

War Song 191

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Ly used her ass reluctantly "This painting is so lifelike. It's as if the orchids are blooming right before our eyes. The orchid branches are strong, and the faint green buds are just beginning to sprout. It was too perfect to be considered a discarded work. It would be a shame to waste it on Grand Princess Eleanor."

It's fine. Kyle loves painting orchids, so there are plenty of orchid paintings, so many that we don't even have space for them in the study. By the way, make sure to send one to the king as well," Carissa replied. Salvador greatly admired Kyle and had a collection of his

calligraphy. However, he did not have any of Kyle's orchid paintings, which were worth a fortune. Since Carissa had them in abundance, presenting Kyle's work to Salvador would be a gesture of goodwill, and it would allow her to manage Rafael's connections.

The questions Salvador asked at Serenity Palace had made her a bit uneasy. Thus, using Kyle's painting as a way to gauge the situation seemed like a reasonable strategy. It would also convey her and Rafael's goodwill toward the king.

Lily and a few others searched through the storeroom for quite a while before coming to the conclusion that the orchid painting was indeed the most suitable choice. If they gave Eleanor gold or silver, it would only provoke laughter. Eleanor's taste was known to be pretentious, and she wasn't necessarily skilled at appreciating true

art.

Discovering a pile of handkerchiefs at the bottom of a box, Pearl spread one out and stifled a laugh.

"What's this? Haha, the embroidery is so ugly. How did this end up here?"

Her eyes wide with urgency, Lily rushed over and yanked the handkerchief away, stuffing it back into the box. "Don't take it out."

Carissa had already noticed and walked over to examine one of the handkerchiefs. The embroidery was so poorly done that it was almost unbearable to look at.

The design was supposed to be an oak tree, but the branches were crooked and the leaves resembled worms. Another handkerchief, presumably meant to depict a rose, was so poorly executed that Carissa could only imagine it as split leaves. The pale red thread used for the petals and a layer of green made the color scheme confusing and unpleasant.

What on earth was this?

The other handkerchiefs were even worse. One that should have been smooth had been embroidered into a crumpled mess.

"Haha, who embroidered this?" Carissa asked, laughing uncontrollably.

Lily gave her a meaningful glance.

Carissa paused, then suddenly dropped the handkerchief with a shocked expression. "Did I do this?"

Lily burst into laughter. "When you were little and wanted to learn embroidery, I taught you. After a month of practice, you produced so many handkerchiefs like these. Madam Sinclair couldn't bear to throw them away, so she stored them all in boxes."

Carissa was stunned. Were these really her handiwork? Staring at the oddly shaped handkerchiefs, she felt a strange sense of familiarity, as if she had seen them before.

Ah, she remembered now.

During a visit to Rafael's command tent at the Southern Frontier, she had eaten a bowl of noodles, and the marshal had pulled out a handkerchief that was just as ugly as these ones to wipe his mouth. What could the handkerchief Rafael used be one she had given him?

Carissa quickly turned to Lily and asked, "Lily, did I ever give these handkerchiefs to anyone?"

Lily smiled. Yes, you did. Every member of the family received one, including your parents and brothers. You even gave them to guests who visited the estate. At the time, you thought your embroidery was quite good."

"Did I give any to the marshal... the Hell Monarch?"

Lily thought for a moment before replying, "It seems you did. Back then, the Hell Monarch and the king occasionally visited the estate. You proudly handed out a few handkerchiefs, so it's likely one went to the Hell Monarch

But I'm certain the king received some because he and your eldest brother were laughing so hard about them. You thought they were praising your work."

Lily's affectionate tone only made Carissa want to sink into the ground.

What a childish mistake! She had mistaken trash for treasure, thinking her embroidery was unbeatable!

But who would keep such handkerchiefs? Shouldn't the people who received them have thrown them away after leaving the estate? Why would Rafael keep it until now? Had he forgotten to toss it away? Carissa's face flushed a deep red.

How embarrassing!

To have given away such terrible embroidery so brazenly. How shameless had she been back then

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Clenching her teeth, Carissa said to Lily, "Starting tonight, I want you to teach me embroidery. I need to make a perfect handkerchief."

Mistakes made in youth must be corrected.

Carissa could accept her own imperfections, but she could not accept that she had handed out subpar work to everyone.

However, she was puzzled. While she could understand why her mother had kept her handkerchiefs, why would Rafael want to not only keep them, but also carry them around? There was a fleeting thought that she couldn't quite grasp. Did Rafael have a fondness for unattractive things? What peculiar taste

he had!

As the two senior maids organized the storeroom, Frederick took the opportunity to tell Carissa that Jason had sorted out the account books and wanted her to review them. "Alright, leave them in the study. I look them over tonight," Carissa

said

Frederick nodded. "The accounts for the farms and shops have also been organized. Jason has summarized the totals and provided detailed breakdowns. I glanced through them and found them to be well done. The people Mr. Sinclair hired are indeed reliable."

The accountant had been recommended by Solomon, and since the Sinclair family did well in business, Solomon's recommendation was trustworthy.

Lulu, Pearl, and the others were arranging outfits for Carissa. With so many people expected at tomorrow's event, Carissa needed to stand out.

Just then, Luke arrived to ask if Carissa would be attending Eleanor's birthday banquet the next day, so she went out to personally respond.

"Please inform His Highness that I will be attending."

Luke nodded. "Understood, my lady."

Knowing Rafael had sent Luke over to gauge her intentions, Carissa added, "Tell His Highness that if he doesn't wish to attend, he needn't worry about it. I can handle things on my own."

Luke chuckled. "My lady, you misunderstood. The reason His Highness sent me to ask was to inquire about what gift you'll be bringing if you attend."

Carissa looked at the plump, kindly steward and replied, "A painting- one painted by my senior, Kyle Spencer."

"Oh!" Luke's voice was filled with a mix of emotions, tinged with regret. "Then... I see..."

Kyle's paintings were rare and valuable. To give one to someone like Eleanor, who was known for her pretentious taste, seemed like such a waste. Luke was visibly distressed by the thought of such a precious artwork being squandered.

Carissa noticed his pained expression and smiled. "My senior's works include both his proud masterpieces and some he casually discarded. I'm a bit of a hoarder, so I've collected both his treasures and his cast-offs. If you'd like, I can give you one of his masterpieces.

Luke's expression brightened instantly, and he waved his hands vigorously. "No! I wouldn't dare take a masterpiece. I'd be very grateful for one of the cast-offs you mentioned, though. I promise to treasure it." "Very well," Carissa agreed without hesitation.

Beaming with joy, Luke bowed with gratitude and hurried off. His short legs moved so quickly that they almost seemed to produce a whirlwind,

Back in the estate, Lulu had selected several outfits, but they were all quite plain. Due to her period of mourning, Carissa rarely wore bright colors. The pink outfit she had worn previously was the only exception. It was the only relatively vibrant outfit she had worn recently.

Lulu was worried. How could such plain attire possibly showcase Carissa's stunning beauty to its fullest?

"Perhaps the moonlight white blouse and pleated skirt will do," Carissa suggested.

The sheer pink outfit would remain unworn. It was a keepsake her mother had made for her wedding, tucked away and never worn at Valor Estate.

For Eleanor's birthday banquet, something plain and simple would suffice.

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Lulu examined the outfit. 'Moonlight white is fine. There's a subtle shade of blue that complements your skin tone. What about accessories? Should we add a strand of red coral?'

"No red," Carissa replied. "Keep it simple, not too grand."

She selected a white pearl hairpin and paired it with two moonlight white silk ribbons.

"That's still quite plain," Lulu observed.

*Plain or not, we'll know once it's on," Carissa said.

She went behind a partition screen to change into the outfit. When she emerged, she had styled her hair into a simple bun, secured with the silk ribbons and adorned with the white pearl pin.

She twirled, asking her maids, "How do I look?"

The girls were mesmerized. Even without makeup, Carissa resembled an ethereal fairy. The two silk ribbons in her hair added a significant touch of elegance to her moonlight white dress.

Lulu quickly turned to Pearl. "Lip balm, earrings, perfumes, and pearl pendants-hurry!"

"Got it!" Pearl immediately got to work, gathering various accessories.

Lulu seated Carissa at the dressing table, then applied lip balm for her and redrew her eyebrows. When she was done, she draped a long necklace of pearls around Carissa's neck, and added a butterfly pendant to the sash around her waist. A soft, sheer outer garment completed the look, adding an extra touch of ethereal charm. Lulu thought for a moment, then decided to tie the sleeves back, giving the outfit a playful and youthful edge. The lip balm's subtle red made Carissa's complexion appear even more flawless, and her natural blush, without the need for rouge, was a testament to the effectiveness of Sebastian's blood-regulating medicine.

Lulu beamed with pride.

The fabric of the outfit was exquisite, with the pleated skirt made of soft satin that flowed like water with every movement. The light, flowing gauze overlay and the silk ribbons in her hair made Carissa look like a celestial being.

Carissa gazed at her reflection in the copper mirror.

Was she truly beautiful?

Back at Meadow Ridge, no one ever praised her looks. Everyone only ever called her a monkey.

When she returned from Meadow Ridge, ready for courtship, her mother had dressed her up meticulously and she had spent time avoiding the sun, which made her skin as smooth as silk. Everyone who saw her couldn't help but remark on her beauty.

She remembered Barrett's first visit, how he had been unable to take his eyes off her and had spoken with a changed tone, his formalities in disarray. She recalled his dazed expression and thought at the time that he must be a fool.

It turned out he wasn't a fool, just a heartless man.

Carissa turned around and gazed at herself in the mirror, then asked Lulu, "Do I really look good?"

Lulu stood beside her, leaning close to her cheek as they both looked into the mirror together. "Well, do you think you look good?"

Lulu was attractive herself. Although her features were not perfect, they came together in a very pleasing way. Seeing herself alongside Lulu in the mirror made Carissa realize, "Oh, I guess I really do look quite good."

Lulu pouted. "My lady, you shouldn't say such things in front of others. Being unaware of one's beauty can come

across as an attempt at provocation. I also feel like slapping you for saying that."

Carissa tapped Lulu's forehead with her finger. "You're beautiful too. We all have two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. I just happen to look a bit fairer."

Lulu sighed and turned to Pearl, who was covering her mouth and laughing behind them.

"Isn't it annoying? We live in comfort every day, with nothing much to do, while Lady Sinclair goes to the Southern Frontier, braving harsh winds and sandstorms. Yet, less than a month after returning, she's already looking more radiant than us," said Lulu.

Joy laughed. "Lady Sinclair is naturally beautiful. Even if she was tanned, she would quickly regain her fair complexion."

"It doesn't matter if we look rougher. What matters is that Lady Sinclair is truly beautiful," Pearl added her praise, agreeing wholeheartedly.

Carissa examined each of them closely.

In truth, they were all charming and attractive, not the sort of plain faces one might easily overlook on the street.

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The next day was Eleanor's birthday banquet.

From early in the morning, the entrance of Harmony Palace, Eleanor's residence within the royal palace, was crowded with carriages, and a long red carpet stretched all the way to the street corner. Outside, more than thirty yards away, a tent had been set up with thirty tables for a public feast. Commoners could come and eat as long as enough people gathered.

Eleanor held this public feast every year under the guise of sharing her joy with the people. However, in reality, it was just a show to enhance her reputation for kindness.

In addition to the public feast, she had prepared vegetarian meals specifically for priests. Known for her devotion to religion, Eleanor donated substantial sums to temples and monasteries every year. After all, those who have committed many wrongs often seek blessings from deities.

Eleanor was hosting a large number of guests today, and she had also invited the Warren family.

Barrett and Aurora did not attend. Ever since Barrett learned about his mother and elder brother's quarrel at Northwatch Estate, he had been avoiding home. Meanwhile, disfigured and disgraced, Aurora had no desire to face ridicule at the party.

However, Rebecca attended with Amelia, Bryan, and Serena.

With Eleanor having extended the invitation, not attending would be seen as an affront. Fortunately, Barrett had received a reward of gold, which allowed them to present a more suitable gift.

Naturally, Rebecca had personal motives for attending. She hoped to introduce her unmarried children to potential matches among the distinguished guests. If any of the matriarchs of the other families took a liking to them, their marriage prospects would be secured.

Guests at Eleanor's birthday banquet were either wealthy or noble. Despite the scandal surrounding the Warren family due to Aurora, Rebecca still attended with her daughter-in-law and children. In the presence of so many influential figures, Rebecca felt remarkably insignificant.

As she looked at the well-dressed guests, she recalled the former glory of her family. When she had first married, that period of splendor had been as fleeting as a firework. The prominence she once held was etched in her heart, and she longed to return to her former heights.

Unfortunately, her husband was weak, and her eldest son mediocre. Only her second son, Barrett, had married the then-Marquis of Northwatch's daughter.

Who could have anticipated that shortly after Carissa's marriage, the Sinclair family would be annihilated? The Sinclair family lacked strong male heirs, and with Melanie gone, all Carissa could offer them now was wealth.

So, when Barrett returned with his military achievements and sought to marry Aurora, they saw the future filled with the glory Rebecca had always desired, while Carissa was discarded.

Yet, fate rarely aligned with one's wishes.

Hector was posthumously honored with the title of duke, and Carissa became the legitimate daughter of a duke. She also achieved military merit and earned widespread acclaim.

In contrast, Aurora, whom Rebecca had high hopes for, not only failed to achieve any merit but was also punished, which in turn affected Barrett's reputation.

Rebecca's heart was a reservoir of grievances, capable of filling a vast river. At the birthday banquet, she led her daughter-in-law and children to pay their respects to Eleanor. She had assumed that Eleanor had invited them out of respect for Barrett and planned to present a birthday gift to her, then socialize with the other ladies in the garden.

As she observed the ladies' gazes, Rebecca noted the lack of warmth. Despite their outward politeness, there was no enthusiasm in their eyes, only a palpable indifference. She could sense their disdain.

Just as she was about to retreat awkwardly, Eleanor gently asked, "Rebecca, I've heard that your health has not been well. How are you faring now?"

Rebecca was taken aback. How did Eleanor know about her health issues? However, it was not entirely surprising, as Amelia had once gone to the physician's office to plead for Snowdrop Pills.

Feeling surprised and flattered, Rebecca responded, "Thank you for your concern, Your Highness. I am much better now."

Lounging comfortably in her chair, Eleanor smiled at Rebecca. "You're about my age. How could your health be so poor? I've heard that your former daughter-in-law cared for you day and night. She must be quite a devoted person."

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Upon hearing Eleanor mention Carissa, Rebecca's heart was thrown into turmoil. She was unaware of the past between Eleanor and Melanie, and assumed that Carissa's recent achievements had made her valued by the royal family.

Did this mean Eleanor was now favoring Carissa? Et the gentle expression on Eleanor's face suggested otherwise.

At a loss, Rebecca heard Isabella Miller, who was seated nearby, speak up.

"Your Highness, all this talk of devotion is just for show. After the divorce, Carissa ignored her former mother-in-law's wellbeing. Where is the so-called devotion in that? Anyone can put on a show. Rebecca made such a scene at Northwatch Estate. If she weren't forced into a corner, who would want to be embarrassed like that?" she said.

Isabella was the queen's sister-in-law, and her husband held a third- rank official position, making him a key figure in court.

As soon as Isabella spoke, others began to murmur in agreement.

"Isn't it just that she's flaunting her military achievements and looking down on everyone else? She's such an ungrateful person. Of course she's despised by all." "Rebecca, I heard that when her family was killed, you took

meticulous care of her, even staying by her side at night to prevent her from doing anything rash. You cherished your former daughter-in-law, yet she doesn't appreciate it."

Rebecca was initially stunned by these remarks but quickly realized their implication. The ladies seemed to be contradicting Eleanor, but the grand princess remained unperturbed. There was even a vaguely amused smile on her lips.

Clearly, the ladies were echoing Eleanor's sentiments.

Rebecca understood now that Carissa would indeed be attending the banquet, and that Eleanor held a grudge against her. Eleanor had not invited Rebecca out of respect for Barrett's achievements, but because she could use her to criticize Carissa.

Realizing that Eleanor shared her disdain for Carissa, Rebecca felt a surge of excitement, as if she had discovered a kindred spirit.

Putting on an act-wasn't that Rebecca's forte?

With a sigh and a tearful look, she said, "Your Highness, you're too kind. Sometimes, genuine intentions do not always beget genuine responses. I've done my part with a clear conscience-that is enough for me."

Eleanor sighed sympathetically, wiping the corner of her eye. Rebecca, it must be tough for you. It's commonplace for men to take concubines, but the problem is that a certain someone couldn't accept a concubine despite coming from a noble family.

"Compared to her, you ladies here are in a different position. If your own husbands had taken a concubine, you might have just sought a divorce quietly. You wouldn't have made a fuss in front of the king and asked for a divorce edict. To put it bluntly, Carissa considers herself above all others and thinks everyone is inferior to her. She doesn't even care about the Warren family."

Eleanor's cryptic and sarcastic remarks made her attitude towards Carissa abundantly clear.

Some of the ladies present had visited Northwatch Estate and considered acting as matchmakers to persuade a man to marry Carissa, hoping to gain some favor and a title in return. However, now that Eleanor had spoken, these ladies no longer dared to take on the role of matchmaker.

Even some of the counts, who were feeling their influence wane, had initially entertained the idea of getting their sons to marry Carissa to gain a title. But now, they quickly abandoned that thought. Regardless of Carissa's true nature, the fact remained that she was not someone who would tolerate concubines. None of the present ladies would genuinely accept a concubine, but they didn't want their sons to be denied the right to take one if desired.

After all, if Carissa failed to bear a son, wouldn't that mean the potential end of their line?

Rebecca seized the opportunity to voice her grievances, painting Carissa as arrogant, jealous, and disrespectful. She argued that if Carissa hadn't returned with military achievements, she would have been universally condemned as a jealous, discarded woman.

Rebecca, Eleanor, and Isabella were relentless, with the grand princess taking the lead in slandering Carissa. In less than an hour, Carissa quickly became a figure of universal scorn among most ladies. Some knew that Carissa was not truly like that, but remained silent to avoid being targeted by the collective disapproval.

Although Carissa had not yet arrived, Dakota, Helen, Josephine, and the other concubines of the late king had already arrived. After all, Eleanor was their sister-in-law. Victoria held the most authoritative power in the palace, and she had permitted them to attend Eleanor's birthday banquet.

With the presence of all the senior concubines, it was customary for the other ladies to rise and pay their respects.

Helen had been reluctant to attend. She and Eleanor had never been on good terms, and she had suffered quite a few grievances at the grand princess' hands.

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However, Helen had been invited, Although she didn't want to come, she couldn't bear the thought of what stories might be spun about her if she stayed away.

So, she gritted her teeth and showed up.

When she heard the gossip out Carissa, she was enraged.

Fortunately, no one knew that this woman was about to marry Rafael.

If they did, and if Eleanor herself were to lead in making fun of her, Helen would have felt utterly humiliated.

Helen sat to one side, deliberately ignored by Eleanor. Helen had no mind for conversation.

It was Eleanor's daughter, Jessica, who saw Helen and smiled. "Oh, you've come too, Aunt Helen? What gift did you bring for my mother?

Jessica's question, directed only at Helen, clearly aimed to make her uncomfortable.

Helen had expected to be challenged over this gift. Reluctantly, she said, "I heard you're a devout Christian, Your Highness, so I brought a finely crafted gold cross as a gift. Please accept it."

She signaled Gillian to present the gift to Eleanor. Eleanor took one glance, and said indifferently, "Though I already have several of these gold crosses, I appreciate your kind gesture. I will accept it." Helen was nearly driven to rage by Eleanor's haughty attitude. She rolled her eyes, thinking that if Eleanor looked down on the gift, she shouldn't have accepted it.

Yet, Helen dared not speak her mind. When it came to insult

was no match for Eleanor. In terms of status, after the late king's passing, Helen-once favored was how insignificant.

Her most outstanding son had returned triumphantly. While she could boast in the palace, she felt constrained outside, fully aware of her son's indifference towards her. If it weren't for Salvador's

intervention allowing her to leave the palace and stay with Rafael, Rafael likely wouldn't have agreed.

Rafael's lack of respect toward Helen was her greatest sorrow. Despite his great accomplishments,

son had never sought to

improve her status. Even though Helen's sister was the queen dowager, she was still only an honored concubine, which was below the rank of noble concubines like Dakota and Josephine. So, Helen had to swallow her anger

Eleanor said slowly, "I've heard that the king has shown mercy and allowed you to leave the palace to live with Rafael, Helen. It must be a touching reunion of mother and son. I haven't had a chance to congratulate you."

Hearing this, Helen realized that even the imperious grand princess had to acknowledge Rafael's achievements and, by extension, Helen could also share in the benefits as his mother. Helen allowed a smug smile to cross her face.

"Rafael is respectful, and insisted on living with me. I thought it best to help manage the household. After all, with the lands, estates, and shops we have, it would be difficult without a lady of the house to oversee them," Helen said, her voice betraying a hint of satisfaction.

Eleanor let out a soft laugh and smoothed the crimson skirt she wore, her eyes narrowing as she smiled slyly

"Ah, such a wonderful son. But if he's so devoted, why hasn't he asked the king to promote your rank? After all, you bore the late

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king's son and come from a distinguished family. Also, your elder sister is the queen dowager. Now that Rafael has achieved such a remarkable feat by reclaiming the Southern Frontier, wouldn't it be easy for him to speak a word in the king's and the queen dowager's presence to elevate your rank to that of a noble concubine?"

Helen's smile froze instantly. She could tell that this old woman was clearly up to no good-the remark was a direct jab at her pride!

"You must be quite the failure as a mother if ev

your own son

doesn't hold you in high regard," Eleanor said with a smile.

The onlookers dared not openly criticize Helen, but stifled their laughter behind their hands.

It fueled Helen's fury.

She struggled to control her temper. Even though she knew she would be at a disadvantage, she was about to explode.

Just as she was about to erupt, someone announced, "Lady Sinclair has arrived!"

At the mention of Carissa, a variety of emotions flickered across everyone's faces-some sneering, some dark, some cold, and others filled with delight.

The only one who seemed genuinely pleased was Leona. She had been seething as she overheard the others' comments, but, constrained by her status as a junior, she had held her tongue.

Upon hearing that Carissa had arrived, Leona quickly got up to greet her but was restrained by Heather.

Heather had also been present and had remained silent about the gossip concerning Carissa.

Helen's mind reeled with the news.

Carissa was here too?

She hoped that no one would discover Carissa's imminent marriage to Rafael, or she would be thoroughly embarrassed today!

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When Carisse entered the venue, she was the center of attention.

Many of the officials' wives had already paid her a visit, but seeing

her now in her elegant attire, her beauty seemed even more transcendent and otherworldly.

A hint of pink on her lips added a subtle flush to her already radiant complexion. Her pale cheeks, naturally smooth as silk, were gently highlighted with a touch of eyebrow pencil. A splash of green on her earlobes only enhanced her spring-like beauty, making her stand out among the finely dressed noble ladies present.

Jessica, who had also dressed up for the occasion, wore a gold-threaded pleated skirt, a pale pink silk gown embroidered with peonies, and a red coat adorned with intricate gold and silver threads. Her hair was styled in an elaborate updo, decorated with pearls and gemstones, reflecting the height of luxury and splendor.

Yet, despite her meticulous preparation, Jessica's grand appearance paled in comparison to Carissa's understated grace.

Jessica was naturally impulsive, and she couldn't hide her irritation at Carissa's refined look.

Smiling coldly, she said, "Today is my mother's birthday. You come dressed so simply, which clearly shows a lack of respect for her celebration."

Carissa glanced at her, and replied with a smile, "It doesn't matter how I dress. Since it's Her Highness's birthday banquet, if I were to dress as extravagantly as you, it would only waste your efforts in dressing in such splendid attire on this occasion to honor Her Highness."

"What?" Jessica looked down at her own outfit, which was indeed splendidly matched. But Carissa's implication about her attire being

merely a show for everyone here was hard to swallow. "Are you saying that I'm dressed inappropriately?"

Carissa scrutinized Jessica again, and said, "If it's just about dressing up, being a bit flashy doesn't matter as long as the intention is sincere." Carissa glanced around at the other ladies with a smile, and asked, "Don't you agree, ladies?"

No one dared to speak up, but some stifled their laughter.

They thought Carissa must be unaware of the trouble she was stirring by making Jessica look foolish in front of Eleanor!

Carissa noticed Dakota, Josephine, and Helen among the guests. Her gaze briefly swept over them, and she saw a flicker of light in Helen's eyes.

Carissa felt a hint of confusion.

Helen's gaze was rather intriguing.

Approaching Eleanor to offer her birthday wishes, Carissa's peripheral vision caught sight of Rebecca, her former mother-in-law. Eleanor had invited Rebecca, and Carissa could almost guess the topics of conversation that had been carried out before her arrival. But why did Helen look sullen after her initial surprise? Was she still upset about something, or had someone offended her here?

Seeing that no one was paying Carissa any attention, Jessica couldn't help but feel a sense of triumph.

She sneered coldly, "We were just discussing you. Rebecca is truly pitiful-she's so sick because of you, and you won't even allow Sebastian to treat her. Though you've achieved merit for the court, it doesn't erase your cruel nature. No wonder you've become the

abandoned wife of the Warren family."

Jessica was merely the mouthpiece for Eleanor. When Eleanor wanted to voice something but couldn't due to her esteemed and elder status, she let her daughter speak on her behalf.

Once Jessica finished, Eleanor gave a mild rebuke. "Jessica, be respectful. How can you speak so recklessly?"

She turned to Carissa with a gentle smile. "Carissa, I've spoiled her. Don't take her words to heart."

The crowd stifled their laughter, clearly enjoying Eleanor's confirmation of Jessica's remarks.

However, Carissa was not upset. With a smile, she replied, "Rest -assured, Your Highness, I won't bother with ignorant remarks.

Sebastian has already clarified that he didn't treat Rebecca due to her own moral failings. Does Lady Jessica doubt Sebastian's words? Sebastian is known for his integrity and aloofness. Anyone who questions him might as well forget about ever getting any medicine from the physician's office."

Jessica hesitated for a moment before retorting, "When have I ever questioned Sebastian? Don't make up nonsense. I'll tear your mouth apart if you keep calling me ignorant! Who do you think you are?" Jessica was currently seeking Sebastian's help to improve her health. Since her marriage, she hadn't become pregnant.

Her husband already had a son from one of his concubines. Meanwhile, there was still no sign of her own legitimate son.

Sebastian had advised her that with six months of treatment, she might finally conceive.

She certainly didn't want to offend Sebastian at this critical moment.

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Carissa's smile widened, her fan fluttering as she tried to dispel the oppressive atmosphere in the room

"It seems you believe in setting double standards, Lady Jessica How is it that when I speak the truth, you want to tear my mouth apart, yet it's perfectly acceptable for you to slander and spread rumors? I trust the grand princess has invited Sebastian today. Should we perhaps ask him to clarify things?"

Carissa cast a meaningful glance at Rebecca. "Rebecca, if you feel wronged, you may address your concerns directly with Sebastian."

Rebecca looked at Carissa with a mixture of resentment and

coldness. Carissa was once so submissive and obedient before her, but now, her gaze was filled with indifference.

Rebecca blamed Carissa for everything that had happened. Carissa couldn't even tolerate one concubine. What kind of virtue could she

have as a wife?

Yet, Rebecca remained silent. She knew that if Sebastian was called over, she might find herself cut off from Snowdrop Pills in the future.

Jessica felt cornered. She glared at Carissa, and snarled, "What right does a discarded woman have to act so arrogantly?"

Carissa's voice was neither too loud nor too soft, just enough for everyone to hear, and it carried a note of intimidation.

"I am not a discarded woman. The divorce was my request-I chose to leave Barrett. I don't care what you say behind my back, but in public, I expect you to be mindful of your words. Even though I'm the only one left of the Duke of Norwatch's family, I'm not someone you can easily mess with."

A hush fell over the room. Many of the ladies present were unwilling

to be complicit in Eleanor's machinations. However, they couldn't say or do anything due to her status. At this moment, they were

internally cheering for Carissa.

They had attended many such parties. While they might not know Eleanor's true nature, they recognized her tendency to form cliques and target those who were not genuinely loyal to her.

Eleanor never confronted people directly. Instead, her daughter, Jessica, and a few others would act as her proxies, often leaving others speechless.

But this time, it seemed they had met their match. Carissa may be an orphan, but she wasn't one to easily be bullied.

Helen watched Carissa with inexplicable satisfaction. Though she disliked Carissa, she admired the latter's courage in standing up to Eleanor and Jessica.

"Cari, you're quite impressive," Leona said softly from beside. Carissa, her eyes full of admiration.

Eleanor finally spoke, her tone cold and detached. "Lady Heather, how is your health these days?"

Heather, already on edge, felt her heart leap into her throat as her daughter praised Carissa. She was keenly aware of the potential consequences, and had no desire to offend Eleanor.

As soon as Eleanor asked, Heather flinched and forced a smile. "Thank you for your concern, Your Highness. My health is improving."

After answering Eleanor, Heather abruptly waved for her daughter. "Leone, come back and sit beside me."

Leone was holding Carissa's arm. She replied with a smile, "Mom, I'd like to talk with my cousin for a moment." Heather's expression changed, and she snapped, "You can talk later."

Come here now!"

Carissa gently patted Leona's hand, and said softly, "Go ahead. I still need to pay my respects to Her Highness and present my gift."

Taking the scroll from the visibly furious servant, Carissa

approached with measured steps. Her dress flowed gracefully with each step, and her movements were poised and deliberate, far removed from the roughness of military life. As she walked, the silk ribbons in her hair swayed slightly,

The crowd, having already been dazzled by her beauty, now watched in awe as she approached Eleanor. They thought to themselves that Carissa had inherited her mother's otherworldly beauty, perhaps even surpassing it.

Eleanor watched her with eyes that, usually so inscrutable, were now filled with an unmistakable and uncontainable resentment.

To Eleanor, Carissa embodied everything she despised, a reflection of the woman she loathed.

Chapter 199

Carissa's voice softened, losing the earlier sternness and coldness."

Your Highness, I wish you a long life that's as enduring as a

mountain."

Eleanor's gaze slowly shifted away from Carissa's face, and the rising resentment and thoughts were gradually suppressed. "Thank you, Carissa. Bring the gift forward. A servant stepped up to receive the scroll.

Jessica remarked coldly, "It seems the gift is a painting or calligraphy. I wonder which master's work it is. I hope it isn't something casually bought from the street."

Carissa smiled faintly. "Even if it were something casually bought from the street, it is still a token of my sincerity. Just as when my father and brothers sacrificed their lives, Grand Princess Eleanor sent my mother a symbol of chastity. It was also a gesture from your heart, wasn't it?"

No one had known of this particular event, but Carissa's words sent shockwaves through the room. The crowd's expressions varied, but no one dared to speak out.

The thought that a royal princess would send something so cursed was chilling.

Hector had died for the kingdom. How could the grand princess bestow such a thing to his family?

Helen gasped, unable to contain herself. "A symbol of chastity? What a cruel curse! Are you condemning the ladies of their family to be widows for generations?" Others might not know, but Helen was aware that Rafael was to marry Carissa. The symbol of chastity was something only a

widowed woman would use, as it was to commemorate and celebrate widows who did not remarry, often as a symbol of their loyalty and virtue.

In this case, it seemed like a curse against Rafael!

Despite her fear of Eleanor, Helen couldn't help but voice her

outrage.

Eleanor's gaze turned icy as she addressed Helen. "Helen, do you speak without understanding the situation? Have you seen me give Melanie a symbol of chastity?"

Helen hesitated and glanced at Carissa, uncertain whether it was

true or not.

Eleanor's gaze then returned to Carissa, her eyes cold and her tone

stern.

"I have no grudge against the Duke of Northwatch's family. I don't understand why you would accuse me of such things in front of everyone. If you have that symbol of chastity, show it. If not, accusing me is a serious matter, and I will hold you accountable."

Eleanor's eyes were a fierce and menacing glare, as if she intended. to devour Carissa alive. For someone of her stature to direct such a look at a mere orphan from a noble house should have been intimidating enough to make Carissa retreat.

But Carissa was not intimidated. She even managed a smile.

"My late mother had received your good intentions, Your Highness. If any of the ladies wish to see it, they are welcome to visit my family. estate another day..

"As for whether it was sent by Your Highness, that is something only you would know. Whether you admit it or not, it's a fact that can't be erased. Finding the original carver should not be difficult. I fear that such a sinister item is unique in all of Starhaven."

"How dare you!" Eleanor's anger flared,

When had she ever been so offended?

"Are you trying to force me to admit something? Talk of sinister Items and the like-what nonsense! think your family is the one that brought about-"

"Brought about what?" Carissa stepped forward, her gaze as cold as ice.

"You say the Sinclair family has brought about sinister fate?

Countless lives have been lost at the hands of my family, but those were all enemy soldiers. That you can enjoy peace in the capital and host grand birthday celebrations every year, it is thanks to the sacrifices made by the Duke of Northwatch's family.

"As a royal princess, you should honor the contributions of those who have given their lives. Yet you speak of them being sinister so casually-if word of this spreads, how will the soldiers of Starhaven. dare to go to the battlefield to defend the kingdom?"

"How dare you!" Eleanore's face turned purple with rage at having such a heavy accusation thrown at her, but she didn't dare continue. the topic.

"What nonsense are you spouting? Why are you bringing up war and state affairs? It seems you're not here to sincerely celebrate my birthday at all!"

Her gaze fell on the scroll, and she snapped, "Open it. Let's see if it's meant to curse me."

Carissa's audacious remarks and the mention of the symbol of chastity in front of the gathered nobility were seen as an affront. It was clear she was using her military achievements to seek revenge, making her gift likely to be filled with insults.

Although it was not immediately possible to verify the matter of the symbol of chastity, if Carissa dared to present a cursed item, Eleanor could be condemned on the spot..

It wasn't only Eleanor who thought so-the noblewomen present shared the same belief. Some who disliked Eleanor thought to

themselves that while Carissa was indeed a tough opponent, she was also unfortunately quite foolish

Chapter 200

Jessica stepped forward, and seized the scroll.

"I will open it. Carissa, if you dare to curse my mother, I will make sure you can't rest in peace even after you die!"

As the scroll slowly unfurled, everyone craned their necks to see what was revealed. To their surprise, the scroll depicted a painting. of an orchid.

The half-length scroll showcased an orchid, with blossoms either in full bloom or just about to open. Many flower buds stood quietly on the branch.

The crowd was stunned. The orchid painting seemed almost alive, as if the flower was right before their eyes. Every little detail, including the texture of the petals, was meticulously depicted.

Among the ladies present who were knowledgeable about painting, one gasped. "Is this Mr. Spencer's painting? I have had the honor of seeing his paintings before, and the technique is identical. Yes, this is indeed Mr. Spencer's work."

This announcement caused a stir among the guests.

Kyle Spencer's painting?

That was something highly coveted, nearly impossible to obtain. Despite Carissa's disrespectful words, her gift was remarkably precious.

Eleanor, who prided herself on the arts, had seen Kyle's paintings. but could not recognize them herself. Still, she felt as if the orchid was right in front of her. It was so vivid that she could almost reach out and touch a petal.

Hearing that it was a painting by Kyle, Rebecca felt her heart shatter.

Carissa was truly wealthy-this painting must cost at least at thousand gold coins.

Rebecca deeply regretted her decision. In her pursuit to bring. someone like Aurora into the Warrah family, she had effectively driven away her golden opportunity. If this painting had been hers, it would have ensured that the Warrens wouldn't need to worry about money for at least the next two or three years.

"That's not Mr. Spencer's painting," said Adelaide, Dakota's daughter-in-law. She stood up and shook her head. "The craftsmanship is very similar, but this is a fake."

Adelaide Quinton was the queen, Kylie's cousin, and a legitimate daughter of the Quinton family's second branch. At fifteen, she stunned everyone at the Spring Festival with a painting and a poem created in less than half an hour. Dakota hosted that year's Spring Festival. Shortly after, Adelaide was betrothed to Dakota's son, Kendrick.

Renowned for her literary and artistic talents, Adelaide's claim that the painting was a fake was taken seriously by most attendees. The crowd began to murmur.

"Lady Sinclair brought a fake painting as a gift? To think she would do such a thing!"

"It's better to send nothing than to present a fake."

"But this painting is so exquisite! It doesn't look like a fake."

"A fake is a fake. Can Lady Adelaide's judgment be wrong? She is known for her poetry and painting."

Jessica was fuming. "A fake? Carissa, you dared to present a fake to my mother?"

She had suspected Carissa wouldn't have spent a fortune on Kyle's

painting. Besides, Kyle's works were not easily acquired.

"You truly are despicable! If you can't afford a proper gift, don't give one at all!"

"No, it's not a fake."

The noble lady who had initially declared the painting to be by Kyle stepped forward. She was Rosalind Young, the granddaughter of the royal chancellor, Trevor Young.

Adelaide smiled faintly at Rosalind. "Lady Young, I have an orchid. painting by Mr. Spencer in my residence, so I can distinguish between genuine and fake. This imitation is indeed remarkable, but it's still a fake. Look at the seal: Mr. Spencer uses a small, unique monogram to mark his works. However, this one has a larger monogram. They are not the same.

Everyone looked at the monogram on the painting, which was indeed a larger size.

However, few present had seen Kyle's work in person and didn't know what seal he used. Since Adelaide had a collection of Kyle's work and was saying so with authority, most believed her.

Rebecca's heart was somewhat eased. It was a fake after all!

Helen couldn't bear to watch. Carissa was going to be thoroughly. condemned now.

Jessica was enraged. She tore the painting in half, and threw it on the ground. "Carissa, what is the meaning of this? How dare you present a fake at my mother's birthday banquet?"

"No!" Rosalind lamented, rushing to pick up the torn painting. "This is not a fake! It's genuine! What a shame!"