you must take proper care. He prepared a bunch of pills and herbs, all personally mixed by him. He said you must take them for a month to replenish your energy and blood, to avoid any lingering ailments that might cause pain in your later years."

Carissa glanced over the items: Snowdrop Pills, Heart-Guarding

Pills, Heartshield Pills, Bloodbliss Pill, Purity Pill, Radiance Pill, and so on. There was also a jar of skin whitening and nourishing honey ointment, and several packages of medicinal herbs for brewing. "That must have cost a fortune," Carissa said with a smile, shaking her head. "He's so eager to give me the best medicine. Lulu, please send some of the Heartshield Pills and Snowdrop Pills over to Granduncle Theodore."

"When I arrived, Mr. Carter had already taken some to Lord Sinclair," Lulu said with a smile.

Carissa nodded slightly. Frederick was thorough in his duties, and she didn't need to worry about these details.

"What's in this large bundle?" Carissa asked, noticing a sack of herbs at the doorway. "Is this for brewing as well?"

"No, this is for soaking in water," Lulu explained. "It's said to dispel cold and protect the muscles and bones. Sebastian mentioned that the cold weather on the battlefield could have left you with a coldness that seeped into your bones, so you need to soak in a medicinal bath to dispel it."

Sebastian truly treated Carissa like his own daughter. He really pampered her a lot.

With remedies for dispelling cold and for beautification, it seemed he wanted to restore her to her original, radiant beauty immediately.

"Alright then, I'll take a medicinal bath tonight."

Carissa naturally wouldn't disappoint her elder's kind intentions!