

War Song 201

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Adelaide let out a chuckle. "Lady Rosalind, did you not hear clearly? The monogram on the painting is wrong. Shall I send for the orchid painting I have for you to verify?" However, Rosalind remained serious.

"My family also possesses two of Mr. Spencer's orchid paintings. He painted both personally in our backyard, with my grandfather present. Each painting depicts a different orchid, and the monograms on them -one was small, and the other was large. They were both used by Mr. Spencer. In fact, he has more than just these two styles of monograms."

She revealed the monogram of the torn orchid painting.

"This monogram is identical to the one in my family's painting. My grandfather is here today, right outside the main hall. If anyone has any doubts, he can verify it."

Adelaide was taken aback, but she shook her head. "That's impossible! It's well known that all of Mr. Spencer's sold paintings have a small monogram to mark his works."

"That's correct. Hence, one of my family's paintings was purchased, and the other was a gift from Mr. Spencer. The gifted one is marked with the larger monogram," Rosalind shot back. Adelaide found herself in an awkward position, unaware of such details.

Jessica sneered. "Doesn't that make sense? Carissa's painting could only be bought. How could Kyle have gifted her a painting? Since it wasn't gifted, the fact that it has a larger monogram to mark the work must mean it's a fake!"

The audience murmured in agreement.

How could Kyle have gifted Carissa a painting? Even if it was given to her father or family, it would be a treasured heirloom. Why would she give it away so easily to Eleanor?

Helen looked at Carissa with a mixture of disappointment and anger. She had just started to develop a slight fondness for Carissa, which now vanished. Bringing a counterfeit to deceive others-how could she expect her son to marry such a person and not become a laughingstock?

Carissa smiled lightly. "I know my senior's paintings are hard to come by. Today, I thought it fitting to present one for Grand Princess Eleanor's birthday. It's a pity that my senior's painstaking effort was torn apart like this."

Everyone gasped.

Senior? Kyle was her senior?!

"Are you saying that Kyle is your senior? That you both apprenticed under the same guild?!" Adelaide exclaimed.

"Yes, I am an apprentice of the Pathfinders Guild, where Kyle is a senior apprentice, therefore my senior. Didn't you all know?" Carissa responded calmly.

A collective gasp spread through the crowd as they looked at the orchid painting in Rosalind's hands.

Someone cried, "So this painting is real? It's such a pity it was destroyed!"

However, Eleanor was still skeptical. How could Carissa present her with such a valuable painting?

She loudly proclaimed, "Guard, call for the royal chancellor!"

Trevor was in the outer courtyard with the male guests. Eleanor's husband, Henry Kingsley, was entertaining them.

Rafael had also arrived earlier. The ladies were conversing in the inner courtyard, and it was improper for the men to enter. So, he sat idly, hoping the banquet would end smoothly.

If Carissa was harassed, she would likely fight back. Still, he came to keep an eye on things just in case.

When someone from the inner courtyard came out to invite Trevor to authenticate Kyle's painting, it startled the civil officials present. They admired Kyle greatly, and even the opportunity to just appreciate his work was considered a high honor.

Thus, everyone stood up, eager to join the appraisal, including the renowned physician, Sebastian.

Due to the need to segregate men and women, Eleanor ordered partition screens to be set up. After the space had been divided, she invited Trevor, the princes, and officials inside.

Rafael naturally followed, but with the partition screens in place, he couldn't see Carissa.

When the torn painting was handed to Trevor by Eleanor's steward, Trevor gasped.

"It's torn?"

The officials gathered around to see, all drawing sharp breaths. Some, who had long admired Kyle, felt as if a piece of their hearts had been cut out. Ignoring the presence of Eleanor, they lamented, "If this is a genuine piece, what a pity it is!"

Trevor's face turned ashen with anger. "What do you mean, 'If this is a genuine piece'? This is a genuine piece! How could it have been torn? Who did this?!"

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Trevor's voice trembled, a dull pain creeping into his heart. Though his residence housed two of Kyle's paintings, this was a genuine piece.

How could it be treated so poorly? It was an insult to Kyle and a tragedy for the artwork!

His hands shook as he directed someone to hold one side of the painting while he joined the pieces together. This painting was superior to the ones in his collection because the orchid depicted was in full, vibrant bloom. The orchids on Meadow Ridge were naturally more spectacular than those in a backyard.

Hearing it was an authentic piece by Kyle, Rafael could guess the situation. He remained silent, his gaze sweeping over everyone's faces.

Trevor was on the verge of tears, his lips trembling incessantly. "How could it have been torn? Who tore it? Who did this?"

The ladies watched Eleanor's expression, remaining silent. Helen had intended to speak, but upon seeing Eleanor's cold gaze, swallowed her words.

Forget it. It was better to endure and avoid trouble.

"I presented this painting to Grand Princess Eleanor as a birthday gift. Lady Adelaide claimed it was a forgery, and Lady Jessica tore it in anger. Since Lady Rosalind declared it genuine, Grand Princess Eleanor called for you to verify it, Lord Young," Carissa loudly declared.

Hearing Carissa's words, Rafael realized his guess was correct.

Helen stared at Carissa in disbelief. Did she not realize she had offended Adelaide? This woman was bold, offending not just Eleanor and Jessica, but also stepping on the toes of Adelaide!

Trevor and the gathered nobility and officials were stunned. Tearing a painting based on one person's claim it was a forgery? What if it wasn't?

Now, it was confirmed to be genuine.

Trevor was too angry to speak, but he knew it wasn't his place to express it. His heart ached with regret, an overwhelming regret that pained him deeply.

Kendrick's face darkened upon hearing that his wife had declared the painting a forgery.

Eleanor remained expressionless, silently observing, but her gaze on Carissa was like a poisoned dagger. She hadn't expected Carissa, whose mother had been insulted with the gift of a symbol of chastity, to present her with such a precious gift. Nor had she anticipated that Kyle was Carissa's senior in the same guild.

"Henry, please escort the officials to the main hall for tea. The banquet will commence shortly," she said calmly.

Henry stepped in to defuse the situation, guiding the regretful officials out.

Trevor, still holding the torn painting, slowly handed it back to the steward as he remarked, "If Mr. Spencer knew his treasured work was treated so poorly, he would be heartbroken."

Afterward, he excused himself, claiming he felt unwell. He left for his residence, skipping the banquet entirely.

With the royal chancellor gone, Rosalind and her mother, Juliet Taylor, also took their leave. Juliet had clearly seen Eleanor's intent to target Carissa, and preferred not to stay.

As Juliet and Rosalind departed, Carissa said, "It seems I've caused trouble for you today, Your Highness. Consider this birthday gift null and void. I'll take back the remains of the painting."

She retrieved the torn painting from the steward, her eyes scanning the room, noting the displeased expressions of Dakota and Adelaide.

As for Eleanor, her hands gripped the armrests tightly, veins bulging on her forehead. Renowned for her reputation, she had failed to recognize a genuine work by Kyle today-a most humiliating blunder! Watching Carissa roll up the painting, Eleanor abruptly redirected the people's focus. "Rebecca, Sebastian was here earlier. Why didn't you ask him to treat your illness?"

This shift in attention made everyone look at Rebecca.

Rebecca's heart sank.

This was bad! If Sebastian were called back, his unpredictable temper might lead him to say anything. With so many people present, how would she manage the situation? How would she maintain her reputation afterward?

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It was obvious when Eleanor set out to entrap someone, she showed no mercy. She immediately commanded someone to fetch Sebastian back.

Sebastian had already explained this issue, and the officials' wives had also been present then. However, he was more than willing to clarify once again.

Standing behind the partition screen, his voice was old and stern.

"Madam Warren suffers from a heart ailment and hemoptysis. This illness has persisted for many years, and remains incurable. It can only be managed with Snowdrop Pills.

"Initially, I treated her in consideration of Lady Sinclair. Since entering the Warren family, Lady Sinclair has tended to Madam Warren's illness day and night for a year. The monthly cost of the Snowdrop Pills is considerable, and there's no need to explain where the money comes from.

"However, Madam Warren was uncooperative. She constantly complained to me about the cost of the pills without understanding the precious herbs used to make them. If not for Lady Sinclair's repeated pleas, I would have stopped visiting the Warrens long ago.

"A person's reputation is as vital as a tree's bark. After General Warren won a victory, he discarded the wife who had served his mother for a year. Then, taking advantage of the king's marriage edict, the Warrens conspired to cast out Lady Sinclair to seize her dowry.

"Such family ethics and character are despicable to me, so I will not visit their estate to treat her. The only reason I still sell them medicine is because Madam Warren's eldest daughter-in-law knelt for a long time in the snow outside my office. It was out of respect for her devotion that I continued to provide the Snowdrop Pills. Why would I have done so otherwise? The pills are already in short supply.

"Moreover, General Barrett marrying Lady Sinclair was him reaching above his station. Fortunately, he never touched even a single finger of hers. They divorced, and she preserved her purity. Because of that, she can remarry without issue."

Having said his piece, Sebastian turned and left without even bidding farewell to Eleanor.

The focus of the gossip immediately shifted from Eleanor to Rebecca.

After all, even if it hadn't, no one would dare to gossip about Eleanor.

But what truly shocked everyone was that Barrett had never touched Carissa.

Good heavens, how could he resist such a beauty?

Many people had seen Aurora's appearance, and now hearing that she was disfigured and unpresentable made the situation even more surprising.

The Warrens had reaped what they had sown. They had a high-born daughter from the Duke of Northwatch's family, yet they had let her go because they thought she had no family backing. Little did they know that Carissa didn't need her family's support-she could earn military merits on her own.

"She must be regretting it now, huh? How could Aurora ever compare to Carissa?"

"If I were her, I'd be wishing for the ground to swallow me up."

"Exactly! It's like finding treasure but leaving empty-handed. Such character and behavior are truly unacceptable. I was considering arranging a marriage for her third son, who looks decent enough, but thankfully I hadn't yet proposed."

"Me too. I thought her daughter seemed quite proper and graceful, but now I wonder if it's all just an act."

The murmurs reached Rebecca's ears, making her so angry she nearly had a heart attack. Serena looked tearful and pitiful. But considering their family's actions, no one dared to feel sympathy for them. On the other hand, Carissa had shown remarkable composure and assertiveness today, standing her ground against Eleanor and even exposing her misdeeds without fear.

Though it appeared reckless, upon closer reflection, she had left no room for Eleanor to retaliate.

If even Eleanor couldn't attack her directly, who knew what else Carissa might reveal?

Moreover, her senior was Kyle. If he came from the Pathfinders Guild, then wasn't she also clearly a member of the same guild? Besides Kyle, Pathfinders Guild was rumored to house many other talented individuals.

Clearly, Carissa was not without strong backing.

With this realization, the gazes directed at Carissa became more meaningful. This potential marriage was indeed worthwhile. She was pure, beautiful, cultured, and capable. She could be graceful when needed and fierce when required-a perfect candidate for a noble wife.

Many people started contemplating marriage alliances with Carissa. Besides her personal merits, she was connected to the prestigious Pathfinders Guild.

Seeing this, Helen suddenly felt a sense of looming danger. She even forgot her dislike for Carissa, and that the last thing she wanted was for Carissa to become her daughter-in-law.

Watching the other noblewomen eyeing Carissa, she blurted out, "The Warrens have indeed treated her unfairly. After Carissa marries into my family in the future, I will ensure she is well cared for!"

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This statement left everyone in shock. Even the fact that Rebecca was rebuked by Sebastian was quickly forgotten.

Everyone turned to look at Helen. What did she mean? Did the Hell Monarch want to marry Carissa? A royal prince wanted to marry a woman who had been divorced?

It wasn't just the noble ladies who were surprised-even Eleanor was taken aback. She glanced at Helen, then at Carissa, her brows furrowing.

Carissa also looked at Helen with a calm expression.

This matter hadn't been settled yet, and no formal proposal had been made. Why did Helen announce it?

Besides, didn't Helen despise her? No one had asked, and no rumors had spread. Yet here Helen was, announcing it herself.

Had Helen accepted her? But the acceptance was so sudden, leaving people at a loss.

Moreover, even if it was to be announced, this wasn't the right moment. Carissa had been criticized for so long, and it was rare for Sebastian to explain in front of the noblewomen why he didn't treat Rebecca. Now, Helen had just rescued Rebecca.

This future mother-in-law was really out of touch!

Eleanor suddenly smiled-a sarcastic grin on her heavily powdered face. "Oh? Rafael wants to marry Carissa? With so many noble ladies in the capital, he fancies a divorced woman?"

Helen instantly regretted her words. She was angry with Carissa, and hadn't accepted her yet. She was against their marriage, so how could she be the one to announce it?

She really couldn't control her big mouth, and felt like slapping herself!

Rebecca was so shocked, her jaw nearly dropped. She couldn't believe that the discarded woman from her family could marry into the royal family. Carissa was going to marry the prince who reclaimed the Southern Frontier and become a powerful princess?!

Carissa wouldn't be just a leisurely princess consort without a position like Avis or Heather!

Many noble daughters on the scene had their hearts broken. Rafael wanted to marry Carissa? How could Carissa deserve this? Even if she had military merits, she was still a once-married woman.

How could she deserve this?!

Countless pairs of resentful eyes fixed on Carissa's face, accompanied by many incredulous glances, as if this was some earth-shattering news.

At this moment, Carissa really wanted to drag Helen out and harshly question her if she had lost her mind.

Jealousy twisted Serena's face. On the day the army returned in triumph, she had gone to watch. When her eyes fixed on Rafael, she couldn't look away.

Serena's heart raced. She thought that if she could marry into the royal family as a concubine, it would be a tremendous blessing. She didn't dare to think about becoming the main wife-she had some self-awareness. Though she was from a general's family, it had fallen from grace.

However, being a concubine seemed achievable.

Now, hearing that her former sister-in-law who had been thrown out of the house could marry the Hell Monarch, jealousy gripped her heart like an iron hand.

She couldn't hold back, and blurted out, "Carissa, do you even deserve it? You're just a discarded woman my brother didn't want! How can you marry the Hell Monarch as his consort?" Rebecca immediately reprimanded her in a stern voice, "Shut up!"

With so many noble ladies and officials' wives present, Serena's outburst was disgraceful and an indication that she lacked proper upbringing. Finding a good marriage match would be difficult after this. Serena realized she had lost her composure. She paled and retreated behind her mother, but her eyes remained fixed on Carissa with venomous hatred.

Serena voiced the thoughts of many noble daughters present, but they would never say it aloud. No matter how jealous or disappointed they were, strict family training forced them to suppress these feelings. Jessica laughed derisively. "Aunt Helen, you always strive to be the best and claim your son is exceptional. Now you want him to marry a divorced woman? I bet once this news spreads, you'll become the laughingstock of the entire capital in less than half a day."

Then, Jessica then turned to Carissa with a cold smile. "Carissa, do you even understand your status? How can a divorced woman like you dream of marrying my cousin? You should know your place and leave before you embarrass yourself further!"

Her words made several people laugh out loud.

Helen's lips trembled with anger, but she couldn't think of a retort. She could only glare, first at Jessica and then at Carissa.

"Yes, I'm a divorced woman. But I can fight on the battlefield and marry into the royal family as a princess consort. This is a fortune many people can't achieve in several lifetimes. Lady Jessica, you're very envious and jealous, aren't you?" Carissa responded calmly.

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Carissa laughed softly, her demeanor unruffled.

"I don't find myself embarrassed at all, but don't you feel any shame, Lady Jessica?"

"You're the daughter of a princess, and you were given a royal education. Yet, you speak such harsh words. You couldn't even recognize my senior's painting, and tore it apart in your ignorance. Such rashness is what will truly invite ridicule.

"As for telling me to leave, are you issuing an eviction order? How amusing. Grand Princess Eleanor invited me here with a formal invitation, and I brought a birthday gift. Now, you want to chase me away? Is this how your family treats its guests? Or was there another intention behind that invitation-to humiliate me in front of these ladies?

"Did you think that after my separation from Barrett, I would be too ashamed to show my face, and that I would quietly endure your insults?"

She paused, her gaze sweeping across the room.

"If you expected me to be a laughingstock by inviting me here, you'll be disappointed. I haven't done anything wrong. It is not I who should be ashamed. My family is upright and honorable. No matter where I go, I can speak loudly and proudly.

"But you, Lady Jessica, lack respect for your elders. You disregarded the concubines of the late emperor. You said Helen would become a laughingstock, showing neither respect nor devotion. I wonder how your parents raised you?"

Her eyes turned to Eleanor, her voice sharp.

"But I suppose there's no surprise there. After all, a mother who would send a small sculpture commemorating chastity after my father and brothers sacrificed their lives for the country-a clear curse-could hardly raise a proper daughter. Don't bother trying to drive me away. People like you are beneath my company. Goodbye, no need to see me out!"

With that, she called out to her maids, Lulu and Pearl.

"We're leaving. This filthy place isn't worth visiting again. Who knows what kind of lingering resentment might cling to us? Look-the air above Harmony Palace, Grand Princess Eleanor's residence, is thick with the spirits of people who died a wrongful death."

Eleanor could no longer contain her fury, and shouted, "Carissa Sinclair!"

Without turning back, Carissa replied, "You should find a high priest to perform some exorcisms for them, or the resentment will backfire eventually."

Wasn't it just about seeing who became the topic of conversation among the high society ladies in the capital? Well, Carissa might as well drop a bombshell.

Whether it was true or not, Eleanor knew it well. She wouldn't dare actually call in the authorities for an investigation-because if they did, the truth would come out.

According to the laws, masters couldn't kill their servants without reporting to the authorities first, and those who had been treated as concubines couldn't be killed cruelly. Carissa hadn't known this until earlier, when Frederick mentioned that most of the concubines who had been with Henry had met untimely ends, advising her to be cautious with Eleanor.

Having said her piece, Carissa walked away, leaving Eleanor fuming in anger, shouting in vain.

There was no need to look back or stay. The conversation ended there.

Carissa had come and given her gift, but was treated harshly by the hostess. There was no reason not to fight back. Others might fear Eleanor, but she did not.

Rebecca stood stunned, never having seen this sharp side of Carissa. Or rather, she had never truly seen the real Carissa. The daughter-in-law who once served her so dutifully seemed like a completely different person now.

Why had someone with such pride and capability ever been content to serve a sickly mother-in-law?

She couldn't understand it, but she also seemed to understand at the same time.

And this understanding made her feel even worse.

Even more shocked than Rebecca was Helen. Her astonished gaze followed Carissa's elegant retreat until the latter disappeared from sight. Even then, her eyes did not shift.

At that moment, a drum seemed to be beating inside her chest, each thump resonating through her bones, reverberating loudly in her ears.

The thrill of it was unprecedented!

Helen's lifelong enemy, the mother-daughter pair she had always been powerless with before, had been undone by a few words from Carissa. Helen had never seen Eleanor so unraveled. It felt incredibly satisfying!

Carissa being her daughter-in-law might not have been her first choice, but perhaps she wasn't so bad after all.

No!

Helen couldn't think that way. Carissa was still unworthy of her son, Rafael!

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As Carissa walked away, Rafael followed suit.

News of their departure quickly spread from the inner courtyard to the main court. The royal relatives and various civil and military officials present all learned that Rafael was about to marry Carissa. Men and women thought differently.

Men valued heritage and purity, but they also placed great importance on benefits.

Who was Carissa? Beyond being the daughter of the Duke of Northwatch and backed by her impressive background, she was also an apprentice of the Pathfinders Guild, with Kyle as her senior.

The Pathfinders Guild wasn't just a martial arts faction. Apart from Kyle, it was home to many extraordinary individuals. Currently, the leader of the Pathfinders Guild was Adrian Russell. He was the great-grandson of Blake Russell, who was the former Supreme Cavalry Commander, also known by his other titles of the Exotic Sovereign and the Annara Monarch.

Adrian founded the Pathfinders Guild, and his influence extended over all the guilds in Meadow Ridge. After all, Meadow Ridge itself was his domain, as it used to be Blake's fief.

Though the Annara Monarch's title was not hereditary, the territory was never reclaimed. Over the years, only they knew how much wealth they had amassed.

Of course, wealth was secondary. The crucial factor was the influence within the martial world. Adrian's martial prowess was said to be second in the world, with one of his juniors being the best. Whether these rumors held true was uncertain, but the guild's formidable reputation commanded respect throughout Meadow Ridge.

Everyone would want to befriend such a powerful faction, so a marital alliance would clearly also be favorable.

Moreover, Carissa herself was a celebrated hero who recaptured the Southern Frontier and replaced Aurora as the top female general of the era.

Given these accomplishments, whether Carissa was a divorced woman was irrelevant.

It was indeed a strange world where, sometimes, women belittled each other even before men had the chance to do so.

They said that like attracted like, and these women really did harm their own kind and caused injury to one another.

Carissa and Rafael exchanged a glance at the entrance of Eleanor's residence. Seeing her spirited demeanor, it was clear she hadn't been distressed, which put Rafael at ease.

Since the announcement was already made, he took the opportunity to extend an invitation. "I heard that there's a chef from Funara at Wisdom Retreat who's skilled in making spicy cuisine. How about we go and try it?"

"Sounds good!" Carissa was indeed hungry. Arguing with others was quite exhausting.

Rafael and Dylan mounted their horses, while she, Lulu, and Pearl boarded the carriage.

Pearl still looked somewhat reserved. "My lady, is it appropriate for you two to dine together in public like this?"

Carissa smiled, and replied, "Should we invite him to our estate instead?"

"Uh... Perhaps Wisdom Retreat is better," Pearl reconsidered.

The estate wasn't prepared for such an impromptu meal, and even if they could prepare a few dishes, it wouldn't be suitable for hosting distinguished guests. The prince was indeed a distinguished guest!

Upon arriving at Wisdom Retreat, Dylan went in first to reserve a private room, then came out to invite Rafael and Carissa inside.

The private room was set with two tables: one for Lulu, Pearl, and Dylan, and the other for Rafael and Carissa.

Carissa took on the task of ordering the food. Holding the menu, she looked up at Rafael and asked, "Can you handle spicy food?"

"I thrive on spice!" Rafael straightened up, taking the task of ordering very seriously.

After enduring hardships on the battlefield for three years, he was eager to savor everything. More importantly, he knew that Carissa liked spicy food.

"For the two of us, three dishes should be enough. Since I can handle spice too, let's order all spicy dishes. However, Lulu and Pearl don't like spicy food. Let's order one spicy dish and three non-spicy ones for their table. How does that sound?"

"Three dishes won't be enough. Let's order eight," Rafael said.

Carissa chuckled. "Can you eat that much? It would be a waste if we can't finish it."

"I can manage. I didn't have breakfast today, and I was looking forward to a good meal at Grand Princess Eleanor's birthday banquet. Since that didn't work out, we can't let our stomachs down."

Carissa laughed as she wrote down their order. The menu had spicy dishes, but also featured other cuisines. Ordering all spicy dishes wasn't feasible, so she also selected two of Wisdom Retreat's signature dishes.

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Once Carissa finished writing down their orders, she showed them to Rafael. He reviewed it and said happily, "These are all to my liking. Let's go with this." Then, he turned to Dylan. "Dylan, take this and place the orders."

Dylan nodded and took the paper, then went out to place the order. He returned shortly afterward.

"What happened in the inner courtyard? Did they doubt the birthday gift you brought and think it was a fake? Did they also try to bully you?"

Rafael had a general idea, but wanted to hear it from her directly.

Carissa took a sip of water to soothe her dry throat, and said, "They couldn't bully me, but there were indeed some who targeted me and didn't take me seriously."

Lulu chimed in, "My lady, the last few things you said really frightened me. How could you dare to speak so boldly? What if Grand Princess Eleanor decides to retaliate?"

Carissa replied, "Whether I say it or not, she was going to make things difficult for me anyway. I might as well get it off my chest."

She gave Lulu a sideways glance. "You've been with me for years, from the estate to Meadow Ridge and back to the capital. Have you ever seen me afraid of anyone?" "You were always fearless, but now..."

Lulu hesitated, remembering their days at Valor Estate. It wasn't that Carissa was afraid of anyone, but she seemed like a different person now.

However, Lulu knew better than to voice this in front of Rafael.

"In any case, even if we try not to offend anyone, we end up offending them. Being afraid won't change anything," Carissa said.

Rafael asked curiously, "What did you say before you left?"

Carissa recounted the events in the inner courtyard and her argument with Jessica, relaying every word she had said.

Rafael listened without any hint of surprise, as if he had anticipated her reaction.

Who could bully this little demoness from the Pathfinders Guild? The Warren family might have thought they had the upper hand. However, they were unaware that Carissa only married into their family due to Melanie's instructions after Hector and his sons sacrificed their lives on the battlefield.

As Barrett went to battle to defend Starhaven, Carissa vowed to care for those in the Warren family household.

She was never someone to be easily manipulated.

Years ago, when Rafael went up the mountain, he had witnessed Carissa pinning her senior, Winona, to the ground. Winona hadn't gone easy on her-she truly was outmatched.

Of course, Winona was renowned for her Lightfoot Skill and was one of the most famous spies in the martial world, though not many knew of this particular event.

According to Adrian, Carissa was a martial prodigy. Among all the guild apprentices, she had no peers in terms of martial skills. Not only among the guild members but also across all the guilds in Meadow Ridge.

Who hadn't Carissa challenged in her younger, more reckless days?

Regardless, none could surpass her.

When Adrian spoke of her, he did so with a proud expression.

However, Rafael was surprised by Helen's public announcement of their impending marriage. Given her nature, she would surely oppose the marriage vehemently. Even if someone asked her, she would likely remain silent. Her choice to speak out without being prompted was very unlike her.

"My mom will surely regret her public announcement tonight when she returns to the palace," Rafael said, knowing her well.

Carissa found it amusing. "Your mom spoke to me with such arrogance the other day, but in front of Grand Princess Eleanor and Lady Jessica, she was as meek as a puppy. She was angry, but dared not retort. She could only glare at them. It was quite amusing to watch."

"Grand Princess Eleanor is my aunt. She was pampered by my grandfather from a young age. When she lived in the palace with her mother, she learned many underhanded tactics. After she grew up, even my father had to give in to her. How could my mom not be afraid of her?"

Rafael's long fingers traced the rim of the cup as he continued, "My grandfather was quite compliant with her demands, but when it came to her interest in your father, he didn't comply. That's why she harbored resentment towards the Sinclair family."

Carissa replied, "Anyone with a brain knows that a princess can't command a military force. My father was a formidable general in his youth, capable of standing on his own. How could the court allow him to marry the princess? It's something everyone understands. How could she not? It's just her unwillingness to accept it."

Rafael's lips curled into a smile that was as captivating as it was mesmerizing. "Yes, she's merely using the opportunity to vent her frustrations. By the way, how did you know about the grievances in her household?"

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Just then, the waiter brought out the food to be served, and Carissa fell silent. She watched as each dish was laid out before them.

Among them was her favorite-spicy stuffed peppers. Their vibrant red and green hues looked utterly appetizing.

There was a variety of dishes, both spicy and mild options, and the fragrant aroma soon filled the room.

Carissa was ravenous. She picked up her utensils, and addressed Rafael's earlier question.

"When we left, Frederick mentioned that over the years, Lord Henry had taken many concubines. Most of them died after giving birth. I thought, if a concubine dies, it could be due to an accident or childbirth complications, but for so many to die—it's hard not to be suspicious."

As she spoke, she picked up a stuffed pepper and placed it on her plate. She also served some to Rafael. "Try some of this. It's the star of all the dishes."

Then, she spooned a small amount of red chili and green chili onto his plate.

"Okay." Rafael looked at the bright red chili with a serious expression, not hurrying to eat. "Your suspicion is correct. Indeed, Henry's concubines were all cruelly mistreated and died terrible deaths." Carissa asked, "I didn't see any concubines around Grand Princess Eleanor today. Were all killed? And the children born of those concubines are missing too?"

"Not exactly. Those who knew how to behave might have survived. After giving birth, they would offer their children to her and then serve as footmaids by her side, which allowed them to stay alive. As for the children..."

He finally took a bite of the pepper. After chewing briefly, he quickly swallowed. His eyes suddenly turned bloodshot, and he grabbed his cup to drink, coughing as he said, "It's too spicy...!"

As he coughed, he pulled out a handkerchief to cover his mouth. The handkerchief was overly conspicuous, and Carissa turned her face away, unable to look.

What kind of embroidery was that? It was neither a bird nor a bee, and it was all wrinkled!

Did he even remember who gave him this handkerchief?

No, she needed to find a way to steal it and destroy it!

She took a bite of the stuffed pepper, savoring its spicy and smooth taste. It was truly soul-satisfying. However, her focus wasn't on the food but on his handkerchief. Casually, she asked, "This handkerchief of yours doesn't seem very well embroidered. Was it made by one of the seamstresses in your residence?"

Rafael, his cheeks flushed from the spiciness, continued to drink water, gradually clearing the fiery sensation from his mouth.

He finally lifted the handkerchief, and said, "This? It's probably not from the residence's seamstresses. This handkerchief has been with me for a long time. I remember it was made by a young girl who was just learning embroidery. It was the first handmade gift I received, so I've kept it. I'm just a bit regretful that I can't recall who the girl was."

He spoke with sincerity, and his eyes showed genuine regret, indicating he had truly forgotten who gave it to him.

Carissa was relieved. If he had forgotten for so long, he would likely never remember. She needed to practice her embroidery diligently in the coming days, and make sure he didn't notice how rough her skills were in the past.

"Before this handkerchief, has anyone ever given you a handmade gift?" Carissa asked while serving him more food. "Here, try this."

He poured more water, and let the food cool a bit before he ate. His manners were very refined, a stark contrast to his demeanor on the battlefield.

It seemed that everyone started putting on airs after returning to the capital.

"My mom never did embroidery. If I needed handkerchiefs or such, the palace had plenty. Gillian could easily fetch me some," Rafael said, only to start coughing again.

This time, it seemed the spiciness had hit him hard. He gulped the water down, but ended up coughing even more.

Dylan watched him with growing concern as Rafael coughed so violently that it seemed like his lungs might come out. He couldn't help but worry.

Rafael had never been able to handle spicy food before.

Why was he claiming to thrive on it today?!

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Carissa also noticed that Rafael started coughing as soon as he ate, and his cheeks turned red from the coughing.

Clearly, he wasn't used to spicy food. So why did he choose this restaurant?

She moved the list of non-spicy dishes to his side, and said, "Even though you like spicy food, I think your throat is sore today. You should avoid spicy dishes for now and eat something lighter." "My throat does feel off," Rafael said, clearing his throat as he felt the lingering burn from the spices.

It was quite uncomfortable.

"I'll have someone bring you a glass of milk," Carissa said, standing up to open the door to the private room. She called for a waiter to bring a cup of milk.

"Milk can help neutralize the spiciness," she said with a smile, as if comforting a child. "Drink up."

Rafael took the glass of milk. It had a slight gamey taste, but it was cool and refreshing, making it bearable. More importantly, it was a gesture of her thoughtfulness.

He appreciated her unspoken understanding, not revealing his discomfort or his attempts to please her.

She had truly changed since their time in Meadow Ridge.

But he felt quite bitter, because the scene of her coaxing him to drink milk was probably how she had always served Rebecca in the past, right?

She had truly regarded the Warrens as her family, and genuinely wanted to spend her life with Barrett. How could a pack of ungrateful wretches deserve her sincerity?

Rafael's eyes darkened with anger. Liam's revenge on Aurora was indeed too presumptuous. He had thought that humiliating Aurora would drive her to commit suicide, just like Westhaven's crown prince. However, Aurora was still alive and well.

Carissa noticed his sudden cold demeanor, and asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Rafael's expression was cold as he shook his head. "It's nothing. We'll talk about it later."

Dylan, recognizing Rafael's need for privacy, signaled to Lulu and Pearl. "Let's move to the adjacent room for our meal."

Lulu understood that there might be serious matters at hand, so she called the waiter to help them move the food to the next room.

A few minutes later, only Carissa and Rafael remained in the room.

"Is something troubling you, Your Highness?" Carissa asked.

Rafael looked at her. "Seeing how you coaxed me into drinking the milk, I imagine you were equally patient when you attended Rebecca. You once treated the Warren family as your own, yet they all betrayed you. I'm angry on your behalf. And it seems to me that Aurora's punishment was too lenient. Even the military punishment she faced was endured by Barrett on her behalf."

Carissa hadn't expected that a simple cup of milk would remind Rafael of her time in the Warren family.

She thought for a moment, and said, "Perhaps. But I trust that after careful consideration, the king will have her removed from the Ministry of Defense. She used to look down on women of the inner court. Now, she'll have to settle for being a general's wife and serve her in-laws and husband."

Carissa remembered Aurora's once proud declaration that she despised fighting with the other women in the household. But in the end, she would inevitably become the very type of person she despised. It was a fate that seemed all too predictable.

"Your family was annihilated, and she is indirectly responsible. Don't you want to kill her?" Rafael asked.

This was a question Carissa had pondered many times.

She furrowed her brows. "Killing her would be easy-it's just a matter of a single strike. But would it be true revenge? The people of Westhaven won't reveal the evil she committed at Victory Pass. Killing her wouldn't be true revenge."

True revenge would involve exposing the truth. The people of Westhaven choose to conceal it, and Salvador would be even less likely to make it public. Such an action would be detrimental to Starhaven. Moreover, the Starhaven soldiers would be branded as cruel and ruthless, and it would also implicate her grandfather, Dominic.

So, revenge was unattainable. The cost was too high.

In truth, both of them understood the situation-it was merely a matter of unresolved resentment.

Aurora's existence was like a thorn, embedded in their hearts. It was not only the grudge of having Carissa's family killed-Aurora's actions had cast a shadow of shame over the soldiers of Starhaven, tarnishing their honor and dignity.

"Eat up," Carissa said, bringing her thoughts back to the present. She smiled at him, her heart warmed by the fact that someone cared about the wrongs done to her family.

Rafael returned her smile warmly. He picked up a piece of pepper, and offered it to her. "I know you like spicy food, so eat up."

Carissa tilted her head with a playful smile. "When did you find out that I like spicy food?"

"When I was at Meadow Ridge, I heard them mention it," Rafael replied.

"That's odd. Why didn't you ever meet with me when you were there?" Carissa asked, puzzled.

They weren't strangers, and since he was already at Meadow Ridge, why hadn't he sought her out?

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Rafael continued to put food on her plate, but he avoided answering her question. Carissa suppressed her curiosity. After all, it wasn't a particularly important matter.

He smiled, and deflected by saying, "After Grand Princess Eleanor's birthday banquet today, I'm sure there will be many new topics among the noble families in the capital."

Carissa gave him a playful glare. "Yes, many noble ladies will have their hearts broken. When Lady Helen announced our engagement, many looked at me with disdain."

"There will be many who envy and resent me," Rafael said meaningfully.

At least Barrett would regret it. Even Salvador had been moved as well.

"Not really. Who would want a woman who has been divorced?" Carissa said.

Rafael tapped her forehead lightly with the end of his spoon. "You're about to become the Hell Monarch's princess consort. Are you still belittling yourself?"

"Such is the way of the world." She tapped him back playfully, then quickly moved away, smiling. "I'm not belittling myself. I know how outstanding I am."

Seeing her smile so freely, with light shining in her eyes, touched Rafael deeply. Even if her happiness was partly a facade, her willingness to wear it was a good start.

The sadness that had once lingered in her eyes when she first arrived at the Southern Frontier had greatly diminished.

Carissa observed him, whose expressions shifted from relaxed to serious, and thought that perhaps everyone had their own pain. He was forced to marry someone he didn't love due to royal edict, while his true love was married to someone else.

She wondered who that woman was. If the woman knew she had missed out on such a fine man, would she regret it?

After the meal, they went their separate ways. During their farewell, Carissa felt they had grown closer. It seemed that after their marriage, they would be able to respect each other as friends. The next day, officials from the Protocol Department and Trevor accompanied Rafael to Northwatch Estate as he was to formally propose to Carissa.

Theodore and Solomon were also invited to Northwatch Estate, where they began the traditional courtship rituals, including the proposal, astrological signs inquiry, gift presentation, and setting the wedding date.

Trevor personally came to oversee the proceedings, which greatly pleased Theodore. He felt assured that Rafael was genuinely intent on marrying Carissa.

Theodore was deeply comforted. Not only had Carissa enhanced the Sinclair family's reputation through her achievements, but she was also marrying into the royal family. This would surely make those who had looked down on her and her family rethink their opinions.

The Astrology Department minister was also invited. After consulting the almanac, he declared, "They're a match made in heaven!"

With these words, Rafael decided to set the wedding date.

The Astrology Department minister smiled, and said, "It's already July. Preparing for a wedding within six months is already quite fast. The twenty-fourth of December is a good day. Although the preparation time is a bit rushed, it can be done if there are enough people to help."

Rafael was eager to marry Carissa as soon as possible, but felt that the wedding should be conducted with proper ceremony. He asked Theodore and Carissa for their opinions, and once they agreed, the date was set for the twenty-fourth of December.

Turning to Carissa, Rafael asked, "I still need to visit Meadow Ridge personally to ask for your master's consent. Do you want to come with me?"

Carissa shook her head, her eyes clouded with sadness. "I won't be going."

There was once a woman named Carissa at Meadow Ridge-a carefree and spirited woman.

Carissa had left herself behind there. Even though she had endured much during the divorce, she never returned. She only sent letters to her master and seniors, not wanting them to see her without a genuine smile.

Rafael understood why she didn't want to return to Meadow Ridge, and sighed inwardly. He maintained a calm exterior, and nodded. "Very well. I will go there myself."

Theodore was immensely satisfied. The fact that Rafael would attend to every detail of the engagement showed how much he valued the match.

The Warren family had been so arrogant before. Now, would they still be able to hold their heads high?