

War Song 171

Chapter 171

After soaking in the medicinal bath, Carissa felt a warm flush spread through her body. Just before bed, Pearl brought a basin of medicinal foot soak and said she had to soak her feet every night. Carissa complied dutifully, soaking her feet for a while before drinking a cup of calming tea, a remedy formulated by Sebastian to aid sleep.

Aside from the first two days after returning from the battlefield, when she slept deeply, the past few nights had been plagued by insomnia. Even when she managed to fall asleep, nightmares haunted her. Her father, her brothers, her family-once vibrant and full of life-

now appeared before her, drenched in blood. She would wake up, unable to return to sleep.

After dealing with her family's massacre and returning to Valor Estate, she had needed to drink calming medicine every night to sleep. Sebastian had always kept her troubles close to his heart.

After finishing the tea, Pearl added a candy to her cup and smiled. Lulu said that since you dislike the bitterness of the medicine, you must have a candy afterward."

Carissa took the candy, savoring its sweet and sour taste in her mouth.

In truth, she had long since overcome her fear of bitter medicine.

As a child, she had indeed dreaded the taste of medicine. Her small face would be scrunched up in distaste as she clung to her mother. Her parents and brothers all feel pained for her. But now, who was there for her to show her displeasure to? Whom could she cling to?

In a moment of melancholy, the sweetness in her mouth faded, leaving only the bitterness of the medicine and the sour taste-much like the unexpected emotions that occasionally surged within her.

Yet she had learned to suppress these emotions and to hide them from view. Those around her were keenly observant, and if they noticed even a hint of unhappiness or a flicker of sadness in her eyes, their concern would be evident.

Frederick returned with the medicine, and also brought back a painting by Theodore.

Theodore had spent decades perfecting his art, and had achieved great skill.

Every year, the Sinclair family contributed a significant amount of silver coins for public use, supporting the impoverished so they could excel in their own ways. Theodore spearheaded these donations, and the funds were earned through selling Hector's paintings.

Naturally, when Melanie was still alive, she had made the most generous contributions. However, Theodore's branch of the Sinclair family had few scholars, with many opting for trade instead. While merchants were regarded as lower in status, their ability to earn money raised their standard of living significantly.

Therefore, neither the late king nor the current one had any reason to be wary of Theodore's side of the family, as they were but a single tree that couldn't support the whole forest. Carissa instructed the painting to be framed and hung in the main hall. It was a grand landscape painting, majestic and imposing-it was perfectly suited for the main hall.

The following day, Rafael arrived at Northwatch Estate with Dylan just before nine in the morning.

Carissa had just finished breakfast, and had expected him to arrive later in the afternoon. She had even prepared a chilled dessert for the occasion.

She and her maids, Lulu and Pearl, hurried out to greet him. By the time they reached the front courtyard, Rafael was already seated in the main hall, and Frederick had served tea.

Carissa was accustomed to Rafael in his battle-worn attire, so she was momentarily taken aback when she saw him.

Today, he was dressed in an elegant green robe with cloud patterns. He also wore a crown, had a sash around his waist, and black shoes on his feet. His attire was dignified, and his demeanor was calm and composed. This noble outfit made him look even more

distinguished and refined.

His regal appearance only accentuated his striking features and exceptional demeanor.

Surprised by his formal attire, Carissa felt her own outfit to be rather casual in comparison.

Rafael's gaze shifted to Carissa. She wore a delicate white blouse with a sheer pink shawl, paired with a black skirt intricately embroidered with gold thread. Her hair was styled in an elegant bun, adorned with sapphire ornaments. Her attire gave her a distinct air of nobility.

Rafael rarely saw her in such attire. Previously, whenever he visited Meadow Ridge, she would always be wearing vibrant red garments with her hair tied high in a ponytail and red ribbons. Her black ponytail would sway with the fluttering ribbons, giving her a lively and captivating presence.

Carissa performed a military salute. "Marshal!"

Rafael turned away, and nodded slightly. "General Sinclair, please

clear the room so we can speak privately."

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Leaving an unmarried man and woman alone in a room was inappropriate. Frederick would normally insist on having several attendants present for propriety's sake.

However, with Rafael being addressed as Marshal and Carissa as General Sinclair, Frederick assumed their discussion would revolve around military matters, which weren't for his ears. After serving a pot of tea, Frederick promptly cleared the room and closed the door, instructing that no one should approach.

Rafael held his cup, his long fingers tracing the floral design on its surface, his expression solemn.

After a moment of silence, seeing he had not yet spoken, Carissa looked up at him, her eyes filled with curiosity. "Marshal, is this about the Southern Frontier battlefield...?"

"Not at all," Rafael interrupted, taking a sip of tea before setting the cup down. "I'm here today for personal matters, not military ones."

Carissa's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

Personal matters? What could there be to discuss between her and Rafael if not military matters?

Rafael looked at her, and asked, "The king has given you a three-month deadline to marry. Otherwise, you will have to enter the palace as a concubine. Correct?"

Carissa wasn't surprised that he knew about this, so she simply nodded in acknowledgment.

"Do you want to enter the palace and become a concubine?" Rafael asked bluntly.

Carissa studied Rafael's face. "Did His Majesty send you?"

"No. I'm asking this for myself."

Carissa met his clear, unwavering gaze and slowly shook her head. No, I don't."

Rafael then inquired, "Is there someone you have in your heart?"

He scrutinized her closely, noting every subtle change in her expression.

She replied firmly, "No, there isn't."

"Any particular person you have feelings for?"

"None."

Rafael understood he held no place in her heart, but hearing her admit she had no feelings for any man at all was like a sharp sting from a bee.

It was a slight pain, but bearable, given that her indifference wasn't directed solely at him.

Seeing his expression momentarily pale before returning to normal, Carissa pondered for a while before asking, "Your Highness, are you here to help me resolve this issue?" Rafael was silent for a long moment, his gaze fixed on her. "I like you and wish to marry you. Will you agree?"

Crash!

The cup in Carissa's hand toppled over, shattering into pieces on the floor. She stared at Rafael in astonishment. "Marshal, this isn't a jest you should make!"

Carissa quickly rose, shaking the water from her dress. Normally composed, she was now somewhat flustered.

"Although we've known each other since we were young, I went to Meadow Ridge when I was about seven. Even if you visit Meadow Ridge every year, I've never seen you..." "Alright, fine. I'll stop teasing you," Rafael said with a reassuring smile as he picked up his cup again.

"When I said I liked you, I was jesting. However, my intention to marry you is sincere. I've recovered the Southern Frontier, and the king wants to grant me a marriage. My sister-in-law showed me the portraits of several young women, but none of them were to my liking. Then I happened to hear from my sister-in-law that the king has given you a three-month deadline to find a husband. If you don't, you'll have to enter the palace as a concubine."

He picked up the cup to drink, but found it empty. Swallowing as if he were still drinking, he continued, "You don't want to enter the palace, and I don't want a wife forced onto me. Isn't this a perfect coincidence? If we marry, it will solve our immediate problems. Should you later find someone you truly like, I will grant you a divorce."

It sounded quite reasonable, but Carissa was puzzled. "If you didn't like the women, why didn't the queen and Lady Helene continue their search? Surely they can find someone suitable?" Rafael's fists tightened, his brows furrowing with a trace of

unresolved sadness. He offered a faint, rueful smile.

"There will be no suitable match. The woman I wish to marry is already married." =

Carissa sensed his helplessness from the faint smile of regret. She hadn't expected someone as accomplished as him to be unable to be with his ideal partner.

Rafael's voice softened. "Since my heart is already bound to her and

I can no longer share it with anyone else, why should I marry another and ruin their lives?"

Carissa was touched. She hadn't imagined that Rafael could be so deeply affectionate.

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Although she was touched, Carissa still refused.

"His Majesty's edict requires me to find a husband within three months. I believe he intends to designate a successor for the title. If I were to marry you under false pretenses, His Majesty might not approve."

Rafael hadn't anticipated this response. It seemed she still didn't fully understand Salvador's intent. After a moment's thought, he pressed his hand down in a calming gesture.

"You needn't worry about that. I will speak to the king. His concern about designating a successor is likely due to his fear of you finding someone as fickle and unfaithful as Barrett." Disparaging her former suitor was a petty tactic, but it likely seemed reasonable to her.

When Carissa heard Barrett's name, she remained unmoved. However, what Rafael said wasn't without merit. The title of duke was now backed by the Sinclair Army—the generals and soldiers who used to follow Hector, and now Carissa. So, choosing a successor required careful consideration.

Previously, when Salvador had conferred honors upon her father, he had mentioned that her future husband could inherit the title. He probably hadn't anticipated that she might earn the Sinclair Army's recognition on the battlefield herself. Now that it was known, a casual selection was out of the question.

The three-month period, which was supposedly for her to find a husband, was, in reality, Salvador's way of searching for a suitable successor. But Salvador would only consider whether the person was suitable for the title, not whether they were suitable for her or capable of spending a lifetime with her.

In this case, it was easy to end up with a mismatched partner who didn't get along with her.

Following her line of thought, Rafael could easily guess her current feelings.

"Even after my ideal partner married, I hadn't planned to take a wife. However, the king insists on granting me a marriage. Even though I'm his younger brother, I must comply with his wishes. Rather than marry someone else, it is better for my partner to be you," he said. Carissa gazed into his deep black eyes beneath his long lashes, which seemed as dark as a starless night.

After a long pause, she finally said, "Your Highness. If we marry, and you find someone you like later, she would only be a concubine. I don't need a divorce from you. I have already divorced once. If I were to do it again, it would be a disgrace to my late parents."

Rafael fought the urge to leap. Instead, he pressed down on his crown with a restrained motion. He tried to maintain a nonchalant demeanor, but his lips betrayed him, curling upward despite his

effort.

"Aside from her, I won't have affection for any other woman. Living this way with you for the rest of our lives seems quite acceptable. At the very least, we can respect and honor each other as guests," he said. Carissa couldn't help but be curious. "May I ask who the lady is? You clearly have a deep affection for her. How could she bear to disappoint you?"

When the woman in question was mentioned, Rafael's eyes glowed brightly. "She doesn't actually know my feelings. It was merely my one-sided affection. Before I went to the Southern Frontier, I went to her mother to ask for her hand in marriage, but her mother likely

didn't think much of me. After I left for the battlefield, she arranged for her daughter to be married far away. As for who she is, it's best not to say. She is already married, and I wouldn't want to affect her." Carissa nodded in agreement. "What you say is very true. A woman's reputation is important. Since she is already married, it's not right for you to keep mentioning her."

She felt a surge of respect for Rafael. Despite his bravery and strategic mind on the battlefield, he was so considerate and

sensitive about the difficulties women face. Even though he loved the woman deeply, he refrained from mentioning her to avoid tarnishing her reputation.

If more men were like Rafael, the world would indeed be a kinder place for women.

Seeing her reaction, Rafael adopted a commanding tone similar to that of a military camp. "Carissa, give me a clear answer. Be

straightforward, and don't dawdle. If there are any issues, I'll take full responsibility."

At his tone, Carissa responded almost instinctively, "I'll do it!"

Rafael felt a huge weight lift off his shoulders, and couldn't help but smile.

"Great! Let's figure out our roles. You handle the household, while I'll take care of everything outside it. My mother and sister will be living with us. After we marry, my sister won't stay long, but my mother will be a challenge. She is accustomed to luxury and pride, and likes to exert her authority. But I'm confident she won't be able to bully you."

Carissa was a woman who became strong when faced with force, and soft when dealing with weakness. It was time for her to face

some consequences.

Carissa couldn't help but smile. "Your Highness, you're truly considerate. I suspect you didn't want to marry anyone else because you were worried your mother would mistreat your wife."

Her comment, though a joke, carried an undercurrent of truth.

Rafael's eyes burned with a fiery intensity. "Carissa, you really are perceptive."

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After Rafael left Frederick and two senior maids entered the room.

Carissa didn't hide anything from them. She told them Rafael had come to propose, and that she had accepted.

Frederick and the two senior maids were taken aback. They were silent for a moment, then their expressions turned grave.

This is the best outcome." Carissa said with a light smile. "Though His Highness and I do not share romantic feelings, we have a bond as comrades. Marrying him is certainly preferable to having to accept a random suitor into our family."

-Words hung on the tip of Lily and Holly's tongue, but the two chose to swallow them. They could only manage a forced smile, and said, My lady, you must be prepared. With a royal prince, there is no avoiding concubines and secondary wives."

Previously, Rafael had also sought to marry her. However, Melanie had brushed him off. She didn't want to marry her daughter into the royal family. She argued that with so many primary and secondary V wives and concubines, Carissa, who wasn't adept at dealing with such complicated affairs, would struggle to have a good life.

However, Lily and Holly dared not speak these thoughts to Carissa. After all, it was Melanie who had opposed it. Despite that, Carissa had already agreed to marry Rafael now.

"Concubines and secondary wives are no issue," Carissa said.

"No issue?" Lily repeated, somewhat surprised. "But in the Warrens, when General Warren wanted to take another wife..."

Carissa shook her head, her delicate face calm.

"It's different. Barrett promised my mother he wouldn't take

concubines. I devoted myself to caring for his family, waiting for his return after he achieved something. Yet, when he returned, he sought to marry Aurora, breaking his promise to my mother and failing in his duties as a husband. While I did my part as a wife, he was dedicated to another woman and spoke to me with such cruelty. Naturally, I couldn't endure that."

Her words ignited a spark of anger in Frederick and the maids' eyes. Yes, how could one not be enraged when one's heart was so trampled upon?

"As for my marriage to His Highness," Carissa went on, "we have agreed that this union is solely to address our immediate needs. We are indifferent to each other's feelings, and seek only mutual respect and harmony. Of course, marrying into the royal family is no easy task. His mother, Lady Helen, will also move into our home. She is not an easy mother-in-law to deal with."

"Lady Helen is the sister of the empress dowager. I have heard that the empress dowager also dotes on her, and the women in the palace are quite fearful of her. If she becomes your mother-in-law, life may become quite challenging," Frederick said.

He felt that marrying Rafael might not be the best choice, but the alternative-taking in a stranger to marry into the Duke of Northwatch's family-could also pose risks. There was a fear of encountering a heartless and unfaithful man who, once granted the title, might become arrogant and disregard Carissa altogether.

After all, the purpose of marrying Carissa was to secure the title she held. Once her husband became a duke, he might not be as considerate as an ordinary son-in-law of the family would be.

On the other hand, marrying Rafael had its advantages. He was a man of integrity, born into royalty. This marriage would also serve as a powerful rebuttal to those who had once looked down upon Carissa. Although many in the capital respected Carissa, there were still

noble families who believed she would never marry well. They were unwilling to accept a lower status, which meant she might spend her life in solitude, confined to the grand estate of the duke.

With these thoughts in mind, Frederick said, "Marrying Prince Rafael is certainly better than someone chosen by the king himself."

At this point, they still believed Salvador's selection was primarily for the purpose of securing a successor for the duke's title.

After leaving Northwatch Estate, Rafael felt like he was floating in the air. Once mounted, he turned to Dylan and said, "Let's go. We need to go to the palace to see the king."

Since there was no morning court session today, and Salvador was in the study room meeting with the Cabinet, Rafael waited for quite some time outside the study.

When the cabinet officials had finished their business and left, Derek finally announced Rafael.

Rafael entered the room and knelt, presenting the medal of command for the Hell Monarch Army with both hands.

"Your Majesty, I have two matters to report today. The first is that, with the country currently at peace, it is customary for me to return my military command to you. I am here to return the Hell Monarch Army and the late General Sinclair's medals of command."

After a brief pause, he continued, "The second matter is that I wish to marry Lady Sinclair, the daughter of the Duke of Northwatch. She has agreed to this union. After selecting a date, I will send someone to propose to her formally."

Salvador looked at Rafael with obscured and unreadable eyes.

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Salvador examined the medal of command presented by Derek with an inscrutable expression.

After a moment, he retrieved the other half of the Sinclair Army's medal of command, aligning it with the one Rafael had handed.

The Hell Monarch Army's medal of command was now complete. Their father had given it to Rafael before, allowing him to command the Hell Monarch Army indefinitely to defend the nation.

Rafael didn't have to surrender it.

Salvador traced the edges of the Hell Monarch Army medal of command with his fingers, feeling a peculiar sensation from the unfamiliar engravings.

"Carissa agreed?" he asked, almost incredulously.

"Yes, she has," Rafael replied with evident joy, as though he were still the naive younger brother he used to be. "Before I set out for the campaign, I went to propose to her. I never expected Melanie to marry her to Barrett. Even more unexpected, she has returned to meet me after all that happened."

Rafael looked up, his smile radiating sweetness.

"Naturally, I must thank you for your support. I know that your three-month deadline was to give me a chance."

Salvador's inscrutable demeanor softened, and he smiled warmly. " If I didn't push you a little, would you have let her slip away again? I know your nature-having failed to propose before, you now plan to cultivate your feelings slowly. But a woman's youth can't be wasted, and her family has a title to inherit."

A hint of embarrassment flashed on Rafael's face. "I admit, I was
hesitant."

Salvador was silent for a moment, studying him. "Is Carissa truly that important to you?"

"Your Majesty, I have admired her for a long time. You know this well," Rafael replied as he took a seat. "I had planned to wait until the matters of the rewards and compensations were settled, then surrender my military command and gradually develop a

relationship with her. However, with your edict, I fear she might be taken away."

Salvador forced himself to smile.

"Yes, this was also the intention of me and my mother. We wanted to nudge you into proposing. Otherwise, Carissa might have been married off to someone else. She's highly sought after now. She has inherited the Sinclair family's military prowess with courage and strategy. She led a successful siege on her first battlefield, and has done so twice, with formidable martial skills and the ability to command troops. My foolish brother, you've found a treasure," he said.

Rafael smiled warmly and happily. "Indeed, I have found a treasure. My admiration for her began when she was at Meadow Ridge. Her capabilities in battle and siege were never my concern."
Salvador nodded. "Indeed!"

It was true that Rafael had admired Carissa long before, without any ulterior motives. Salvador had made things more complicated than
necessary.

Salvador smiled on the surface; deep down, however, he felt a pang of regret.

He had previously thought that whatever choice his younger brother made, he would gain something from it. So, it didn't matter which

path Row chose. But now that Rafael had chosen Carissa and

relinquished his military command without hesitation, there was an

WRX his heart

TOS. What he did in the picture, would Rafael have

automatically surrendered his military command after completing the rewards and competitors'

and ambitions, and reclaiming the Southern Frontier was part of that ambition. Whether there would be other ambitions as time

Went On. Was uncertain

With the military command surrendered and no more concerns, the two brothers could continue to maintain a harmonious and respectful relationship.

As for Carissa

Salvador recalled her calm demeanor when she had come to the palace seeking a divorce edict. She had been as serene and unaffected by the turmoil.

The second time, she had entered the palace to discuss the Victory Pass battle and the Westhaven people masquerading as Sandoria soldiers in the Southern Frontier. Her face had been flushed red with urgency, and her eyes burning with anxiety.

At the time, Salvador had doubted her sincerity, thinking she was merely meddling out of personal emotions.

Now, looking back, it was clear personal matters held no sway over her. Her calm demeanor during the divorce request contrasted sharply with her genuine emotions when dealing with major military concerns.

Salvador sighed inwardly. A woman like her was unforgettable, even if she had been married once.

For a fleeting moment, he had hoped Rafael would choose to retain his military power and disregard Carissa.

But now... Perhaps it was fine this way.

After a few moments of contemplation, Salvador looked up and asked, "Do you need me to grant you a marriage edict?"

Rafael leaned back in his chair, looking as if he had shed a heavy burden, appearing carefree and relaxed. "Thank you for your kindness, Your Majesty. A marriage edict is too formal. Carissa has been married once before, and I don't want her to be in the spotlight."

Salvador nodded slightly. "You should also consider how to explain this to your mother."

Rafael's gaze grew serious. "I will be straightforward with her."

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In Evergreen Palace, an angry, sharp voice rang out.

"She wants to become your consort? Unless I'm dead, you tell her not to harbor such delusions! Otherwise, I won't spare her!"

Rafael remained calm as he watched the distraught Helen. Having grown up amidst such roaring voices, he was accustomed to it. However, it was unlikely Carissa would be.

Helen's face turned ashen as she extended a finger; the long, claw ring almost poked Rafael's nose.

"In a few days, I'll be moving into your residence. If she dares to set foot in the estate, I will have her legs chopped off!" she screamed.

Rafael nodded. "Alright, chopping off her legs sounds good. I've seen her cut off the legs of enemies-she was as swift as lightning. With a single slash, she divided their body into three pieces. It's quite a sight."

Helen raised her hand, her voice cutting like a knife. "Whether she's the legitimate daughter of a duke or a highly skilled warrior, she's nothing but a discarded woman expelled from the Warren family to me! You are a prince! There are many pure and noble young women. in the capital hoping to enter your family. Yet, you chose a woman of ill repute. Are you out of your mind?!"

Rafael's eyes flashed sharply. "I won't tolerate such words a second time. If you dislike her, you need not live in the estate. It is much better for you to stay here in the palace, where you can enjoy your status and comfort."

Helen's gaze turned cold. "What did you say? You want me to stay away from your estate for that... that once-married woman? Rafael, you're being disrespectful to me!"

In Starhaven, ruling with kindness and respect was crucial. Just one instance of being called disrespectful could feel no overwhelming as having a mountain pressing on you. Once, Rafael found it hard to breathe.

But just like the story of the boy who cried wolf, hearing how

disrespectful he was over and over again didn't bother Rafael as much anymore.

The first few times, it felt like a huge burden. After hearing it so many times, however, he knew his mother was just venting out her anger-nothing more.

It was already remarkable that they maintained a semblance of harmony in their relationship.

When Helen said he was disrespectful, Rafael replied calmly, "I'm marrying Carissa. Whether you accept it or not is up to you to decide."

Helen drew in a sharp breath. "Marriage is a matter decided by the parents and the matchmaker! If I oppose it, does that mean your parents' wishes count for nothing? Are you so willing to defy all conventions just to marry that lowly woman? What kind of spell has she cast on you to make you so infatuated that you disregard even her unsavory past?"

Rafael stood up. "Thank you for your reminder, Mom. I'll discuss my marriage with the empress dowager. After all, she's my late father's primary wife, so she's in charge of the household. It is her right to make decisions about my marriage."

Helen watched as he left without even bidding her a proper farewell, her tears falling freely. Anger and helplessness churned within her. Despite her efforts, she couldn't control her son. No matter what she said, he always seemed to ignore her. He treated her concerns with indifference and a marked lack of respect.

She was at a loss for what she had done wrong. Her son always seemed to be against her, no matter what,

Excluding Salvador, among the children of more than thirty concubines in the palace, Rafael was considered the most outstanding. Even the late king had spoken highly of him.

Rafael had achieved his current status due to Helen's meticulous planning and nurturing. Despite her tireless efforts, his attitude remained cold. Although she had maintained her dignity in front of the other concubines and gained their admiration, the pain in her heart was hers alone to bear.

That night at the celebration feast, when the palace attendants had escorted Rafael to the Eternity Palace, she had been overjoyed. She ordered her servants to prepare soup, and arranged a room with hot water and fresh clothes for him to bathe.

Yet, he had collapsed into a chair in the side hall and fallen asleep.

The following day, when she excitedly arranged a feast, he had already disappeared without a word,

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Helen lay on her chaise longue, her heart burning with resentment towards Carissa.

Her attendant, Gillian, stood beside her, trying to offer comfort.

"There's no need to be so upset, Your Highness. Prince Rafael is a man with his own thoughts. He's merely infatuated with Lady Sinclair's beauty at the moment. I've heard she's the most stunning woman in the capital.

"When Madam Sinclair first planned to marry her, many noble

families sought her hand. It's a mystery why Madam Sinclair ended up marrying her to General Warren."

As she dabbed Helen's tears away with a handkerchief, she continued soothingly, "After all, she is merely a secondhand item. There's no need for you to be so enraged. If Prince Rafael insists on marrying her, so be it. A beauty from afar is pleasing to the eye, but living with her every day can become tiresome.

"No matter how beautiful a woman is, if she becomes petty and jealous, which man wouldn't grow weary of her? Prince Rafael will have many concubines. Once her fierce demeanor is revealed, she may end up being disliked by the prince himself without you having to say a word."

Helen seethed with anger. "That may be true, but how can a

dignified prince marry a discarded woman-especially one cast out by a decayed family? How can I hold my head high in the palace?"

She had always been strong-willed. In the late king's entire harem, apart from her sister, she had looked down upon all the other concubines. Even the noble concubine, Dakota, she regarded as insignificant. Dakota's son, Kendrick, had married a niece from the queen, Kylie's

family. Kylie's natal family, the Quinton family, came from a prestigious background and held significant power in the court.

Helen's own daughter, Klera, was also in the midst of an

engagement discussion. The list of potential suitors included the sixth son from the Quinton family. The sixth son was from the third branch of the Quinton family.

Though a legitimate son headed the third branch, he had suffered a fall in his youth that left him with a damaged mind. Now, at forty years old, he behaved like a child of about seven. Fortunately, he married a kind-hearted woman. She accepted his condition and treated him like the child he was, and also gave him a son and a daughter.

The sixth son of the Quinton family wasn't a scholar. He couldn't even pass the state exams. His days were spent playing polo, flying kites, skating, and throwing darts. Recently, he had taken up gardening as a hobby.

Helen, of course, looked down upon him. She hoped Kiera would marry someone knowledgeable and respectable, not someone frivolous and inept like the Quinton family's sixth son.

However, the Quinton family was willing to marry off their sixth son to Kiera because once she was married to him, he could no longer hold a significant position in court. He could either find a minor official post or live out his days in idle leisure, wasting his life away.

Previously, Salvador spoke about this, indicating that he was satisfied with Quinton's family's sixth son. Even Kiera had stolen glances at him, and had fallen for him.

Helen found herself torn. She wanted to ally with the Quinton family, but she didn't want her daughter to marry a wastrel.

With both her children's marriages proving unsatisfactory, how could a woman as strong-willed as her bear it?

Consumed with anger, she ordered, "Summon Carissa to the palace tomorrow! I want to see what kind of enchanting vixen she's become. Even as a discarded woman, she dares to aspire to enter the royal family?!"

Since convincing Rafael was proving futile, Helen hoped Carissa would retreat upon realizing the difficulty of her situation. Carissa shouldn't assume that a few military achievements made her exceptional.

If it had been in the past, Helen might have supported this marriage. Back then, Hector was still alive, and his family hadn't been

destroyed yet. The Duke of Northwatch's family was prominent in the military, and Hector had also supported Rafael.

But now, times had changed.

Carissa wasn't a virtuous woman, nor had a powerful family to back her. What use did she have, apart from her beauty?

Moreover, she had been sent to Meadow Ridge for training, and had developed a rough and unruly nature.

How could such a person possibly become the matriarch of Hell

Monarch's Estate?

The thought of it only fueled Helen's disdain.

"Also, investigate whether she still has any contact with the Warrens. If she has ongoing interactions with them, it would be a breach of propriety. Such a woman must never be admitted into our family!" "Understood, Your Highness. I will send someone right away," Gillian responded, and withdrew.

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Gillian sent people out to investigate, and quickly learned about the commotion Rebecca had caused at Northwatch Estate with her

eldest son and daughter-in-law.

The incident had caused quite a stir, and it was easy to gather information. The general sentiment among the onlookers was that the Warren family had been excessively oppressive.

Gillian had this information confirmed and then reported it to Helen, who frowned at the news.

"If Carissa hadn't pushed the matter to an extreme, would the

Warrens have gone to such lengths to cause a scene? Did Sebastian really refuse to treat her?"

"It's true," Gillian confirmed. "The physician's office also issued a statement and clarified that it was due to Madam Warren's lack of virtue that they refused to treat her."

Helen sneered. "Since when do physicians decide whether to treat a patient based on their character? As an outsider, how could he know the internal matters of the Warren family? Clearly, Carissa must have told him she was being mistreated by her in-laws. Sebastian, taking her side, refused to treat the old lady."

"Perhaps it's because upon returning from Victory Pass, General Warren sought to marry General Yates as a secondary wife with his military achievements, and Madam Warren supported this arrangement. That may have displeased Sebastian, given his good relations with the Sinclair family," Gillian added.

Helen's face was filled with disdain. "Regardless of the reasons, one should never cut off another's means of survival. If the Warren family's matriarch wasn't pushed into a desperate situation, she wouldn't have caused such a scene at Northwatch Estate. Aren't

their family affairs already embarrassing enough without airing it to the public?"

Having been coddled since childhood and sheltered in the palace by Victoria, Helen had never been involved in palace conspiracies. Her simple-mindedness led her to believe that if someone caused trouble, it must be the troublemaker's fault-after all, why else would someone bring their troubles to light?

Naturally, Helen had already decided that Carissa was always

wrong, and she disliked her intensely. She was so averse to her that she told Gillian, "Even if he wanted to marry a dog, I would think it a better choice than Carissa!"

Gillian also felt that Carissa was unworthy of Rafael, but now wasn't the time to stoke the flames. She could only say, "You could summon her to the palace tomorrow, Your Highness. Perhaps she will reconsider if she knows the difficulties she faces."

When someone from Evergreen Palace came with a letter for Carissa to come to the palace the next day, Frederick and the two senior maids were extremely anxious.

Everyone knew Helen was a difficult person to deal with. She had high standards, and rarely held anyone in high regard. They even heard that she had suppressed the more senior concubine, Dakota, for many years.

Frederick suggested, "My lady, perhaps you should ask Prince

Rafael to accompany you to the palace. At least with him there, Lady Helen won't make things too difficult."

Carissa smiled. "There's no need for that. Since Lady Helen still lives in the palace, she won't overstep her bounds. At most, she'll say a few harsh words. We've heard harsh words before. It's nothing we

can't handle."

Unable to bear the thought of Carissa facing any more hardship, Lily interjected, "My lady, that's not right. We haven't done anything shameful, so why should we have to endure such harsh words?" Carissa winked. "You make a good point. Should we just go into the palace and have a showdown with Lady Helen and smash Evergreen Palace to pieces? What do you think?"

Lily was taken aback; after a long moment, she quickly exclaimed, "That's absolutely out of the question. That would be asking for trouble!"

Lulu chuckled, and stepped forward to link arms with Lily. "Don't worry, Lily, Lady Sinclair won't be so reckless. If Lady Helen is unreasonable, we still have the empress dowager on our side. The empress dowager is very fond of Lady Sinclair!"

Lily nodded, but then shook her head. "It's true that the empress dowager favors Lady Sinclair, but Lady Helen is her sister. The empress dowager is known to be very indulgent with her, so we might not be able to rely on her for help."

When Lulu heard this, she said, "You're right! What should we do, then?"

She started to worry along with the other three in the room.

Chapter 179

After Rafael left Evergreen Palace, he headed to Serenity Palace to pay respects to Victoria and seek her approval to marry Carissa,

Victoria was delighted.

"Child, you're silently accomplishing great deeds! Just two months ago, your mom was expressing her worries about your marriage to me. Who would have thought you'd meet Cari on the battlefield and instantly hit it off? Cari is a good girl. You need to treat her well and cherish her."

"Mother, I will definitely treat her well," Rafael assured. "However, it seems my mom doesn't like Carissa much. She might summon Carissa to the palace in the next couple of days to give her a hard time." Victoria immediately understood that he was indirectly asking for her help. Her eyes softened with affection as she said kindly, "Don't worry. As long as I'm here, she won't suffer anything." Rafael knelt, and solemnly thanked her. "I'll leave everything to you, Mother."

Victoria gazed at him, a flicker of complex emotions in her eyes. However, she quickly returned to normal. She asked him about the battlefield, if he had been injured, and if his wounds had healed.

Rafael answered all her questions. Victoria insisted on having the royal physician check his health and prescribe some medicine to help him recover. The royal pharmacy had plenty of nourishing supplements, and Rafael left the palace with an armful of them.

Sometimes, he wondered whose son he truly was. Helen never asked him about these things.

After the celebration feast, when he was drunk and sent to

Evergreen Palace, his mother only shook him excitedly. She said that reclaiming the Southern Frontier was an unparalleled achievement, and that they would be remembered in history.

She never asked if he had suffered or been injured. She only cared about the outcome, not the process.

Still, he didn't resent Helen. She had always been like that too focused on her feelings, and expecting everyone to revolve around her.

It couldn't be said she didn't love him. She did, but just enough to maintain a distant relationship between them. It didn't make him resentful, but it also didn't create much hope or expectation. After Rafael left, Victoria lay on the chaise longue, closing her eyes to rest. She didn't say anything for a long time.

The head palace maid, Michelle, stood by. Seeing that Victoria was silent and seemed to be asleep, Michelle tiptoed over and gently covered her with a thin blanket.

The weather was hot, but the palace hall blocked out the sunlight, making it easy to catch a chill while sleeping.

Victoria opened her eyes. "I'm not asleep, just lost in thought."

"Are you worried about Prince Rafael and Lady Sinclair's marriage, Your Majesty? You've known about it for a while. There's no need to worry. Prince Rafael will surely treat Lady Sinclair well," Michelle

said.

Victoria shook her head. "It's not that I'm worried about."

"Are you concerned that Lady Helen will mistreat Lady Sinclair?"

"I'll make sure to warn her not to go too far." Victoria sighed. "I'm just worried about the rift it might cause between the brothers. Salvador's move is clearly aimed at the military power in Rafael's

hands. How could Rafael not see that? Knowing this, how could he

have any opinion on it?

There's no need to worry. Your Majesty Prince Rafael will

stand The king is reclaiming military power to prevent future troubles. Without the Hell Monarch Army, there will never be a day

of brotherly strife." Michelle said.

"Salvador knows his brother doesn't have such ambitions."

"Your Majesty, it's better to be safe than sorry. Besides because the king will feel guilty about taking away Prince Rafael's military power, he will surely treat him doubly well.

Victoria nodded slightly. "I don't oppose his decision. When he informed me of it, I supported it in my heart. With the Sinclair Army backing Carissa and Rafael having the Hell Monarch Army, even if Salvador doesn't doubt them, the court officials would see them as a

major threat. After all, a commoner with a treasure invites trouble."

"Your Majesty sees things clearly. There's nothing to worry about. The king and the prince have been close since childhood. Any estrangement will be temporary."

Victoria sighed softly. "Yes. Without military power, holding a real position in the court can help them share the burden for the

kingdom."

However, Victoria's brows remained furrowed. She had other

concerns.

No one knew a child better than their mother. She knew exactly what Salvador was thinking.

It was

surprising how things came full circle-Salvador was just like his father. She could only hope that, just like his father, Salvador would always put his family and kingdom first.

Chapter 180

The next day, Carissa entered the palace with Lulu.

She first went to pay respects to Victoria. Victoria happily took her hand, and asked about her relationship with Rafael.

Carissa had prepared her explanation well. She recounted how she and Rafael had fallen for each other on the battlefield, and that he had proposed upon returning to the capital. Grateful for his regard, she had accepted.

Victoria knew the real story, but chose not to mention Salvador's three-month ultimatum. She merely smiled and said it was all a matter of fate, divinely ordained.

After chatting for the length of about half an hour, Victoria mentioned summoning Helen.

Understanding Victoria's good intentions, Carissa shook her head. Lady Helen has already summoned me to Evergreen Palace. If I rely on your favor and defy her, she will only resent me more once I marry into the family. You may protect me this time, but you won't always be able to shield me in the future."

Victoria gazed at her. "You're always so understanding and considerate. It makes my heart ache. My younger sister has been spoiled by my maternal family and me. Her temperament is difficult. Once she moves in with you, she might make your life hard. Let's see what she says today. If she's too harsh, I'll have a word with her."

Carissa smiled warmly. "Thank you for your kindness, Your Majesty. With your protection, I won't suffer any hardship."

Victoria returned her warm smile. "Go on, then. I'll send someone to check on you later."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Carissa curtsied, and left.

At noon, under the scorching sun, Carissa and Lulu followed the attendant, who led them through the garden.

The attendant from Evergreen Palace had been waiting outside for them.

There were shaded corridors they could have taken, but the

attendant led them through the hottest parts of the garden, taking a long, winding route. They even retraced their steps a couple of times, making the journey unnecessarily long.

Carissa felt fine, being a martial artist. Lulu, on the other hand, struggled with the heat. She was sweating profusely, her head spinning and aching. She felt nauseous, and was on the verge of a heatstroke. Carissa had anticipated that their visit to the palace today wouldn't be simple, so she brought along the medicines Sebastian had given her.

Seeing Lulu's discomfort, she took out a Verdant Pill—a pill often used for digestive issues and to relieve summer heat—and gave it to her. Then, Carissa fanned her to help cool her down..

Noticing that the attendant looked on the verge of fainting, Carissa smiled. "Sir, I have a Verdant Pill here. Would you like to take one?"

Because of Helen's instructions, the attendant had led Carissa under the scorching sun. After half an hour, he was already struggling, his lips turning pale. Hearing Carissa's offer and seeing no one else around, he lowered his eyes and whispered, "Thank you for the medicine, my lady."

The attendant was a low-ranking servant from Evergreen Palace. Carissa was clearly aware he was making things difficult for her on orders. Yet, she still offered him medicine.

He took the offered pill, and swallowed it. The taste was unpleasant,

but it spread a cooling sensation through him, dispelling the oppressive heat.

In the palace, low-ranking attendants and maids were the most despised and often ignored. To be cared for even a little brought an unusual warmth to his heart.

He quickly glanced at Carissa and said, "Please follow me, my lady."

This time, the attendant led her along the shaded corridors, avoiding the harsh sunlight, and headed towards Evergreen Palace.

Upon reaching the entrance of Evergreen Palace, the attendant ran inside to announce their arrival.

Shortly after, an older palace maid came out, scrutinizing Carissa. She asked indifferently, "Are you Lady Sinclair?"

"Yes, I am," Carissa replied, curtsying. "Greetings."

The palace maid maintained her indifferent tone. "No need for such formalities, my lady. Please follow me. Lady Helen is expecting you."

Carissa followed the maid into the palace, ready to face whatever lay ahead.