

## War Song 221

### Chapter 221

Watching Bleanor's face shift from green to red, and then from red to white, Helen felt a deep sense of satisfaction.

At last, she was seeing Eleanor get a taste of defeat

Helen didn't fully understand why this matter couldn't be used to accuse Carissa of any crime-after all, an offense of disrespect was no small matter. Regardless, seeing how Eleanor suddenly fell silent, it was clear that no punishment for Carissa would be forthcoming.

To truly understand the subtle reasons behind this, Helen would need to consult her sister. But for now, she was content to enjoy the spectacle of Eleanor's irate,

multicolored face.

In the end, Eleanor stormed off in anger, having realized during this visit to the palace that Carissa's audacity was backed not only by Rafael, but also by Victoria and Salvador.

No wonder she had been so brazen!

After Eleanor left, Salvador sighed and rubbed his temples. "It seems that the matter of the miniature chastity belt sculpture is indeed real. Aunt Eleanor has truly gone too far." Victoria's face was clouded with anger. "I even wanted to slap her myself. How arrogant and ignorant! She's so cruel and selfish-she's completely disgraced the royal family!" "Melanie must have been furious at the time," Salvador said.

Victoria's eyes reddened. "Yes, but she never complained to me about her

grievances. I could have interceded on her behalf."

"Mother, don't be too distressed. She's gone now. We can only hope she finds peace," Salvador said, his expression darkening as he thought about how Aurora had led to the Duke of Northwatch's family's downfall.

With the truth remaining hidden, how could Melanie ever find peace?

Yet how could the truth ever be revealed? It would remain muddled, with Westhaven remaining silent and the people of Starhaven being unaware.

Derek was right-the Duke of Northwatch's family had indeed suffered greatly.

Salvador had more state affairs to attend to, so he departed soon after, leaving only Victoria and Helen in the hall.

Helen was deep in thought.

Eleanor had come with such force today, determined to punish Carissa. Helen had thought that, no matter what, Carissa would inevitably face some sort of retribution. Arrogance always comes with a price.

Yet who would have expected that Eleanor, after throwing a fit, would leave without any punishment or reprimand dished out to Carissa? It almost felt like Eleanor had to swallow her anger and walk away empty-handed.

Helen pondered for a while. Some things became clear to her, while others remained elusive.

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She asked, "Victoria, why did Eleanor let Carissa off so easily? Given her temperament, with Carissa barging in and insulting her, how could she let it this? I believe Carissa must have had something to back her up, or Eleanor wouldn't have stormed into the palace so furiously."

Victoria gave Helen a pointed look. "Can't you figure it out? Try using your brain a little. If you don't use it for too long, it'll start to rot."

Helen sighed, and replied with a hint of childishness, "Victoria, you know I don't like thinking too much. Even if I make some guesses, I can't be sure of everything. Besides, I wouldn't know if I've guessed correctly."

\*Put away that cutesy demeanor. You're going to be someone's mother-in-law soon, so stop being so pretentious," Victoria scolded, giving her a stern look.

"You've guessed correctly-Carissa did indeed barge into Eleanor's residence and scold her. At first, Eleanor thought Carissa must have some support behind her. But when Salvador asked if Eleanor wanted to punish Carissa for it, she started to catch on. If people connected the punishment to the scandal that was spreading after the birthday banquet, do you think she'd still dare to tell anyone that Carissa stormed in and insulted her?

"It's about the miniature chastity belt sculpture, right?" Helen asked.

"That's one reason. Another is that even if Carissa was punished for directly storming into Eleanor's residence and scolding her, it would be just a reprimand at most. After all, it's Carissa's first offense, and she recently obtained some military

achievements.

"That would have made Eleanor's authority meaningless. Who would fear her after that? She would be known to be all bark and no bite if that happened. So, do you understand now? Carissa wasn't acting recklessly; she had gauged Eleanor's psychology and acted accordingly."

Helen nodded, and a wave of complex emotion swept over her. "Carissa is quite a formidable opponent."

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Victoria was well aware of Helen's intentions. She decided to give Helen a gentle warning.

"Soon, you'll be moving to Hell Monarch Estate to live with Rafael. If you don't understand the ways of managing a household, don't try to overstep and take control. Once Carissa enters the family, she will naturally take charge of the household's affairs..."

"Victoria, that's not quite right," Helen interrupted Victoria with an unusual seriousness. "How can a new bride be in charge of the household? I have reservations about her. Since we're here together, I won't hesitate to speak plainly-I don't like her, and I don't want her to be my daughter-in-law, let alone manage the household."

"Oh? You want to take over the household?" Victoria raised an eyebrow. "Alright then, starting tomorrow, I'll ask Kylie to transfer her duties overseeing the inner palace to you. Let her have a rest and see how you manage for a few days."

"It's not like I've never done it before," Helen replied. "Kylie has been in charge of the inner palace, and I've assisted her significantly. Besides, didn't I help you a lot when you were in charge of the palace back then?"

"Yes, you helped a lot, but sometimes you were more of a hindrance," Victoria said bluntly.

"Our parents spoiled you too much. After you entered the palace, I kept an eye on you and protected you, allowing you to have a stable life and bear a son and a daughter. How many times have you gotten into trouble and I had to clean up after you?"

"But once you're in Hell Monarch Estate, if you want to enjoy a peaceful life, don't try to make things difficult for your daughter-in-law. Whether you like Carissa or not, or oppose her entering the family, it's a done deal that she's marrying Rafael. You don't have the right to oppose it. If you cause trouble in the household, I won't spare you."

Because of Carissa, even Helen's own sister wasn't fond of her anymore. This made Helen even more unhappy with Carissa.

Despite this, Helen had come to a harsh reality-no matter how unhappy she was with Carissa, the marriage was set in stone. She couldn't stop it.

Thinking back, Helen had made such a big deal about it at Eleanor's birthday banquet. If they backed out of the marriage bow, Carissa's reputation would be ruined. After considering it, Helen decided to just let it be and see how things play

out

The news of the Hell Monarch marrying the Duke of Northwatch's daughter soon spread throughout the capital, and the citizens were abuzz with discussion.

There were many opinions among the people. Some said Carissa was unworthy of such a match, while others believed they were a perfect match.

However, another voice soon emerged, claiming that Carissa had married Barrett less than two years after the deaths of Hector and his six sons. That meant she hadn't observed the three years of mourning, and was thus deemed greatly negligent and disrespectful toward her family.

Now, it had been just over a year since her mother passed away, and Carissa was already preparing to remarry. This further showed she had no sense of respect for her family. How could someone so disrespectful have been a dutiful daughter-in-law to Rebecca?

This claim quickly ignited into a wildfire of controversy across the capital. People began to realize that it really hadn't been three full years between Hector's death and Carissa's marriage to Barrett. That meant the mourning period Carissa had observed was indeed less than three years,

As for the mourning period for her mother, whether Carissa needed to observe it or not was still under debate as she had already divorced once. However, it was clear that she was married to Barrett during the period when she should have been mourning.

In Starhaven, failing to observe duties to one's family was considered a grave offense, which could incite public outrage. Within days, the situation escalated, with some even shouting and cursing outside Northwatch Estate,

When the maids went out to buy silk threads today, they returned trembling with anger. Recognized as servants of the Duke of Northwatch's family, they were surrounded and berated by the people. People pointed fingers at their faces and showered them with spit.

After washing their faces, they went to report to Carissa.

Lulu was nearly in tears as she said, "They talk about observing three years of

mourning which is generally understood as two years and a bit more. But Lady Shad had been mourning for more than three years. The wedding date was also chosen by the late madam after a discussion with the Astrology Department. Now could it be twisted into this? We couldn't explain it to them, they simply refused

Carissa adjusted her collar and smiled. "It's no matter. Let them continue their outcry for a few more days. Grand Princess Eleanor has plenty of money. Let her spend more of

The instigators of this public outcry were none other than Eleanor herself, with some citizens stirred up by her and others led by hired provocateurs.

Let them continue their attacks for now. This tactic wasn't hard to counter, as it was based on falsehoods

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Eleanor was indeed behind this matter. Since she couldn't have Salvador punish Carissa for offending the royal family, she decided to take matters into her own hands and teach Carissa a lesson in her own way.

The people of the capital had praised Carissa for her devotion to her family. Then, what about now? Eleanor wanted to see if a daughter who remarried during her mourning period would be met with public scorn!

One of Eleanor's servants, Lucy, came in with a beaming face to report, "Your Highness,

news of this has spread far and wide. Coffeehouses and taverns are abuzz with discussions, and it's mostly in condemnation.

"Mostly?" Jessica's brows knitted in cold displeasure. "Are there still some people speaking in her favor?"

Lucy replied, "Yes, my lady. There are a few troublemakers defending her, saying that by the time she got married, it had already been twenty-four months since her father's death."

Mourning for parents traditionally lasted three years for children, but this was considered a general guideline, and the actual required period was twenty-four months.

Jessica said, "The common people won't remember her wedding date. It's probably someone from the duke's family who's trying to confuse the issue."

She turned to Eleanor, and asked, "Mom, did she really complete the mourning period?"

Eleanor replied indifferently, "Who knows? In any case, the common people won't care about such details. They enjoy taking the opportunity to berate the powerful, which brings them some satisfaction. They won't concern themselves with the specifics."

"If she did observe the full mourning period, and if she comes forward to clarify, the people will believe her, making our efforts pointless. You must have spent quite a bit of money this time," Jessica said.

Eleanor sighed, her expression darkening. "I did spend a lot of money, but if it results in Carissa being publicly denounced by the entire city and her reputation being ruined, then the money was well spent."

She felt a sense of satisfaction, but she really had spent a lot of money. Over the years, the funds of Harmony Palace had been spent like water, leaving the outward appearance of wealth but an empty foundation.

Whenever Eleanor thought about it, she couldn't help but resent her parents for giving her too little land and income, making it so difficult to maintain the palace's appearance.

With a deep breath, Eleanor continued, "Who would believe her if she came forward to clarify? When she married Barrett, the Warren family was in decline. The date was chosen by the groom's family, and they probably couldn't find anyone of high repute to select a good day for them. A general clarification from her would be utterly ineffective. Are you saying the money I spent was for nothing?"

Jessica finally smiled with satisfaction. "Then let's watch as she falls from grace. Perhaps, by then, Rafael will no longer want to marry her."

Eleanor shook her head slowly. "No, he will still marry her. From the attitudes of Victoria and Salvador the other day, it's clear they are backing this marriage. But perhaps Rafael may not genuinely desire it."

"Why do you say that, Mom?" Jessica asked, puzzled. "Why would the king allow Rafael to marry Carissa?"

Eleanor was equally perplexed. "The king should be opposed to Rafael marrying Carissa. After all, Rafael holds significant military power, and Carissa carries the reputation of the duke's family, which has military backing. Doesn't the king worry that Rafael might harbor ambitions of his own?"

Jessica's eyes widened in shock. "Would he dare?"

Eleanor scoffed coldly. "Who wouldn't want to be king? Rafael may not have such ambitions now, but who knows what the future holds? Ambition is nurtured day by day. It seems the king, despite his wisdom, places too much trust in brotherly bonds. I'll need to remind him of a few things."

"Mom, does the king still respect you?" Jessica inquired.

Eleanor's gaze darkened slightly. "He shows respect on the surface, but who can say what lies beneath? I need to make him remember my favors. I'll go to the palace tomorrow to remind him."

Jessica stepped forward with a charming look. "Mom, please take me with you to the palace. I have some matters I wish to discuss with Aunt Helen."

What matters?"

Jessica's eyes gleamed with calculation. "I'm a bit short on funds, so I thought to ask Aunt Helen for some money."

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Eleanor smiled slowly, thinking it was time to extract some money from this money

tree.

Inside Evergreen Palace, Helen sneezed repeatedly. As she was preparing for a nap at noon, she was informed that Eleanor and Jessica had arrived.

Gillian furrowed her brow. When the two of them came together, it was usually for a specific reason.

A few years ago, Jessica and Dakota opened a makeup shop and made some money. Helen, who hated being outdone by others, heard about their success and thought about starting a shop herself. However, she didn't plan to team up with Jessica. She actually wanted to partner with her maternal nephew.



However, Jessica approached Helen with a proposition. She claimed she had a unique formula that produced makeup as good as the ones used in the palace. She asked Helen for three thousand silver coins to start the business, suggesting they could open a makeup shop together.

Helen was skeptical of Jessica, so Eleanor intervened. Eleanor made sarcastic comments, suggesting that Helen was worried about being tricked out of her money and didn't trust them. Helen was already intimidated by Eleanor and Jessica's presence. So after seeing Eleanor's grim face, Helen ended up handing over the

money.

Over the years, the makeup shop had never made a profit and had instead consistently suffered losses. Periodically, Helen was asked for more funds to keep the business afloat. Despite her private complaints, she felt compelled to comply to avoid being accused of poverty or stinginess.

In these years, Jessica had extracted nearly ten thousand silver coins from her for the makeup shop that had never even turned a profit.

Gillian, who had served Helen for many years and followed her into the palace, was naturally concerned about the expenditure. She suggested, "It seems they are here again to ask for more money. Lady Helen, the makeup shop isn't making any money. Perhaps it would be best to close it down to avoid further requests for funds. You've already spent so much on it."

Even if that amount of silver were thrown into the water, it would at least make a splash.

Helen also felt that the makeup shop had indeed been a failure, but she was reluctant to close it. She felt it would be embarrassing. The makeup shop owned by Jessica and Dakota continued to make a profit, while the shop owned by Helen and Jessica was perpetually in the red. She refused to believe it would remain unprofitable indefinitely.

It was a matter of pride.

Determined not to be defeated, Helen invited Eleanor and Jessica in. As she listened to their reasons, she couldn't help but complain, "Why is it that your shop with Dakota makes a profit every year, while our shop, which is larger than your other shop, suffers losses every year? What happened to the unique formula you promised?"

Jessica was well-prepared with her explanation, a story she had repeated countless times. It went something like this-a business needed time to establish itself and gain a reputation, so initial losses were inevitable. Once the reputation was built, the money would start flowing in.

Helen was not easily swayed by such reassurances. Her primary concern was not to make a large profit, but to surpass Dakota.

Eleanor merely lifted her gaze, and said calmly, "What's the matter? Are you unable to come up with the money? If you really can't manage, you might as well sell your share to Dakota. She has been saying she wants it."

Upon hearing this, Helen ignored Gillian's frantic head shaking and signals. She instructed someone to fetch the money.

Three thousand silver coins were quickly produced, and Eleanor and Jessica left, visibly satisfied.

Once they had gone, Gillian said with a pained expression, "Lady Helen, this can't go on! The makeup shop is a bottomless pit that no matter how much you pour in, it won't be filled. It might be better to sell it." Helen was distressed over the loss of money. Sitting in her chair with a dark expression, she said, "How is it that Dakota's shop is making money while mine is not? Mine is two stories high, much larger than hers, with a greater variety and better quality. It will make money eventually."

"I'm afraid that the makeup shop might actually be profitable, but they're hiding the true figures from you. You wouldn't know if they kept reporting losses," Gillian replied.

"How could I not know? Aren't there ledgers? The ledgers are sent to me. Besides, weren't you the one who reviewed them for me?" Helen retorted.

"Ledgers can be falsified." Gillian sighed. "Lady Helen, next time they come asking for money, don't give them any more. Just consider the previous money a loss."

Helen grumbled inwardly. She had never wanted to give the money in the first place. However, when Eleanor's gaze swept over her, she felt an inexplicable fear. Besides, she also wanted to avoid looking bad in front of them.

Helen suddenly thought of Carissa.

If Carissa were in her place, would she have given them the money?

## Chapter 225

With the silver she obtained from Helen, Eleanor distributed some to continue fueling the gossip in the taverns and coffeehouses, exaggerating Carissa's supposed failure to observe her duties toward her family.

Carissa remained silent. She even closed the doors to Northwatch Estate and refused to make any public response, which satisfied Eleanor. Eleanor thought Carissa must be scared of the public outcry, and reveled in the victory.

Eleanor believed that Carissa going against her was like trying to fight a rock with an egg-completely futile.

Riding on her success, Eleanor entered the palace to see Salvador. She argued that Rafael's marriage to Carissa was laying a hidden danger to his throne. For the stability of the kingdom and its people, she suggested that Carissa's entry into Rafael's household should be prevented.

She expected Salvador to ponder her words seriously. To her surprise, he responded with a cold and stern expression.

"Aunt Eleanor, what are you saying? Both my brother and Carissa are military commanders who have devoted themselves to defending the Southern Frontier and our kingdom. They have shown loyalty to both me and the court. Moreover, my brother and I have been close since childhood. He would never harbor any ulterior motives. Please do not make baseless accusations."

Eleanor was taken aback, then quickly adopted her authoritative tone as his aunt and

elder relative.

"You are being foolish. Can human hearts ever be absolutely trusted? Are there not countless instances of royal family members turning against each other? If you're so naive to believe in him, he might exploit your trust for malevolent purposes."

The king's face darkened. He removed his malachite ring and placed it heavily on the desk, his gaze icy and sullen.

Derek was standing beside Salvador, and he quickly raised his brows in alarm and kneeled hastily.

"Grand Princess Eleanor, please be cautious with your words. If such remarks spread, the court might accuse you of sowing discord between the king and the Hell Monarch, which would be detrimental to you and harmful to both the king and Prince

"Currently, the realm is peaceful, and the relationship between the king and his ministers is good. Furthermore, the marriage between Prince Rafael and Lady Sinclair is already confirmed. If the king were to issue an edict to break this engagement, how would the world view him?"

Eleanor looked at the malachite ring on the desk. She furrowed her brows. While she disregarded Derek's concerns, she noted Salvador's attitude. He seemed completely dismissive of her warnings, and even viewed her as meddlesome.

The malachite ring was a gift from the late king, and it was a sign of displeasure whenever it was removed and placed on the desk.

With a deep sigh, Eleanor decided to retreat, "Your Majesty, I only wish what is best for you."

If you truly wish well for me, then offer some estates and properties as gifts for my brother's wedding, Aunt Eleanor. I'm sure both my brother and Carissa will appreciate your kindness," Salvador replied coolly. Eleanor was momentarily stunned. She looked up at him for a while before letting out a slow sigh. "It is said that honest words are harsh to hear. Your Majesty, you should consider that I never came today." Salvador replied indifferently, "Indeed, it's not appropriate for you to visit the palace frequently, especially not my study. Even if I were the most foolish of kings, I have the entire court to assist me. There is no need for you to worry."

Eleanor stared at him in shock, her face alternating between pale and flushed with anger. It took a moment for her to regain her composure.

After a long pause, she turned on her heel and left without a word. Her anger seemed to radiate around her as she walked, and she was clearly in a state of fury.

Derek rose and said softly, "Your Majesty, please calm your anger, Grand Princess Eleanor has always been headstrong and domineering. It is likely that her actions today were not intended to

offend." Salvador replied coolly, "It is not a serious matter if an aunt calls her nephew foolish. There is no reason for me to be angry."

Derek bowed his head. "You're wise as always, Your Majesty."

For a king, allowing someone to chastise him as foolish was unacceptable. Not even

his own mother would dare to speak so bluntly.

Eleanor had overstepped her bounds.

The rumors about Carissa continued to spread for several days, growing increasingly intense.

On this day at a coffeehouse, a storyteller was once again denouncing Carissa, accusing her of being disrespectful toward her parents. The patrons of the coffeehouse joined in and condemned her loudly.

At that moment, a voice rang out, "Absurd! Lady Sinclair married more than three years after the Duke of Northwatch's death. I personally chose the date for her wedding! To say she married before completing her mourning period is to accuse me of disregarding familial duties. Do you dare slander me? I will have this reported to the authorities!"

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One of the coffeehouse patrons recognized the irate speaker, and immediately shouted, "That's the current minister of the Astrology Department!"

The murmur of the crowd erupted into a clamor. How could a date chosen personally by the minister of the Astrology Department fall within a period of mourning?

The Astrology Department minister pointed an accusatory finger at the stunned storyteller, and thundered, "Who sent you to defame the Duke of Northwatch's household? The Sinclair family's seven men all sacrificed themselves on the Southern Frontier! General Sinclair is a female general who has distinguished herself repeatedly in battle! She aided the Hell Monarch in reclaiming the Southern Frontier! Any loyal subject of our kingdom would only hold the Duke of Northwatch's family in the highest respect. Yet here you are, spreading vile rumors and accusing General Sinclair of being disrespectful! What is your true intention?"

A loud voice called out, "Could it be that you're a spy from the enemy country, deliberately here to defame General Sinclair?"

Another person chimed in loudly, "That's very possible! Has everyone forgotten? The entire Sinclair family was exterminated by spies from Westhaven. He could very well be one of those spies hidden in our capital. We should report this to the authorities immediately!"

The storyteller, now thoroughly panicked, waved his hands frantically. "No, wait! I'm not a spy from Westhaven. I-"

"If you're not a spy, then why are you slandering General Sinclair?"

"Exactly! What are your true intentions?"

"Surround him! Don't let him escape!"

Shouting ensued as coffeehouse patrons moved forward to block the storyteller's escape. He was trapped by the crowd, being pointed at and interrogated.

Frederick stood at the doorway of the private room on the second floor, observing with a cold smile as the storyteller was surrounded and questioned. He then slowly descended the stairs and left. The Astrology Department minister had come out personally to clarify the matter,

and had reported it to the authorities. Even if the case didn't ultimately implicate Eleanor, it would still be a significant loss, as she would need to spend a lot of money to bribe these storytellers to put an end to the situation.

But there were more than just a few storytellers. The gossip spread all over the capital in just a few days, reaching every coffeehouse, tavern, street corner, and under every tree. Those who made money telling stories were all bought off.

If the authorities got involved and started investigating each one, things could get really interesting.

Frederick returned to Northwatch Estate and reported this to Carissa, Carissa was embroidering a handkerchief with Lily. Upon hearing the news, she merely smiled faintly.

"It's good that it has been clarified."

Today, Frederick had deliberately arranged for a few people to go to the coffeehouse. The loud questioners were part of his arrangement.

As for the Astrology Department minister, it was not Carissa who had summoned him for clarification.

Recent rumors and gossip had been rampant, and the Astrology Department minister knew that someone was stirring trouble behind the scenes. Such struggles were common in the capital, and he usually preferred to avoid unnecessary complications.

But this time was different. He had personally chosen the date for Carissa's marriage. If it was claimed that Carissa was marrying during her mourning period, it would imply that he had chosen a bad date! Thus, the Astrology Department minister had come to the coffeehouse specifically to clear things up. He had informed Carissa in advance so that Frederick could mobilize people accordingly.

Reporting the matter to the authorities' was also necessary. Without some deterrence, it would set a precedent for further exploitation, and things could spiral out of control.

The Royal Citadel's governor was Anthony Klein. He was the elder brother of Carissa's second sister-in-law. He was also the Marquis of Highcrest.

Since the Sinclair family's tragic downfall, the Marquis of Highcrest's family rarely had dealings with them. When the Sinclair family was annihilated, it was the Royal

Citadel officials and the patrolling guards who handled the case. Anthony had been devastated when he saw the mutilated body of his sister.

The lack of interaction was not due to a lack of sentiment, but a reluctance to remember the lost loved ones. Especially painful was the memory of him finding his nephew Ryan's body, whose head had been severed and mutilated. Every time Anthony thought of it, it felt as though his heart had been torn open and was bleeding profusely.

However, this case involved the Duke of Northwatch's family. Coupled with the Astrology Department minister having requested official intervention, Anthony took it very seriously. He issued orders for a thorough investigation to get to the bottom of the matter.

Coincidentally, Barrett's second uncle, Gregory, was serving as a deputy governor in the Royal Citadel. He was also involved in the investigation.

The Warren family's second branch had always been close to Carissa, unlike the first branch, which were at odds with her. Therefore, Gregory was determined to uncover the truth and clear Carissa's name. He felt that the Warren family owed her, and this was a way to make some amends.

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It was relatively easy to trace the matter back to Eleanor's estate.

With so many people bought off by Eleanor, there were bound to be a few with weak nerves who, after being questioned by the officials a few times, would reveal everything they knew.

When the investigation reached Eleanor's palace, Anthony ordered a temporary halt. He decided to visit Northwatch Estate in person to see Carissa.

When Carissa got married, the event was conducted with great discretion. There were no lavish feasts, and the Marquis of Highcrest's family only sent three ladies to present gifts. No one attended the wedding.

Carissa and Anthony had seldom met. She had left home at a young age and rarely stayed in the capital. After returning from Meadow Ridge, the Marquis of Highcrest's female relatives occasionally visited Carissa's sister-in-law. Anthony had come once or twice, but Carissa, still learning etiquette at the time, had only appeared briefly to offer a polite greeting while concealing her face.

The last time Anthony had been seen by Carissa was during the massacre of her family. She had returned to her family home from the Warren family and found him sitting on the bloodstained stone steps, holding a severed and mutilated head. His eyes were dark and haunting, like the sky before a storm.

When Carissa heard he was coming personally, her hand trembled while she was doing embroidery, and she accidentally pricked her finger. As she watched the blood well up, it felt like a dark, menacing presence. Everything around her seemed to turn red.



She hadn't expected him to come personally; she had assumed someone else would be sent to inquire.

Carissa composed herself and said softly, "I'll change into another dress and come out right away."

After steadying herself for a while, she rose to change her clothes.

Since the massacre, she had no contact with her sister-in-law's family. At times when she attended events while she had been with the Warren family, she would deliberately avoid them.

The relationships were like gunpowder buried deep within, where seeing each other

only ignited painful memories and wounds that could not be suppressed.

Carissa changed into a plain dress, her hands trembling slightly within the wide sleeves.

She could never forget the sight of Anthony holding Ryan's mangled head as he sat on the ground. The memory was too painful and overwhelming.

As she reached the main hall, she took several deep breaths. However, her eyes betrayed her, as they were already reddened with unshed tears.

With each step forward, it felt as though her feet were weighed down by lead, making it almost impossible to move.

She could hear Frederick greeting Anthony Anthony's voice was deep and authoritative, but his responses were curt and minimal.

After several attempts to compose herself, she finally appeared at the door of the main hall and slowly stepped inside. Instead of looking directly at Anthony, she lowered her gaze and offered a polite greeting, "Greetings, Lord Klein."

Anthony rose, and returned the gesture with a respectful nod. "Lady Sinclair, how are you?"

The formal address felt awkward between them, their eyes betraying their discomfort.

"I'm well enough," Carissa replied, her voice trembling slightly. "Please, have a seat."

Anthony also gestured for her to sit. "Please take a seat as well."

They both settled into their chairs. Frederick withdrew to the doorway, where he squinted against the glaring sunlight, his eyes stinging.

No attendants or servants approached them; the two sat in the main hall, momentarily silent.

Both of them were trying hard to calm their churning emotions and the overwhelming sense of bloodshed in front of them. This might be something that neither of them-and their families-would ever be able to forget.

It was Anthony who broke the silence first. "At the victory celebration in the palace that day, I saw you and almost didn't recognize you."

Carissa recalled the day of the parade and the subsequent palace celebration. She hadn't changed her clothes and was covered in grime then.

She managed a faint smile, but tears fell onto the back of her hand as she looked down. Her voice sounded unnatural as she said, "I'm sorry for that."

Anthony took a deep breath, his throat tight with emotion. "Your father and brothers

..Everyone in the Duke of Northwatch's family would be proud of you."

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Carissa's hands, which were resting in her lap, curled into fists as she choked back a sob. She turned her face away, trying to hide her tears and maintain her composure.

Seeing her distress, Anthony suddenly regretted coming. Perhaps, neither family was truly ready to meet under these circumstances.

Even a man like Anthony found it hard to hold back tears, let alone a girl of eighteen or nineteen. Though she had seen battle and taken enemies' lives, she had always been the cherished jewel of her family. With her family gone, she was left alone.

No matter how strong her outer facade, her heart would still ache with sorrow.

Anthony had never wanted to recall that scene-he never dared to. However, perhaps it was time to confront it. Otherwise, the pain would linger forever.

His voice lacking its usual steadiness, he said, "We should let bygones....be bygones. One must always look forward. I heard about your engagement to the Hell Monarch. I haven't had the chance to congratulate you."

Carissa lowered her gaze and responded softly, "Thank you."

Anthony cleared his throat and continued, "We only learned about your divorce from Barrett later. My mother had intended to send someone to inquire about you, but hesitated. She feared..."

Carissa's voice, too, was choked with emotion as she replied, "I understand. I really do."

After a moment of silence, Anthony got down to business. 'Recently, there have been rampant rumors about you marrying during your mourning period. The public has been quite harsh. But today, the Astrology Department minister made a public clarification and reported the matter to the authorities. We've apprehended several people, and they've revealed that the mastermind behind this is from Grand Princess Eleanor's household. I've come to ask if you prefer to handle this openly or privately?"

He further explained, "Since you're to marry the Hell Monarch, you will eventually need to address Grand Princess Eleanor as your aunt. It's up to you whether you want to strain this relationship. If you're not afraid of Grand Princess Eleanor, neither are we.\*

Carissa raised her gaze and looked directly at Anthony. She took a deep breath, and said, "I will continue to address you as I did in the past as my brother-in-law. Thank you for coming in person, Anthony. It means a lot to me.

"As for how the case should be handled, I leave it to you. I believe Grand Princess Eleanor is not behind this. However, I did have an argument with Lady Jessica at the birthday banquet. Perhaps Lady Jessica is holding a grudge and trying to tarnish my reputation."

Anthony nodded. "I understand. This incident will not harm Grand Princess Eleanor in the slightest. I'm only afraid they will push the blame to a steward. As for Lady Jessica, I will send someone to inquire further."

"Thank you, Anthony," Carissa said as she bowed slightly in gratitude.

"It's my duty," Anthony responded, rising as well and giving a respectful nod. "I'll take my leave now."

"Frederick, see off Lord Klein!" Carissa called out.

Frederick stepped forward with a polite smile. "Lord Klein, let me see you out."

As Anthony reached the door, he glanced back at Carissa. There were many things he wanted to say. But in the end, he only managed to say, "Take care of yourself."

Carissa nodded in response and watched him leave.

She sat alone in the main hall for a long time, silent and lost in thought. The stone steps outside were the very place where Anthony had once held Ryan's severed head, stained with blood.

After Frederick returned from seeing Anthony off, he noticed Carissa's somber expression and stepped forward to break the painful silence of her memories. "My lady, Lord Klein mentioned he would personally send someone to Ironridge Estate."

Jessica had married the Marquis of Ironridge, Leopold Winchester. But after many years, she still had no children. Leopold had taken a second wife, who had borne him a son and a daughter.

Jessica was fortunate to hold the title of princess, or her personality and the fact she was childless would have likely led to her being dismissed long ago.

The Marquis of Ironridge's family was a century-old family, known for its adherence to poetry and propriety. Their household traditions and discipline were notably

## Chapter 229

When Jessica married Leopold, he was still the heir apparent. After the passing of Leopold's father, the previous marquis, Leopold inherited the title and became the Marquis of Ironridge.

Upon inheriting the title, Jessica became the marquis's wife. However, the family's reputation took a severe hit. If not for the family's matriarch, Margaret Dawson, still being alive, the reputation of this century-old family might have been ruined.

The Marquis of Ironridge's family had four branches, and Jessica never got along with any of them. When she first arrived, she used her status as a princess to dominate the household, even attempting to interfere in the affairs of the marquis's

sons.

In the end, she failed at everything, caused a lot of chaos, and became widely disliked. She also spent a lot of money in the process. Her actions also caused Margaret to collapse from fury. Sebastian had to be summoned to treat Margaret, and she still had to manage the household's finances despite her illness.

Such an esteemed family would usually keep their internal troubles private, but Jessica's antics were so outrageous that they could no longer be concealed. In her rage, Margaret declared that she would never hand over the family's authority to Jessica as long as she drew breath.

Leopold's second wife was Margaret's niece. Although she entered as a second wife, Margaret elevated her status. She also became pregnant shortly after her arrival. Now, she had a son and a daughter, and was even expecting another child. So, her position was secure.

The Marquis of Ironridge's family didn't tolerate the mistreatment of servants or oppression of secondary wives, but secondary wives must adhere to their duties, with strict rules in place.

Jessica's chance to gain prominence in the Marquis of Ironridge's family would come only if Margaret passed away, or if she bore a legitimate son. This was why Jessica continuously sought refuge and protection from her mother, feeling utterly out of place and disliked in her husband's family.

So when the officials from the Royal Citadel came today looking to question Jessica, Margaret sent someone to find out what was going on. She discovered it was related to Carissa, the Duke of Northwatch's daughter, being slandered.

Margaret knew there was no need to ask further. She was confident that Jessica was behind it.

Margaret had little interaction with the Sinclair family and was only acquainted with Melanie through social events and a minor dispute over a bracelet, which had been amicably resolved.

The Marquis of Ironridge's family had been established in the capital for a century because they followed certain principles. They didn't take advantage of kind or weak people, and they built a reputation for kindness and righteousness. They weren't afraid of the powerful or influential, and worked to protect their own family's authority and respect.

They also respected heroes, especially those who defended the kingdom. They also made sure not to offend military figures. Even if there were conflicts with military figures, they resolved them quickly. This was because the Marquis of Ironridge's family members knew well that those rough and uncouth generals, despite their crude manners, were fiercely dedicated once on the battlefield. The ancestors of the Marquis of Ironridge's family had once been military men themselves. Though their descendants preferred scholarly pursuits and officialdom, they still held a deep respect for warriors.

So when Margaret learned that Jessica had hired storytellers to slander Carissa- who had done great service for the kingdom-she was both enraged and embarrassed.

Even after the officials left, Margaret refused to believe Jessica hadn't been involved, no matter how much Jessica tried to explain herself.

In her fury, Margaret even swore, "Nonsense! I'd believe a pig could climb a tree before I'd believe that you had no hand in the scheming against Carissa Sinclair! I was ill and couldn't attend your mother's birthday banquet, but what you did... It's shameful. As the marquis's wife, you couldn't even recognize Mr. Spencer's painting, and you tore it right in front of everyone!"

Seeing that no one would believe her, Jessica's anger flared. "Yes, I did that! No matter what I say, you won't believe me anyway. You all would love nothing more than to see me cast out of your family, but do you dare? If you did, do you think my mom would spare your family?"

With that, Jessica slammed the door and stormed off. Then, she packed her things and returned to her mother's residence.

Margaret was so furious that she nearly fainted, but she retained some composure. She ordered gifts to be prepared, and resolved to personally visit Carissa the next day to offer an apology and make amends, while also addressing an old matter to ease her troubled mind.

## Chapter 230

The Royal Citadel also sent people to Eleanor's residence. Since the storytellers had accused someone from her household, it was standard procedure for the Royal Citadel to investigate. Given Eleanor's high status, Anthony took it upon himself to handle the matter with a diplomatic approach. As expected, Eleanor merely offered a scapegoat to take the blame. Anthony didn't dwell on it, and brought the individual back with him.

As for the storytellers, they were all temporarily released. However, the authorities gave them three days to clear up the matter and apologize to Carissa, as well as provide compensation.

Since the Royal Citadel had already made a big deal of visiting Ironridge Estate to question Jessica, she would still be affected even if Eleanor found a scapegoat.

The three-day deadline for the storytellers to make amends was essentially a time for Eleanor to manipulate the situation. At this point, intimidation was futile, and bribery was the only option.

So, a large sum of money was spent. The three thousand silver coins Helen provided were all used up, and Eleanor even had to add more on top of it. The storytellers used this money to apologize to Carissa and provide compensation.

Though they didn't meet Carissa directly, the grand scale of their apologies attracted a lot of public attention. Frederick was at the gate to accept their apologies and compensation, and each storyteller voiced regret for tarnishing Carissa's reputation over a small amount of silver coins.

The crowd began to stir, with some people shouting, "Was it Lady Jessica who gave you the silver coins?"

"Or was it Grand Princess Eleanor?"

"Oh, don't speak nonsense! Do you want to anger Grand Princess Eleanor?"

"It's the truth! I heard that at Grand Princess Eleanor's birthday banquet, Lady Carissa gave a painting by Mr. Spencer. But it was falsely claimed to be a forgery, and torn up on the spot."

"Mr. Spencer's painting was torn up? Goodness, isn't Grand Princess Eleanor the one who loves poetry and painting the most? A piece by Mr. Spencer isn't something you can just buy with money!"

"And what happened to the torn painting? Let me know if you find out! I'll go retrieve the pieces."

"I heard it was Lady Jessica who tore it. As the wife of the Marquis of Ironridge, how could she not even distinguish Mr. Spencer's genuine work?"

"The Marquis of Ironridge's family likely only sought her out because of her status as a princess, right? What a shame that such a venerable family's reputation is being tarnished."

When Margaret arrived at Northwatch Estate, she saw the commotion and sat in her carriage. She was seething with anger, and her expression was dark.

"What a truly unfortunate fate for our family," she muttered in despair.

Back then, they never intended to seek out the princess. It was Jessica who had set her sights on Leopold. Eleanor had to enter the palace to plead with the late king. While the late king didn't grant the marriage directly, he discussed it privately with the late marquis in the Royal Study. After several refusals, the late marquis was finally convinced to have her marry into his family.

Margaret swallowed a pill, and then sent someone to announce her presence.

Frederick glanced at the carriage with some surprise, and sent someone inside to request that Lily come out to greet the matriarch.



The fact that Margaret came in person made it clear that Jessica was far from innocent. Some people in town even said that the Marquis of Ironridge's family was known for its straightforward and honorable conduct, and they felt sorry for them having such a troublesome daughter-in-law.

The discussion among the people about the Marquis of Ironridge's family affairs only intensified Margaret's anger towards Jessica. Even though she remained calm on the surface, she seethed with anger inwardly.

Lily came out to welcome Margaret with a respectful attitude, and led her into the inner garden's flower hall.

Soon, Carissa appeared. She showed Margaret all due respect, greeting her properly and serving the finest refreshments.

Carissa spoke in a warm and humble manner, acting like a respectful younger person speaking to an elder.

Regarding the slander from Jessica, Carissa smiled and said, "This matter is something I haven't taken to heart. Please don't worry about it, Madam Winchester. Besides, this matter is unrelated to the Marquis of Ironridge's family. I'm truly sorry for the trouble you've gone through to personally visit me."