

War Song 181

Chapter 181

Leaving Lulu outside the hall, Carissa lowered her head and stepped inside.

The white marble tiles beneath her feet were so polished that it looked like mirrors, reflecting the opulent and luxurious decor that surrounded her.

Carissa quickly glanced up and saw a distinguished woman seated on a chair in the center of the hall, dressed in a regal purple gown. Her hair was styled in an elaborate bun, adorned with luxurious jewels, and her features bore a slight resemblance to Rafael's.

Carissa knew this woman was Helen.

Stepping forward, Carissa knelt. "Greetings, Your Highness."

Carissa's posture was perfect, her gaze lowered, and her dress neatly arranged. The slight movement of her hairpins as she knelt was just right, leaving no room for criticism. After all, she had spent a year learning proper etiquette upon her return from Meadow Ridge, under the guidance of the palace tutors.

Helen's cold voice pierced the air, "Raise your head, and let me see your alluring face."

Carissa obeyed, lifting her head slowly to face Helen. Although their eyes did not meet, she could feel the coldness in the older woman's gaze.

"Hmph. You're indeed a beauty. No wonder my son is bewitched by

you."

Helen extended her hand, and the elderly maid beside her helped her down from the chair. Standing before Carissa, Helen raised her hand, adorned with long protective claw rings, aiming to

Carissa across the face.

"You vile woman! How dare you seduce my son?"

Before the slap could land, Carissa swiftly grabbed Helen's wrist

Startled and furious, Helen was about to speak when Carissa said Your Highness, if you wish to punish this humble servant, please instruct the palace maids to do so. I have practiced martial arts since childhood and possess inner force.

"Should anyone harm me, my inner force will retaliate tenfold. I dare not harm you, Your Highness. But if you insist on striking me personally, please forgive my offense in advance."

Helen hesitated, recalling that Rafael had mentioned Carissa's prowess on the battlefield, where she had cut enemies into three pieces with a single stroke.

It didn't seem like a lie.

Whether it was true or not, Helen couldn't risk getting hurt by this woman. She withdrew her hand and glanced at the elderly maid beside her. Knowing the maid was too old for such exertions, Helen ordered a strong male servant to be summoned.

To be slapped upon the first meeting was an immense humiliation Helen wanted Carissa to know this was just the beginning of her trials.

A burly male servant entered. Following Helen's command, he raised his hand to strike Carissa's face.

Before his hand could make contact, he was sent flying, landing heavily on the high-backed chair where Helen had been sitting moments before! He spat out a mouthful of blood and passed out instantly. Helen was horrified. She had been watching Carissa closely, and the girl hadn't moved a muscle.

He quickly carried the male servant out, though his

blood had stained Helen's chair. Despite the maids best efforts to clean it the scent of blood lingered. Helen, known for her love of cleanliness, would likely never sit in that chair again. Fortunately, such chairs were not in short supply, and the servants promptly brought a replacement.

Carissa's display of power left everyone in Evergreen Palace speechless. Even the usually composed elder maid was at a loss for words, her hands trembling as she supported Helen.

Helen sat back in her chair, staring at Carissa's stunningly beautiful face. A sense of suffocation washed over her, a feeling she had only ever experienced around her son. To her dismay, she now felt it from this young woman.

Carissa's kneeling posture exuded the authority of a seasoned

warrior, perhaps a residual effect from her recent return from the battlefield. Helen could almost hear the echoes of combat in the air around them.

This only intensified Helen's displeasure.

Taking a deep breath, she looked at Carissa coldly and said, "You are well aware of your status. You're not worthy of my son. I hope you understand your place. In consideration of the merits you earned at the Southern Frontier, I will overlook today's offense."

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Carissa looked up, her expression solemn. "Thank you for your leniency, Your Highness. As for my status and whether I am worthy of the marshal, that is for him to decide. Either way, since he proposed, I will marry him."

"He's simply momentarily confused! He will come to his senses eventually. You're a woman who was discarded by the Warren family. He's only intrigued by you for now, but he will abandon you once the novelty wears off. In the end, you will be the one who suffers. I'm looking out for you. Why are you so ungrateful?" Helen argued furiously.

divorced Barrett. I'm not a discarded woman-I requested the divorce edict. If anyone was discarded, it was him. The Warren family had no say in it. Nevertheless, I appreciate your concern," Carissa replied. Still angry, Helen retorted, "Regardless of who left whom, you're still a woman who has married once. A virtuous woman does not remarry. Since you chose to divorce, you should stay at home and not aim for higher status. What you're doing now is tarnishing the reputation of women."

"Men can divorce and remarry, even take multiple wives and concubines. Why can't women remarry? As for tarnishing the reputation of women, many women see me as a role model. Even the king said at the celebration feast that women of the realm should emulate me," Carissa said calmly, maintaining her composure.

Helen scoffed. "You're sharp-tongued and argumentative. If all women were like you, the world would be in chaos. Women should adhere to their expected roles and behavior-obedience to their father before marriage, obedience to their husband after marriage,

and obedience to their son after the husband's death. They should. also have proper virtue, speech, appearance, and skills.

"And you? You think that just because you have some military achievements, you're a role model for women? What about those who can't go to the battlefield? Are they supposed to be doomed?" That argument sounded familiar to Carissa. She remembered asking Aurora a similar question.

Carissa calmly countered, "Being a role model doesn't mean all women need to go to the battlefield. The king's praise was not just for my military accomplishments, but also my indomitable spirit.

"As for the expected roles and behavior for women... As you mentioned earlier, Your Highness, a woman should obey her father at home, her husband after marriage, and her son if widowed. In that case, shouldn't you now follow the marshal's wishes?"

"How dare you criticize the late king?" Helen slammed her hand on the armrest, her voice filled with anger.

Carissa raised her hands in surrender. "I mean no disrespect to the late king. He was a wise and enlightened ruler whom I deeply respected. How could I dare to speak ill of him?"

Helen spoke coldly, "It seems you've used your alluring appearance and sharp tongue to deceive my son. You speak of grand principles, but your heart is full of petty schemes. I know exactly what you're up

1. to.

"The Duke of Northwatch's family is in decline. And you, an orphaned girl and a discarded woman, are the only one left. You aim to join the royal family to make those who once looked down on and insulted you see you differently, to be jealous of you.

"Perhaps you even want to use the status of a princess consort to take revenge on them."

Carissa's smile didn't reach her eyes. "Your Highness, you're overthinking this. If I wanted revenge, I wouldn't need to rely on anyone."

Helen recalled the display of Carissa's strength earlier and hesitated. The stubborn girl was indeed beyond her control.

Due to Carissa's military achievements, physically dragging her out, and punishing her was out of the question. The intended slap was merely meant to establish authority, to make her realize the

difficulties ahead and make her retreat.

As one of the late king's concubines and a palace veteran, Helen slapping Carissa could still be justified. But that slap hadn't even touched Carissa, and instead, Helen's own people had gotten hurt. Helen had never suffered such a setback in her life. Realizing that confrontation wouldn't work with Carissa, her head ached.

She waved her hand dismissively. "Enough. Don't think about marrying into the royal family. I'll find you a suitable match- someone reliable to inherit your father's title."

"Thank you for your kindness, Your Highness. However, I have already given the marshal my word. A person without integrity

cannot stand in society. I don't wish to be someone who breaks their word," Carissa responded.

Helen glared at her.

Carissa was such a brazen girl. She spoke of climbing the social ladder with such righteousness!

What infuriated Helen the most was that Carissa, who kept proclaiming her desire to marry Rafael, showed no inclination to curry favor with her future mother-in-law!

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Helen didn't want to let Carissa leave so easily, at least not before she gave up the idea of marrying into the royal family. However, Carissa didn't mind kneeling. Having been punished with kneeling plenty of times at Meadow Ridge, she had grown accustomed to it.

She had no intention of currying favor with Helen, who already had plenty of people around her doing just that. Besides, Carissa's marriage to Rafael was a mutually beneficial arrangement. There was no need for unnecessary flattery.

In fact, Helen's straightforward personality made her easier to deal with. She was fierce but not cunning, which was preferable to those who were two-faced.

Carissa wouldn't bully Helen, but she wouldn't let her future mother-in-law bully her either. It was much like when Carissa had to deal with Rebecca when she was still part of the Warren family.

Before Barrett returned, Rebecca had always been kind to her, so Carissa naturally showed her respect. But after Barrett's return and his decision to marry Aurora, Rebecca's attitude changed, and Carissa no longer needed to endure it.

As the standoff continued, a voice called out, "Mom!"

Kiera entered the hall with her attendants.

Kiera, who had just turned fifteen and recently had her debutante ball, was a delicate and charming girl with a hint of royal elegance. She wore a light yellow blouse and a matching pleated skirt.

As she walked in, she stole curious glances at Carissa, who was still kneeling on the floor.

Having heard from the palace attendants that Carissa, the female general, was at Evergreen Palace, Kiera had hurried over to see her.

She hadn't expected to find her kneeling, seemingly at odds with Helen.

Carissa looked up and met Kiera's gaze. Since she was already kneeling, she greeted, "Greetings, Your Highness."

"General Sinclair? Are you really General Sinclair?" Kiera exclaimed excitedly, hurrying over to help her up. "Please, rise!"

"Kiki!" Helen called the princess by her nickname, her expression displeased. "Who allowed you to come here?"

"Mom, I heard General Sinclair was here and came to see her." Kiera pouted slightly as she helped Carissa to her feet. "How could you let General Sinclair kneel here? She just returned from the battlefield and is injured."

Helen rolled her eyes. "What's so unusual about a general being injured? Doesn't your elder brother get injured often too?"

"Don't you feel sorry when he gets hurt? General Sinclair's family would also be heartbroken if she were injured," Kiera replied.

Helen scoffed. "What family does she have left? They're all dead."

Carissa's eyes darkened, and anger radiated from her.

"Mind your words, Your Highness. My father and brothers sacrificed themselves on the Southern Frontier battlefield. And my family was massacred by Westhaven spies.

"That was a great tragedy for Starhaven. Your flippant remark about their deaths not only wounds me, but also pains the king of Starhaven, the entire court, and the people of this nation."

Helen felt a headache coming on. She had never involved herself in state affairs, battles, or court politics—they always seemed distant and irrelevant to her. Hearing Carissa speak with such righteous fervor, echoing her son's sentiments, filled her with an inexplicable

sense of suffocation.

It was infuriating! She couldn't even refute a single word.

Helen waved her hand impatiently. "Leave, all of you. I need my
afternoon rest.

After saying that, she motioned for Gillian to help her away.

"Farewell, Your Highness," Carissa said loudly as she bowed deeply.

Startled by Carissa's sudden loud voice, Helen stumbled slightly and nearly fell, but fortunately, Gillian's strong grip steadied her. Helen was frantic and humiliated. It felt like she had been embarrassed in

front of that little wretch!

She straightened her headdress, lifted her chin, and walked away with Gillian's support, maintaining her haughty demeanor. Carissa exhaled softly as she watched Helen leave. Her future mother-in-law wasn't difficult to deal with, just arrogant.

Turning to Kiera, she saw the princess looking at her with admiration. Carissa couldn't help but smile.

"Your Highness, it's been a long time."

Kiera's eyes widened in curiosity. "Have we met before?"

"We met when you were a child. Do you not remember?"

Carissa recalled that during one of Salvador's visits to Northwatch Estate, he had been carrying a little girl on his back, who was none other than Kiera.

Kiera thought for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't remember.

But she quickly brightened up, her eyes sparkling with joy. "General Sinclair, I heard you're going to marry my brother. Does that mean

you'll be my sister-in-law? That's wonderful!"

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Looking at the cute and innocent princess, Carissa recalled how she looked when she was a child-chubby and adorable.

Kiera had slimmed down a bit, but still had cherubic cheeks that gave her a sweet and charming appearance. Especially when she smiled, her dimples were shallow, and her eyes seemed filled with sweetness, making people happy just to see her.

Carissa smiled. "If everything goes well, I should be your sister-in-law."

Kiera shook Carissa's arm, stars twinkling in her eyes. "I admire you so much. The queen dowager and the king say you're the most outstanding female general in our era. It used to be Aurora, but I don't like her much. I met her once-she was very aloof and acted rudely. She didn't have the grace and charm that you have, being both a formidable general and a captivating woman."

The princess stuck out her tongue playfully. "But Mother says girls shouldn't casually talk about other girls; it can easily cause

misunderstandings and tarnish their reputations. So, I won't say anything else. I just don't like her."

Seeing the young girl smile, Carissa couldn't help but smile too. This sweet girl seemed to always bring joy to others.

Kiera wanted to keep chatting, but Lydia was outside and called for her, "Your Highness, Lady Helen is calling for you. She has something to discuss."

Kiera responded before turning back to look at Carissa. "Carissa, don't be afraid of Mom. She's not fierce at all."

"You're right. Lady Helen is very kind and interesting," Carissa replied with a smile..

Indeed. Helen was a kind person who wanted to slap someone at their first meeting, and an interesting person who stumbled to escape the situation.

Kiera nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, exactly! She's very kind and interesting. You're absolutely right, Carissa."

"Your Highness!" Lydia called again

"I'm coming!" Kiera replied, reluctantly holding onto Carissa's wrist. Carissa, when will you come back to the palace? I want to hear your stories from the battlefield." "Alright. I'll likely be back in a few days, I'm sure Lady Helen will summon me again soon."

Lydia looked frustrated upon hearing Carissa's words.

How did Carissa know? In her chambers, Helen had just mentioned that she planned to summon Carissa again in a few days to continue making things difficult for her. Kiera skipped away.

Carissa glanced at the main hall. This place was truly a feast for the eyes. There were antiques, paintings, cherry wood furniture, red ruby ornaments, double-sided embroidered screens, magnificent carved beams, and painted rafters.

There was only one word to describe this place-opulent!

A servant led Carissa out. Lulu was waiting anxiously in the shade outside, and rushed to her side as soon as she saw her mistress.

"My lady, did Lady Helen make things difficult for you?" "No, Lady Helen was very kind," Carissa said with a smile. Lulu was skeptical, "Really? But I just saw her storming

Lulu had been hiding in the shade and watching from a distance. She had clearly seen Helen leave the hall looking like an angry, puffed-up chick, and her steps were erratic.

"Really? I didn't notice she was angry. I found her quite... chatty," Carissa said, shielding her forehead with her hand to block the sun. Let's go. Let's visit the queen dowager's palace for a bit, have some tea, and then head back to the manor."

In Serenity Palace, Victoria laughed so hard she doubled over, tears streaming down her face.

Wiping her tears with a handkerchief handed to her by Michelle, she said to Carissa, "You're her nemesis. My sister has always needed someone to keep her in check. I wish I had been there to see it. She's used to having her way, thinking anyone in her grasp is doomed. Now, she's finally met her match."

It wasn't that Carissa had come to complain.

Victoria had already sent people to observe the scene. So, by the time Carissa arrived, Victoria had already heard the report.

Carissa drank her chilled lemon tea, and Lulu also had a cup. Feeling parched from their walk, the two drank heartily, paying no mind to Victoria's laughter. The journey had been exhausting, leaving their throats dry and burning from thirst.

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After finishing her drink, Carissa said, "Your Majesty, Lady Helen is actually quite easy to get along with"

Or at least, Helen wasn't difficult to handle.

"Easy to get along with? Are we talking about the same person? Victoria had stopped laughing but her eyes twinkled brightly as she looked at Carissa. "Everyone in the palace is afraid of her. Even the queen tries to avoid her."

Carissa could understand that.

With such arrogance and haughtiness, who wouldn't steer clear of Helen? Any sensible person would avoid getting bitten by a mad dog, right?

However, if given the choice between dealing with Kylie or with someone like Helen, Carissa would still choose the latter. Helen may be domineering, but she was easier to handle. On the other hand, Kylie might seem polite on the surface, but her words were filled with hidden barbs.

Carissa reached for another cup of iced tea, but Lulu quickly

stopped her. "My lady, you shouldn't drink too much. Sebastian said your body needs nurturing, and you shouldn't drink cold drinks or iced water."

Hearing this, Victoria ordered a cup of hot lemon tea, then said, "The weather is hot, and tea is the best for quenching thirst. You must listen to the doctor and take good care of your health. After your wedding, we expect you to help the royal family prosper."

Carissa's face turned crimson. She quickly picked up the cup of tea and turned away to drink it.

"Still shy, are you? It's inevitable, isn't it?" Victoria teased.

"What Inevitable thing are you talking about, Mother?" came Salvador's cheerful voice from the door.

O +15 BONUS

A flash of bright yellow clothing marked the king's entrance. He walked in with a tall, commanding presence and a smile on his face. "Hello, Mother."

Carissa hurriedly stood up. "Greetings, Your Majesty."

Salvador's gaze briefly swept over Carissa's face. "Oh? You're here too, Carissa?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I came to pay my respects to the queen dowager and Lady Helen," Carissa replied, lowering her gaze.

Salvador took a seat, looking at Carissa with a smile. "I see. I know Mother is quite fond of you, Carissa. Whenever you have the time, do come and keep her company."

"I will, Your Majesty."

Victoria turned to Carissa. "You may leave now. I believe the king. has something to discuss with me."

Salvador waved his hand. "There's no need for that. I was just taking a break from reviewing memorials and came to enjoy some peace here. Since Carissa is here, it's perfect timing. I want to ask your about the situation at the Southern Frontier."

Victoria laughed. "You just said you were tired from reviewing. memorials, and now you're talking about military affairs? If you want to know about the war, isn't it better to ask your younger brother?" "No matter. Since Carissa is here, I might as well ask her."

Salvador appeared very affable, but his gaze towards Carissa was somewhat intense.

+15 HOUS

"I heard that when Simonton City was captured, you led the Mystic Army as the vanguard and Barrett assisted you. So, was the city taken by your combined efforts?" the king asked. Carissa wasn't sure why Salvador was bringing up Barrett. The details of that part of the battle had been clearly reported by Rafael. and the other generals.

Unaware of the intricacies of court politics, she cautiously replied, Your Majesty, teamwork is crucial on the battlefield. The marshal ordered General Warren to assist me and the Mystic Army."

Salvador nodded. "Yes, I understand that, as I've been on the battlefield myself. But don't you think it was risky for Rafael to have you two work together, given your personal grievances?"

Carissa raised her brows in surprise. "The marshal's decision was a good one. It's proven by the fact that we successfully reclaimed Simonton City. As for any personal grievances between General Warren and I, we were able to set them aside when facing a common enemy."

Salvador's expression grew stern. "You may have set them aside, but Aurora did not. She disrupted your operations, nearly causing the siege to fail.

"Shouldn't Rafael have anticipated that Aurora's jealousy might jeopardize the mission? Securing the Southern Frontier was crucial, so all risks should have been mitigated. Yet, he didn't."

Carissa felt a chill run through her. Straightening her back, she replied seriously, "Your Majesty, I don't understand what you're trying to say, but it is impossible to guarantee everything on the battlefield. The resources and people available were limited, but the marshal made proper arrangements. Aurora was assigned to the rear guard,

but she disobeyed orders. How can this be blamed on the marshal?"

Salvador gazed at her deeply with an unreadable look on his face. Then, he slowly smiled. "I haven't said much, yet you are already defending him."

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Carissa felt a strange sense of unease, though she couldn't quite put her finger on it—something like hostility, yet not quite. Especially after Salvador had ended his remarks with that enigmatic smile. What did he mean by she was already defending Rafael? It was baffling.

She paused before speaking, "Your Majesty, in war, there are no absolutely foolproof decisions, especially during decisive battles. It's practically taking a gamble. Our strategy for attacking Simonton City was sound. Minor errors should be forgiven, considering we ultimately reclaimed the Southern Frontier and achieved victory."

Salvador burst into hearty laughter. "I only asked a question or two. Look at you, so nervous. There's no need to worry. I was just asking out of curiosity."

Carissa felt her back dampen with sweat.

It was hardly a casual inquiry. Salvador had seemed so serious. It was almost as if he was ready to lay blame on someone!

Holding Rafael accountable for the mistakes of his soldiers seemed unnecessary, especially since they had successfully reclaimed the Southern Frontier. Yet, Salvador's intentions were hard to decipher. Feeling it was best not to linger, Carissa bowed and said, "I won't disturb Your Majesties any longer. I will take my leave."

Victoria, who had been listening with a stern expression, softened slightly. "You may go."

As Carissa reached the door and turned to leave, she took Lulu's

hand. Lulu's palm was sweaty, just like Carissa's. Salvador's sudden arrival, his lack of small talk, and the seemingly accusatory nature of his questions had frightened Lulu. Watching Carissa depart, Salvador's gaze slowly shifted back to Victoria. Meeting his mother's stern eyes, he felt an unspoken tension and chuckled.

"See how scared she was?"

Victoria sighed. "Why did you frighten her?"

"It's amusing. I wanted to see her flustered, unlike her usual impassive demeanor. She was a bit like when she was younger. though she's changed a lot since then."

Victoria's expression grew serious, "People change. She has faced many hardships these past years. Do you find comfort in unsettling her, in seeing her worried? Son, if you need amusement, go to the harem and amuse yourself with your concubines. Don't frighten or bully Carissa

"Did I upset you? Alright, I won't tease her anymore. Is that

acceptable?" Salvador chuckled and waved for Derek. "Bring the list of gifts I've prepared for my younger brother's wedding for my

mother to review.

Upon hearing this, Victoria's expression softened a bit.

Derek presented the list, and Michelle unfurled it for Victoria. The more the queen dowager read, the more satisfied she seemed. It was clear that Salvador still thought of his younger brother fondly.

The list included royal gifts, which could not be sold, as well as items bought from the market, such as gold and silver jewelry, precious gems, and malachite. Most of these items came from jewelry shops in town.

The Royal Management Department procured silks, satin, and fine fabrics of the highest quality. This included over twenty rolls of brocade, which were extremely valuable.

The Royal Management Department also procured furniture, partition screens, wooden chests, wardrobes, and other large items. These items were made from exquisite woods like zebrawood and mahogany.

There were also several jewelry boxes and a vanity.

Victoria looked up. "Why did you even include gifts for the bride's dowry?"

"Well, some of these are for Carissa's trousseau," Salvador explained. "After all, we have a bond from our youth. I was very close to Zion, and now that he's gone, I want to make up for his absence by preparing gifts for his sister."

Zion Sinclair was Carissa's third brother.

Among the Sinclair family's young generals, Salvador had the closest friendship with Zion. However, Salvador held the greatest respect for Hector, the eldest general among them.

"It pleases me greatly to see you thinking and acting this way," Victoria said.

She ordered the list to be put away and dismissed everyone, clearly indicating she wanted to speak privately with Salvador.

Once the palace doors were closed, Victoria placed her hands on her lap, still feeling a tinge of unease. "What were you trying to accomplish by testing Cari like that?"

Salvador smiled gently. "Mother, I just wanted to see if she would truly protect my younger brother. And, of course, to have a bit of fun. with her."

"Now that you see she indeed cares deeply for your brother, how do you feel?"

Salvador's smile remained, though it was tinged with a hint of melancholy. "Naturally, I'm pleased for my brother. At least Carissa is genuinely devoted to him."

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Victoria regarded her son for a while before speaking, "Your father had someone in his heart as well-Melanie. But because he saw Hector as a brother, whenever Melanie attended an event or visited the palace, your father would make himself scarce.

"That was his way of showing the utmost respect to Hector. In fact, Melanie never knew of your father's feelings, even after she passed."

Salvador's expression froze momentarily, his smile slowly fading to be replaced by a serious demeanor.

"Mother, I understand your point."

After a moment of silence, he asked, "Didn't you mind? You still treat Carissa so well."

Victoria smiled gently, her expression serene. "Why would I mind? Aren't there many women in the palace already? Besides, I married him to be the crown princess, the queen, and now the queen dowager. If I were to expect true affection from the king, would that not be unreasonable?

"As for your father, he was aware of his position. A king's

responsibilities are to govern diligently, care for the people, protect the country, reclaim lost territories, and eradicate corruption to ensure peace and prosperity. He never forgot his duties.

"Perhaps he didn't always achieve the desired outcomes, but he did his best. The king's power is supreme, yet he has only two eyes and two hands. Many tasks must be delegated to others, all of whom have their own agendas. How could your father control everyone, especially with the rise of powerful families and corruption after his illness, which made your ascension difficult?"

Victoria's words carried a weight of earnestness as she continued, "You face many challenges ahead. You need help, ideally from

O-BONGS Rafael Since you have reclaimed military authority, if you have any tasks for Rafael, you should assign them to him. I have watched him grow since he was young and know his character and virtues well. Among your many brothers, he is the most capable and loyal to you.

*A king gains and loses as he goes.

The gravity of Victoria's words left Salvador deep in thought.

After a long pause, he lifted his head, his gaze resolute. 'Rest assured, Mother. I know what to do.

Victoria picked up a fan and waved it a few times. "It's truly hot today. I need to summon an official from the Astrology Department to inquire about the best dates this year. You go ahead with your _tasks." "Yes, I will take my leave." Salvador stood and nodded respectfully before exiting.

As Carissa left the palace, she saw Rafael's carriage waiting outside.

She approached swiftly, her expression serious. "Marshal, I need to discuss something with you."

Rafael, dressed in splendid robes and standing tall, replied, "Get in the carriage."

Carissa hesitated for a moment before turning to Lulu. "You should return to the estate first. The marshal will take me home."

Though Lulu felt that Carissa and Rafael sharing a carriage alone was somewhat improper, given their forthcoming marriage, she said nothing more and gracefully boarded the Sinclair family's carriage. Rafael's royal carriage was spacious and luxurious. Inside, the space remained ample and impeccably clean, with a faint scent of orchids.

Today, Rafael looked impeccably clean and handsome, a far cry from the scruffy Hell Monarch Army commander Carissa had first

seen.

In the carriage, Carissa recounted Salvador's questions from earlier. Expecting Rafael to be serious, she was surprised to see him smile.

"Oh? Is that how you responded?" Rafael asked, his lips curving upward.

"Did I answer incorrectly?" Carissa was puzzled by his reaction.

Rafael's eyes, deep and enigmatic like the ocean, remained fixed on her face. "No, there was nothing wrong with your answer. Salvador has been on the battlefield himself; he should understand that there are no foolproof strategies in war.

"After all, it's people who go to battle, not wooden soldiers. People have thoughts, fears, and ambitions, so it's impossible to understand every individual's mindset and ensure every decision is executed flawlessly."

"You're right, Marshal," Carissa agreed with a nod.

Rafael propped his elbow on the carriage window, a thoughtful expression on his face. "You don't need to call me Marshal anymore. Since we're to be married, you can call me..."

"Yes, Your Highness. I should be calling you Your Highness now," Carissa said, her smile radiant and captivating.

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Rafael remained silent.

Was there really a difference between being called Marshal and being called Your Highness?

"Why are you waiting here?" Carissa asked,

Snapping back to the present, Rafael replied, "Oh, I wanted to see if my mom was causing you any trouble. She can be difficult to deal with, can't she? But don't worry. Once we're my residence, she won't be as audacious as she is in the palace. After all, the people in my household will listen to me and to you, not necessarily to her."

Carissa smiled. "She's not too difficult to deal with. She has caused

some trouble, but her methods are... somewhat crude and manageable."

Rafael tilted his head.

Crude methods? That was an apt description. Helen knew nothing of subtlety. She had been pampered all her life. A tantrum or a sulk would usually get her what she wanted.

"She does lack finesse. I remember the harshest method she used against Lady Dakota when I lived in the palace. When Lady Dakota was pregnant with my seventh sister, Father would always accompany her.

"To get his attention, my mom tried to soak herself in cold water to fake an illness as an excuse to summon him. But she only managed to stay in the water for a moment before she jumped out, cursing and saying she didn't care if he came or not, but she wouldn't mistreat herself," Rafael recounted.

Carissa chuckled at the image. "Lady Helen is indeed amusing."

Looking at her smiling face, Rafael found it hard to look away. Amusing? I think your use of 'amusing' is quite amusing in itself."

Helen was certainly not an amusing person. In Rafael's memories, she was not only spoiled and willful, but also unreasonable. If others gave her a little leeway, she would demand tenfold.

Rafael's great-grandfather, a renowned scholar, would have died unhappy knowing he had such a granddaughter. On his deathbed, he had one last wish: to avoid any scandal that might ruin the family's reputation.

Clearly fearing her, Salvador had asked Helen to leave the palace. and live with Rafael.

Everyone in the palace was afraid of her. It wasn't that she was particularly powerful. Rather, even the most privileged young ladies from noble or official families couldn't handle her relentless and unreasonable behavior.

The carriage came to a halt.

Dylan lifted the curtain. "Your Highness, we've arrived at Northwatch Estate."

Rafael shot him a cold glare. Was Dylan incapable of taking a detour? How many rounds could the carriage make around the capital before running out of fodder?

Dylan, bewildered by the glare, wondered what he had done wrong to deserve such a harsh look.

"I'll head in first. Your Highness, take care," said Carissa, hopping out of the carriage.

She waved at Rafael and entered the estate without pausing.

"Your Highness, should we head straight back to your estate or take

a detour around the capital?" Dylan asked, noticing Rafael's reluctance to return directly.

"Back to the estate!" Rafael snapped. "When you should have taken a detour, you didn't. How stupid can you be?"

It felt like Rafael and Carissa hadn't had much time to talk before they arrived at Northwatch Estate. It was mainly because Carissa had taken time to recount her conversation with Salvador.

It was rare to have a private carriage ride with her, and there were many things he still wanted to say. Bringing such a clumsy person like Dylan along only proved Rafael's lack of wisdom as a marshal. Seeing Rafael's irritated mood, Dylan dared not dawdle. He urged the horses to a swift pace, and they soon arrived at Hell Monarch Estate.

As Rafael got out of the carriage, he was met by Luke.

"Your Highness, how about proposing on the day after tomorrow? It's a good date, and we need to inform Lord Sinclair in advance. It's customary to have Lady Sinclair's elder present during the proposal." Rafael's gaze was resolute. "That sounds fine. The sooner, the better."

Luke continued, "By the way, Grand Princess Eleanor's birthday is tomorrow. She is hosting a grand celebration and sent you an invitation. We have prepared several gifts. Please choose one from the study." "Send the gift, but I won't be attending," Rafael replied.

"Grand Princess Eleanor also sent an invitation to Lady Sinclair. I heard Lady Sinclair will likely be attending," Luke added.

"Really?" Rafael frowned.

Eleanor, the grand princess, was the late king's sister, making her Rafael's aunt. He knew her character well.

She was like a snake in the grass-sweet in appearance but venomous at heart. She was known for her tea parties and banquets, where she mingled with the capital's powerful families and secured many connections through cial gatherings.

Many noble families arranged marriages at her parties. If anyone had ever been truly wronged in her presence, it was undoubtedly Helen. Eleanor was skilled in manipulation and had committed many sinister

acts.

She was a sick-minded person. After giving birth to a daughter, she stopped having children and instead gathered many concubines for her husband. When the concubines gave birth, she took their children, then executed the concubines. Her methods were extremely cruel.

Once, a concubine had argued with Eleanor, so she simply didn't want the concubine's child. After killing the concubine's child in front of her, Eleanor had the concubine's fingers and toes chopped off one by one, leaving her to suffer for days before she finally died.

Such cruel deeds were well-hidden. After all, few would inquire into the affairs of a princess!

Rafael learned of this when his uncle, Eleanor's husband, got drunk and lost his way in the palace. Rafael had found him hiding behind a rock, sobbing uncontrollably. When questioned, the man revealed the many cruel acts that happened within their residence. From then on, Rafael held no regard for his aunt and avoided her as much as possible.

+IS BONUS

During the late king's reign, Eleanor was somewhat restrained. But now, without the late king's presence, she was likely even more unruly.

Her daughter, Jessica, was just as wicked. She frequently abused her maids and servants. Once, she even threw stones at Helen, causing her severe injuries. Helen could not complain because, as an elder, she had to endure the princess' wrath. And after all, she was well aware of the princess' cruel nature.

Furthermore, there was a longstanding enmity between Eleanor and Hector.

Hector was once a renowned warrior who struck awe across the

land. At the age of seventeen, he led eight hundred cavalymen to defeat ten thousand Huns, capturing worldwide attention.

At nineteen years old, he held Victory Pass against twenty thousand Westhaven troops with just a thousand men, ensuring the enemy- gained not a single advantage. He outmaneuvered them in the wilds around Victory Pass, leaving them lost and disoriented.

And when he was twenty-one, he was awarded the title of Wolf Lord. If not for the court officials' concerns about his youth and fear of him becoming arrogant, he would have already been promoted to the rank of Grand General.

Who could remain unmoved by such a figure?

Deeply infatuated with Hector, Eleanor was determined to marry him. However, her father was still alive at the time, and he vehemently opposed the idea.

How could such a formidable warrior be reduced to marrying a princess and becoming her consort? It seemed like a waste of his talent.

Moreover, Hector was already betrothed to Melanie, Grand General

Dominic's daughter. Despite Eleanor's efforts, she could not win Hector's affection, and only caused him to develop a deep aversion to her.

Ultimately, Hector married Melanie, and Eleanor's hatred for Hector and his wife became intense.

According to Jacob, when Carissa and Barrett divorced, Eleanor had instigated many of the scandalous rumors that had gone around. Though it was a divorce granted by the king, Eleanor consistently referred to Carissa as a discarded woman, leading to disdain for Carissa among the noble families in the capital.

If not for that, how could Rebecca have made such a fuss with her meager capabilities?

Inviting Carissa to her birthday celebration was clearly a malicious act by Eleanor. Carissa shouldn't go, but if she chose to attend, Rafael would respect her decision.

After some thought, Rafael ordered, "Go to Northwatch Estate and find out if Carissa will be attending."

"Understood, Your Highness. I'll go personally."

With that, Luke turned and left.

Chapter 190

Eleanor's invitation did indeed arrive at Northwatch Estate. Also, the celebration was tomorrow, but the invitation was delivered only today.

Clearly, there was no time to prepare a proper gift, so Carissa would have to choose something from the storeroom.

"Grand Princess Eleanor has always held a grudge against your family. When the late Madam Sinclair was still alive, Grand Princess Eleanor never invited her to any of her parties. Why has she invited you this time? Could it be that a crowd of gossipers is waiting for you?" said Lily, who was quite worried.

Carissa set the invitation aside. "That's a certainty."

She had heard about the past grievances between her parents and Eleanor. When she returned from Meadow Ridge after the deaths of her father and brothers, Carissa found out that Eleanor had sent her mother, Melanie, a "gift" that year.

Eleanor had specifically found someone to carve a miniature

sculpture. It was a small, intricately carved sculpture of a chastity belt that was maliciously inscribed with the word 'Legacy'. It was a cruel gesture, implying that the women of the Duke of Northwatch's family were expected to remain widows and not remarry.

The current invitation was probably a result of Carissa's recent achievements and her status as the duke's legitimate daughter. Marrying her could potentially elevate someone's rank, which might tempt some ladies from declining noble houses.

Eleanor aimed to block her path completely, so that even if Carissa remarried, she could only wed a merchant or a commoner. Yet, how could a merchant or commoner ever achieve nobility? Such a scenario would make the notion of inheriting a title laughable.

-15 BONUS

Lulu spoke up, "My lady, should we not go?"

Carissa took a seat, her gaze cold. "We will go."

"Why should we go and be laughed at?"

Lulu was already angry just thinking about the situation. Hadn't Carissa already endured enough humiliation?

Pearl and the others, who were only aware of the animosity between Carissa and Eleanor from Lulu's account, agreed with Lulu's advice.

L

They said, "She's right, my lady. We shouldn't go. If we do, we'll have to bring a gift."

To the maids, sending a gift was a considerable expense, especially since it had to be appropriate for a high-ranking princess, not some cheap trinket.

Carissa fanned herself casually and said, "We must face it sooner or later. Are we to hide in this residence for the rest of our lives? Besides, a host of official families and noble ladies have already visited us earlier.

"If they turn on me at Grand Princess Eleanor's birthday celebration, I'll know they were mere opportunists. Knowing what kind of people they are, I can avoid them in the future. Consider this celebration as a mirror to reveal their true selves."

Lulu was still concerned but nodded. "My lady, if they say anything unpleasant, please don't take it to heart."

Carissa smiled at her. "Silly girl, I don't care about them. How can their words hurt me?"

Only those who cared could be hurt. Since Carissa didn't care, their words would be like water rolling off glass.

Neither the two senior maids nor Frederick discouraged her from

going. They believed it was necessary, considering that Carissa would eventually marry into the royal family and would inevitably have to interact with these people.

"My lady, I'll prepare the gift," Lily said.

The storeroom was well-stocked with gold, silver, and jewels. Some were part of Carissa's dowry, while others belonged to her mother and sisters-in-law. The Westhaven spies had only killed people but not plundered treasures.

Of course, the items from her mother and sisters-in-law could not be

given away, so they had to choose something else.

Since Carissa wasn't close with Eleanor, the gift didn't need to be extravagant. But given the number of guests, many of whom were from the royal family, it couldn't be too insignificant. After all, Carissa was representing the Duke of Northwatch's family.

After some deliberation, none of them could agree on anything, so the senior maids looked at Carissa with a hint of hesitation.

Carissa thought for a moment and came up with an idea-a gift that others might find invaluable but that she had in abundance.

It was the "scraps" from her senior, Kyle.

Kyle enjoyed painting and would often discard works he was dissatisfied with. Carissa thought some of these paintings were quite good, so she had stamped them with his seal and taken them all home. Naturally, the study had many of Kyle's carefully crafted artworks and calligraphy, which Carissa would not consider giving to Eleanor. A discarded piece seemed most fitting.

She selected a painting of orchids. The scroll unfurled slowly, revealing a realistic depiction of an orchid plant from Meadow Ridge. The painting captured every branch, leaf, and blossom in

detail.

The reason Kyle was dissatisfied with this painting was that he had mistakenly depicted a fully bloomed flower instead of a bud. He felt that a realistic painting should accurately represent what was intended. And since this one did not, it was deemed worthless.

Kyle's exacting standards had led him to discard this piece.