

War Song 281

Chapter 281

Sebastian was summoned immediately. After examining Ryan, he praised Rowan's diligent efforts in helping the boy recover.

He then tapped Ryan's little nose and said, "Well done, kid. You've really got some talent. This old man thought it would take at least a year and a half for you to recover."

*But didn't you mention he needed to expel the poison before he could speak?" Carissa asked quickly.

"That's not an absolute requirement," Sebastian replied,

"Looking at Ryan now, the toxins in his body are nearly cleared. It's just that after two years of silence, speaking might be a bit challenging. Additionally, his throat has been subjected to acupuncture, which has caused some damage and pain. With time, everything will improve."

Everyone nodded and exchanged smiles. Previously, everyone was anxiously waiting to see if Ryan would need to expel the black blood, but it turned out that it wasn't necessary. Sebastian's medical skills were indeed somewhat unpredictable.

Carissa bowed deeply to Sebastian. "Ryan should be the one bowing to you, but his legs are not yet strong. Once he's fully recovered, he will definitely bow to you properly."

Sebastian accepted the gesture. "Alright, get up. Since you've bowed, you don't need to pay the medical fees."

Rowan had always told Sebastian that Carissa insisted on paying the medical fees, and his apprentice's constant reminder had annoyed him greatly.

Carissa was about to argue when Sebastian glared at her and said, "What? Are you ignoring what I said?"

"No, I wouldn't dare!" Carissa quickly replied and smiled. "Alright then, no medical fees. I owe you a favor instead, okay?"

"Get up. I'm too lazy to argue with you." Sebastian rolled his eyes and began writing a new prescription. The prescription needs to be changed now. He must still continue taking medication."

Frederick stood by, thinking they couldn't return to the physician's office for medicine this time. They didn't charge any money there, which made it difficult for him.

Sebastian handed the prescription to Frederick and saw through his thoughts immediately.

"You still need to get the medicine from the physician's office. The Duke of Northwatch's family is currently in a precarious situation and has offended Grand Princess Eleanor. If you go elsewhere for the medicine, you might be setting yourself up for trouble. Be cautious, and don't give anyone a chance to exploit you."

Sebastian, with his years of medical practice in the capital, clearly understood Eleanor's darker dealings. She was capable of committing truly ruthless acts.

Frederick shivered at Sebastian's reminder, realizing he had forgotten that crucial point. Moreover, they had to be extremely cautious with Ryan's situation-some people might harbor malicious intentions and cause further trouble for the Duke of Northwatch's family.

After sending off Sebastian, they notified the Klein family. When the family members arrived, Ryan could call each person by name. Diana, of course, couldn't help but hold him and cry once more. After the Klein family left, Carissa took Ryan to the sanctuary hall. This time, she entered, as she could finally show her family a complete and healthy Ryan.

After offering a prayer, Carissa asked Frederick to take Ryan outside, leaving her alone in the sanctuary hall. Before the plaques of her parents and siblings, she had a thousand words she wished to say. But her throat tightened with emotion, leaving her unable to utter a single word.

She wanted to tell them how she had once found the world so difficult, feeling utterly alone and like a mere shell of a person. But now, things were different. Now, she not only had Ryan, but was also about to marry Rafael,

Good days lay ahead, and she would make the most of them.

She wanted to promise that she would protect Ryan with all her might and watch him inherit the duke's title, get married, have children, and continue their family's legacy.

Yet, she also felt Ryan didn't need to perform spectacular deeds. As long as he was well, that was enough.

So many words and various tangled emotions.

Carissa had once been the most pampered daughter in the family, but now she supported the Duke of Northwatch's household and was Ryan's pillar.

She could no longer run to her mother's arms to seek comfort when troubles arose. She hadn't been able to indulge in such childish behavior for a long, long time.

But with a hopeful future ahead, was it not worth looking forward to?

Yet, as if to overshadow this hope, Aurora actually came to see her.

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Carissa had stayed up late, so she was groggy and barely coherent when Lulu came to report early in the morning.

Aurora was outside the estate, demanding to see Carissa. The noise was that Lulu had no choice but to wake her mistress. so disruptive

As Carissa sat up in bed, blinking away sleep, she was stunned to realize that Aurora had actually come. She focused her inner force on listening more closely and confirmed that the commotion outside was indeed Aurora's voice, accompanied by thunderous banging on the door.

If this continued, it would disturb Ryan. Although he had improved significantly, loud and aggressive noises still frightened him.

Carissa's first instinct was to grab her Rose Spear and drive Aurora away. However, with Northwatch Estate surrounded by influential families, she couldn't afford to embarrass herself by personally handling such a situation. It was beneath her status to engage directly with Aurora.

However, Carissa's curiosity was piqued. She wondered what Aurora could possibly t at this point.

"Show her to the side hall in the outer courtyard. I'll change and join her shortly," Carissa said as she got up.

Though clearly displeased at the disturbance, Lulu understood the urgency. Northwatch Estate had very few capable guards, and while they might manage to handle ordinary intruders, Aurora was skilled in martial arts. It would be even more of a disgrace if the guards were defeated.

"Alright, I'll go fetch her now," Lulu replied, turning to leave.

She instructed Pearl to assist Carissa with getting dressed as she muttered, "This is such bad luck."

Carissa donned a slightly worn everyday outfit, layering it with a fur cloak.

It was chilly today, and snow seemed imminent. Perhaps it was for the best-Ryan could enjoy a snowball fight with the next snowfall. The sky was overcast, and the wind was biting. However, it was nothing compared to the Southern Frontier, where the wind seemed to pierce straight through one's bones.

In the side hall of the outer courtyard, Carissa finally saw Aurora.

She was dressed in a rich burgundy satin gown and draped in a black velvet cloak. A black vell covered her face, and her hair was styled in an elegant updo. Though she wore only a few pieces of jewelry, the red ruby earrings on her earlobes were strikingly radiant.

Her attire was impressive and exuded an air of sophistication. However, her eyes were cold and piercing. and they remained fixed on Carissa as she slowly walked in. Aurora remained seated, not rising or offering any greetings. Her cold, unblinking eyes followed Carissa's every step.

Choosing not to waste time with pleasantries, Carissa sat down and asked directly, "Why are you here?" "Barrett is about to marry the discarded daughter of the Earl of Silverstone's family. Do you know about this?" Aurora questioned in a chilling, sinister tone.

"What does that have to do with me?" Carissa replied with a hint of indifference. "Whether I know or not, it's none of my concern."

"None of your concern?' Aurora sneered icily. "Yes, you're about to marry Prince Rafael. Why would you care about Barrett? But Carissa, let me ask you something: would you still love Barrett if Prince Rafael wasn't in the picture?"

Carissa's eyes grew cold with annoyance. "You came here to ask me this? What answer do you want from me?"

Aurora spoke with a harsh, rude urgency, "I want to hear the truth from you. If Prince Rafael wasn't an option, would you still have feelings for Barrett? Even after the divorce, did you still hope he would come back to you? After leaving Valor Estate, have you ever regretted it? Have you ever been jealous of me? Have you ever hated me?"

Carissa remembered what Charlotte had said-that Aurora was nearly insane. And seeing it for herself now, Aurora indeed seemed to have lost touch with reality.

What was all this about?

It had been so long since the divorce, and Barrett was set to marry someone new. Instead of confronting the new bride, Aurora had come to question Carissa-someone who was no longer connected to Barrett in any way.

What was the point of this?

"First, when Barrett returned to tell me he was going to marry you, I had no lingering feelings for him. I would have left the Warren family immediately if I could," Carissa responded plainly

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After Carissa finished speaking, Aurora burst into wild laughter.

"You can't even speak the truth, Garissa. Where is your so-called bravery? It's nothing but hypocrisy!" Carissa ignored her and continued, "I remember the arrogant way you spoke when you came to see me. You demeaned women and reduced them to dust. I don't envy you, I only despise you. As a woman yourself, you have no pity for your own kind, and your character is questionable."

Aurora snorted coldly. "Is that so? But even then, you had impressive martial arts skills. Since you found me displeasing, why didn't you take the chance to fight me?"

"Because it was beneath me!" Carissa's eyes darkened. "To me, you were nothing more than a buffoon. I had no interest in engaging with you. Besides, your offenses against me were only verbal, so I retaliated with words. The one who betrayed his promise was Barrett, so my ire was directed solely at him."

"Beneath you, huh? I don't believe you didn't want to kill me back then." Aurora snorted again. "I know your noble ladies are hypocritical and pretentious, but your minds are as narrow as a needle's eye. "You didn't make a fuss with me to preserve your virtuous reputation, thinking the Warren family would support you. Who would have thought they were planning to have Barrett divorce you instead?" Aurora lifted her chin, the black veil over her face swaying with the motion. "At that moment, you must have felt utterly hopeless, right? And enraged?"

Carissa laughed aloud. "What was there to feel hopeless about? With a family like that, it's being trapped with them that's truly despairing."

"You're still pretending. You're really good at it." Aurora swept a vase off the table, sending it crashing to the floor with a loud clatter. "Look into your own heart and ask yourself: Have you never harbored any resentment toward me?"

As the vase shattered on the floor, the orchids inside it scattered everywhere. Their petals spread out, stained pale by the water.

Carissa glanced at the broken vase and calmly said, "Lulu, ask Frederick how much this vase cost. Have the Yates family reimburse us for it."

Lulu spoke up loudly, "I know this vase wasn't very expensive. It cost fifty silver coins. It's a new design from the shop, and there are only about ten in the entire capital."

anger.

Aurora's voice rose sharply, laced with would dare ask me for compensation?

"Carissa, it was already exceptionally generous of me to let you take your dowry with you back then. Since you married into the Warren family, the dowry belongs to them. What right do you have to take it all away?

Carissa sneered. "How were you a general if you didn't understand the law? No wonder you were dismissed. I was granted a divorce by the king, so naturally, I was entitled to take my entire dowry. I even have the right to reclaim the portion the Warren family spent, but I haven't pressed them about it. Is that t? Did you come here today hoping I would retrieve that money?"

"I could accommodate your request, but isn't the Warren family preparing for another wedding? Would

they do the same as they did when Barrett wanted to marry you, and ask me for a loan? You asked for so many gifts back then. Now, in order to uphold your virtuous reputation, why don't you use those gifts to help Barrett get a new wife?"

The mention of Barrett remarrying, along with being dismissed and stripped of her military rank, was a deep wound for Aurora. Carissa's words were like a direct stab to her heart.

Aurora erupted in fury, pointing at Carissa and shouting. "You're just a discarded woman! What's there to be so proud of?"

"And you're just a concubine. What's there to be so arrogant about?" Carissa replied with calm indifference.

"I am a general's wife! I married with the full honors of a rightful wife. I will not let go of my position, no matter what!" Aurora retorted sharply.

Carissa lifted her head, her eyes icy with a piercing coldness. Then, go tell the Earl of Silverstone's family about it. Why come here to talk to me? Are you trying to preserve your dignity before me?

"Aurora, you say I hate you, and it's true-I hate you to the core. I'm well aware of what you did at Victory Pass. The destruction of my family is inextricably linked to everything you did there." Aurora froze, clearly shocked by how much Carissa knew.

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Carissa stood and walked through the puddle on the floor, each step bringing her closer to Aurora.

She bent down and whispered into Aurora's ear, "Has Liam's revenge not made you see the truth yet? you still think you're the greatest female general in the world? Aurora, you're nothing. Barrett married out of novelty. If he truly loved you, he would have given you the position of a primary wife instead of secondary wife."

Aurora's face turned pale. "That's because he still wanted to preserve your dignity. As for me, I don't care about the title."

Carissa grabbed the other woman's collar

touch that carried a bone-chilling coldness.

then released it before smoothing out her neckline with a

"Do you think I care about the dignity he preserved for me? And what do you gain from not caring about titles? You came here today and flaunted your power. Did you think I might be concerned about my reputation and let you make a scene?"

Carissa gripped Aurora's chin, pressing hard enough that her jaw felt like it might crack. The pain made tears well up in Aurora's eyes.

"It would be easy to kill you, but I want you to live well. You look down on women and belittle their struggles in the household, but I'm certain that one day you'll become just that kind of person." Aurora struggled fiercely. "Let go of me."

Carissa held firm, forcing Aurora to look up at her.

"What makes you think I'm so easy to provoke? Is it because my divorce came quickly, making you think I'm weak and easily bullied? Or do you think that just because I'm a woman, I would be sentimental about Barrett? Do you think I must still love him, so you've come to humiliate me and vent your anger?"

"You dare not confront the woman Barrett will remarry, but came to me instead. Did you know that the matriarch and the third daughter of the Earl of Silverstone's family came here the other day, and even they had to treat me with utmost respect?"

"What...?" Aurora murmured in disbelief.

Aurora saw the cold, ruthless glint in Carissa's eyes, Had she misjudged? Had Carissa really not hoped Barrett would come back to her after the divorce?

No, Carissa must have been longing for Barrett, but had been fortunate enough to meet Rafael, who was willing to marry her..

"The matter at Victory Pass has nothing to do with the destruction of your family," Aurora said defiantly, though her demeanor had weakened slightly.

Her presence as cold and imposing as ever, Carissa released Aurora and said, "Whether it is related or not, you know in your heart. Leave the fifty silver coins and get out of here. If you come to trouble me again, I break both your legs."

Aurora's jaw ached with a pain so severe it felt like it might shatter. Even opening her mouth was difficult. At that moment, Carissa looked genuinely terrifying.

After sitting there for a while, Aurora finally asked coldly, "Back at the Southern Frontier, you could have led your troops to rescue me, but you didn't. You allowed the soldiers to remain at the base of the mountain, leaving me to endure endless humiliation. Carissa, I've always believed it was out of hatred for having your husband taken from you."

Carissa stood tall, the light casting a cold glow on her exquisite, icy

face.

She spoke in a tone as frigid as the winter wind, "A man who is heartless and unfaithful-I've discarded him like a worn-out shoe. In my eyes, he's not even worth as much as a dog. Only you still value him." "It's impossible... That can't be! How could you not care about him? After a year of working like a servant in Valor Estate and spending all that money, how could you not love him? I don't believe it!"

As her attitude shifted, Aurora grabbed Carissa's arm. "You must have once loved him, right? So, I'm sure you can't bear to see him sell himself for his career and marry a discarded woman! She's an old woman! If you go to him and tell him not to marry her, he won't!!

Carissa looked at Aurora's suddenly humble demeanor and sneered. "Aurora, look at yourself. You've truly become the person you despised the most."

Aurora shook her head, "No... it's different!"

She took a deep breath, her eyes glazed. "I can't accept him marrying the third daughter of the Earl of Silverstone's family. She's a lowly woman!"

Carissa's lips curled into a smirk. "Aurora, believe me, she's not as lowly as you. At least she adheres to proper etiquette, while you, on the battlefield, submitted to Barrett and had an affair before even talking about marriage. You are truly the lowly one. In terms of personal virtue, you and Barrett are equally despicable."

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Being called lowly struck a nerve for Aurora. She sprang to her feet and aimed a kick at Carissa's abdomen. Carissa didn't even dodge, simply countering with a sharp elbow to the other woman's shin. Aurora cried out in agony as a bone-shattering pain surged through her leg.

Carissa seized Aurora by the collar and pushed her into a chair, leaning over her with a cold, unyielding gaze.

"You dare to act up in my house? What exactly are you here for today?"

Aurora struggled with all her might but couldn't break free. In her frantic efforts, her veil fell off, revealing half of her disfigured face.

Seeing Carissa's eyes fixed on her, Aurora's composure broke and she screamed in despair, "It's you!! came here to hold you accountable. You could have led your troops to rescue me, but you didn't! You even stopped Barrett from coming to my aid!

"Carissa, you hate me for taking Barrett from you, so you deliberately allowed Liam to humiliate me. You're bitter, you're resentful, and you still refuse to admit it? You're a hypocrite!

"It was you who caused my marriage to fall apart. Barrett won't even touch me now. If you hadn't stopped the soldiers from rescuing me, I wouldn't have ended up like this. Did you conspire with Liam? Did you and he join forces to ruin me? I am innocent-they never touched me. Go and tell Barrett that! Explain yourself, and I might forgive you!

*Carissa, everyone says you're a hero, but you stood by and did nothing. You're unfit to be a general. You allowed us to fall into Liam's hands and become prisoners of war. You let us suffer endless humiliations. They say the Duke of Northwatch's family is loyal and righteous? Hah! That's bullshit!"

Carissa's eyes grew colder and sharper.

Still holding Aurora by the collar, she turned to Lulu and flatly said, "Keep an eye on Ryan. Don't let him leave his room."

Lulu, who had been glaring at Aurora, responded promptly, "Yes, my lady. I'll go at once."

She hurried out the door, quickly making Amethyst Hall.

or way to

Seeing Carissa's suddenly intense and fearsome expression, Aurora felt a wave of unease, though she tried to maintain a fierce front. "What are you planning to do?"

Carissa dragged her out of the hall by the collar. The biting cold wind whipped against Aurora, causing her hair to fly loose. She felt an inexplicable panic but couldn't escape Carissa's iron grip. "What are you going to do? Where are you taking me? Are you going to kill me? Let go of me! Carissa, let

go of me!"

Aurora's cries were swallowed by the howling north wind. Snowflakes began to drift from the sky, landing softly on Carissa's shoulders. But the overcast sky promised a heavy snowfall.

Carissa dragged Aurora toward the sanctuary hall. Seeing them approach, Frederick quickly ran ahead to

open the door. Carissa threw Aurora into the hall, then strode in herself. Frederick promptly shut the door behind them.

le space

Aurora landed on the floor of the sanctuary hall, her panic mounting as she looked around. The was illuminated by candles, casting a soft glow on the rows of memorial plaques displayed on shelves along the walls.

Before Aurora could let out a scream, Carissa grabbed her by the hair and dragged her to the plaques. Aurora was forced to bow slightly, her gaze falling on one of the plaques in the bottom row, at the very center.

The pain of having her hair yanked made Aurora feel as though her scalp might tear away. She dared not look directly at the name on the tablet.

Carissa's cold voice came from behind her, "This is Terry Sinclair, my eldest brother's son. He was eleven years old, a prodigy in both literature and martial arts."

Carissa continued to drag Aurora from one plaque to the next, naming them as she went.

"This is my grandmother, this is my mother, this is my elder sister-in-law, this is my second sister-in-law... This is my niece, this is my nephew..."

Aurora trembled uncontrollably, struggling with all her might. "You're crazy! Why have you brought me here? I have no grudge with your family..."

A slap landed hard on Aurora's face, accompanied by Carissa's fierce reprimand, "No grudge? At Victory Pass, you slaughtered civilians and destroyed villages. The spies from Westhaven placed the blame for your atrocities on my family. Do you know why they died? It's because of you-because of your lust for glory, your cruelty! You violated our agreement with Westhaven to not harm civilians."

"No... Aurora gasped for breath, shaking her head violently. "No, it's not true!"

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Carissa kicked the back of Aurora's knee, making her collapse to the ground.

"Do you know how they died? Each of them was stabbed eighteen times. Why eighteen? Think carefully!"

"No!"

Aurora's face turned ashen. She swallowed hard, her eyes darting around as memories resurfaced. She recalled the Westhaven junior general they had captured, who had turned out to be royalty.

He had been stabbed eighteen times, and they had even cut off his...

It's impossible. The crimes were committed by Westhaven people. Your family was killed the spies. It has nothing to do with me. Not in the slightest!"

Aurora tried to rise and flee, but Carissa firmly held her shoulders, keeping her immobilized on her knees.

"Because of what you did at Victory Pass, my entire family was wiped out. They didn't even spare my youngest nephew. He was frail from birth and constantly on medication. Eighteen stab wounds... His entire body was hacked to pieces, and there was blood everywhere. The whole Northwatch Estate was drenched in blood. This is your sin, Aurora. Tell me, do you think I hate you?" Carissa spat through gritted teeth. Her eyes ached, though no tears fell. The heart-wrenching pain often came silently.

Aurora crumpled to the floor, unable to look at the plaques. Her entire body was ice-cold and she struggled to breathe. It felt as if countless hands were gripping her throat, choking her. Fear pierced her temples like needles, causing intense pain in her head,

She mumbled, "I didn't do anything wrong. Those civilians were hiding soldiers-they weren't innocent. I wasn't wrong for killing them. Your family died at the hands of Westhaven spies. It has nothing to do with

me....

"Yes, it has nothing to do with me. It really doesn't. I am innocent."

As Aurora spoke, she swallowed harshly and tried to crawl away.

Carissa's voice came from behind her, "My fifth sister-in-law also crawled the way you're crawling now. She wanted to protect her child. She was stabbed many times but refused to die, crawling on the ground toward her child. Blood trailed behind her, and she died next to her child in the end."

Aurora froze mid-crawl, her body trembling uncontrollably as the horrifying scene Carissa described played in her mind.

"You think I hate you because you took Barrett from me? Compared to my family, Barrett is nothing. I don't care about him at all."

Carissa slowly lit the candles in front of the memorial plaques methodically.

"My hatred for you is beyond words-you're the reason my whole family was annihilated: But I can't kill you for revenge. I can't even tell anyone about this, as it would be a disgrace to our kingdom. I've endured it all. My father and brothers sacrificed themselves on the Southern Frontier battlefield, giving up their lives to protect the kingdom. So, I've endured."

Having lit every candle in the hall, Carissa suddenly turned and fixed a cold stare on Aurora.

"But how dare you say that my family aren't loyal martyrs! It's outrageous. What right do you have to say that? Didn't you ask why I didn't save you? I'll tell you-because I couldn't. You brought it upon yourself. "Liam came to the Southern Frontier to target you specifically. They had already occupied that area. When they attacked Simonton City, their numbers were few because they were waiting for you in the mountains.

"Was I supposed to lead tens of thousands of soldiers to face their hundreds of thousands head-on just to save a group of traitors who violated the agreement between our two kingdoms? Sacrifice those soldiers just to save you?

"I wouldn't have been the only one to not do that-no one would. And when I say you brought it upon yourself, I'm not only referring to what happened at Victory Pass. On the Southern Frontier battlefield, the Hell Monarch wanted to save you. That was why he assigned your unit as the reserve forces.

"But you were greedy for merit and took risks. You disrupted our formation during the siege, rushing in ahead of us. You sought to claim credit but fell into Liam's trap. Everything was your

own fault. No one is obligated to sacrifice their lives to save someone as reckless and self-serving as you."

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Aurora recalled everything that had happened on the Southern Frontier battlefield. Reflecting on the events now, she recognized that she had indeed fallen into a trap. She had suspected many things, but had been unwilling to believe, instead coming up with numerous excuses and reasons.

The biggest reason she clung to was that Rafael aimed to elevate Carissa, thus erasing Aurora's achievements and declaring in advance that she would receive no credit.

But Carissa was here, laying everything bare and dissecting it piece by piece.

Aurora had no place to hide. She could only shuffle to the door, curl up there, and mutter, "No, it wasn't like that."

then

Carissa stood before the memorial plaques, her figure shadowed by the candles behind her, making her expression indistinct.

Her voice was soft and haunting as she said, "Aurora, you're still alive. You should be grateful.

"Yet, my family will never return, all because of you. Tell me, is it a wonder that I hate you? I've endured for so long. I didn't want to harm you, but why did you come to me? You achieved merit at Victory Pass. Before the truth reached me, even if you and Barrett had married, I would have respected you for being a woman willing to fight for the kingdom."

Carissa slowly approached, her shadow completely enveloping Aurora as she continued, "But the truth is so ugly, isn't it? Your achievements came at the cost of my entire family being wiped out. Yet, you still have the audacity to flaunt your success in front of me, talking about how you disdain women struggling to survive in the household.

"You claim to be so skilled and noble, so why did you scheme to retain my dowry? Your greed for credit is ugly, and your greed for wealth is even uglier-far more so than your face now."

Aurora was supporting herself with both hands on the ground as she sobbed uncontrollably.

*Stop, please stop... Don't say anything else..."

Carissa bent down, a mocking smile on her lips. "Can't you take it? You looked down on women who fight for men, so why are you here today? To ask me to tell Lady Viola not to marry Barrett? You're fighting for a man now, Aurora.

"You can't stand the thought of Lady Viola marrying Barrett. Now, you know that your so-called love was nothing but a joke. You acted so grand in front of me, but now you're just a mess."

Aurora's lips moved, trying to argue, but she was reminded of the recent argument she had with Barrett, which had been because he was going to marry the third lady of the Earl of Silverstone's family. Carissa's gaze grew colder. "Aurora, remember this well-my family died because of you. You should be thankful that I come from the Duke of Northwatch's family. If not for my family's values, I would have flayed you alive and ground your bones to dust."

She opened the door, revealing that the snow outside had grown heavier, blanketing the ground with fine, salt-like flakes. The snowfall raining down from the overcast sky intensified, swirling faster and thicker. "Pay for the vase, then leave Don't come back. If you do, I'll kill you," Carissa declared, her voice colder

than the snow outside.

Aurora trembled. At that moment, she felt true fear.

Carissa's words carried a murderous intent that was impossible to mask.

Shakily, Aurora stood up and reached out uncertainly. "I don't have any money on me.

"Frederick," Carissa said calmly, "Go and have the accountant draft a promissory note for fifty silver coins. Have Aurora put her fingerprint on it. Tomorrow, send someone to collect the money." Frederick's eyes darkened as he nodded and left.

Aurora stumbled out of the sanctuary hall and leaned against a pillar in the corridor, taking deep breaths. She was shivering from the cold wind, but fine beads of sweat covered her forehead.

In her current state, she felt utterly defeated, and her heart was numb. At times, she wanted to regain her former authority before Carissa, but she couldn't even straighten her back.

The snowflakes drifting before her seemed almost invisible. Her mind was flooded with images of the memorial plaques, the bloodshed at Northwatch Estate, and the horrifying thought of Carissa's fifth sister-in-law crawling, bloodied, towards her son.

Aurora's gaze seemed to stretch farther, beyond the capital city, all the way to Victory Pass and Fawnrun City. She saw the civilians who had died beneath her soldiers' slaughtering blades, their screams echoing

in her ears.

She could hear the curses of that Westhaven royal youth. Even as they cut him countless times, he continued to curse.

Why had she remained indifferent then, and even found it exhilarating?

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Aurora couldn't bring herself to meet Carissa's gaze, as cold and sharp as a blade. Every word Carissa spoke was unpleasant to hear, yet not a single one was untrue.

Aurora had been desperate to achieve something. After the battle at Victory Pass, she believed she had. succeeded, and that she had done so with exceptional merit. No longer just the daughter of an old soldier, she was now a general in her own right.

She looked down on everyone and felt superior, but deep down, she knew she was still insignificant. Otherwise, with her accomplishments, she wouldn't have been relegated to the position of Barrett's secondary wife.

Most people wouldn't have accepted such a fate.

Aurora's acceptance was driven by two reasons-her deep affection for Barrett, as well as the realization that, without her achievements, she would never be able to reach the heights of the Warren family. She dismissed the trivialities of domestic struggles, claiming she wanted women to excel on the battlefield, contributing to the kingdom through war and conquest. She said these things to Barrett, who believed them and looked at her with admiration.

Needing Barrett to see her as different, she achieved this by sleeping with him before returning to the capital, securing her place in the Warren family.

Though Carissa had been Barrett's primary wife back then, Aurora hadn't considered her a threat. Carissa was just a highborn lady, obedient to propriety, governed by rules, and overly demure. Boring, really.

But Carissa's substantial dowry and her management of the household finances meant that Aurora could focus on her career. With a solid position, even as a secondary wife, she could overshadow Carissa, the so-called primary wife.

Who would have guessed that Carissa was not a mere docile cat but a patient and calculating tiger? As Aurora's thoughts drifted, Frederick returned with the promissory note and a stamp pad. He handed them to her and coldly said, "Put your fingerprint here."

The promissory note for fifty silver coins was a humiliation to Aurora. She glared at Carissa, but the moment their eyes met, an inexplicable shiver ran through her. She didn't dare delay, hastily pressing her fingerprint onto the document before stumbling away.

Frederick put the promissory note away and looked at the young woman leaning against the corridor wall. The coldness in her eyes had vanished, leaving only heartbreak.

Frederick tried to comfort her, "My lady, don't be upset. Indifference is the strongest armor-no one can hurt you."

Carissa shook her head, her eyes lowered as she spoke softly, "Frederick, I'm fine. I was just thinking about how lively the house used to be when everyone was still here." Frederick's mood grew somber. The past was irretrievable.

Northwatch Estate was now a shell of its former self. The title remained, but the people were few.

Carissa didn't let herself dwell on the past for long. She quickly lifted her head and left.

She returned to Amethyst Hall to be with Ryan, knowing that such a commotion would have reached him. After all, Aurora's cries had echoed through the corridors as she was dragged away.

Carissa expected Ryan to be frightened, but upon entering Amethyst Hall, she found him in the small study, writing diligently. His face was calm, and the desk was covered with sheets of paper. Lulu and Joy stood nearby, attending to him.

At the sound of his aunt's footsteps, Ryan looked up and greeted her cheerfully, "Aunt Carissa."

His voice was still somewhat hoarse, and he could only manage short sentences before becoming strained. However, he was putting in great effort, and Carissa believed he would soon speak as fluently as anyone else.

"What are you writing?" Carissa asked with a smile, walking over to him. She gently ruffled his hair and leaned in to inspect his work. "Your writing looks better than before."

Ryan was not just practicing writing, but also working on his wrist strength. His hand tendons had been injured, and writing was the best exercise for recovery. Rafael had always insisted on this kind of practice for that reason.

Ryan set down his quill and placed his hands on his neck. His expression was earnest, his eyes resolute.

"Aunt Carissa, in the future... I'll protect you!"

Carissa was momentarily stunned, then a smile spread across her face as she continued to ruffle his hair. She hadn't cried in front of the memorial plaques of her parents, but Ryan's words brought a lump to her throat.

Though Ryan might not fully understand the situation, he could tell there was discord and had a strong desire to protect his aunt.

Chapter 289

Two days later, Frederick arrived at Valor Estate with two guards in tow.

Since Aurora returned home the previous day, she had been suffering from a high fever. She had called for a physician that night and taken medicine. Though she managed to sleep, her nightmares persisted. Only today was she starting to feel a bit better.

However, she hadn't given the promissory note much thought, dismissing it as just another attempt by Carissa to humiliate her. To Carissa, fifty silver coins were nothing-why would she truly come to collect them?

But Frederick had indeed come to claim the money.

When Aurora was informed of Frederick's arrival, she felt a deep sense of embarrassment, as if she were burning with fever again.

Barrett was at home today as he wasn't on duty. He had no idea that Aurora had caused a scene at Northwatch Estate a few days prior.

He hadn't even noticed her leaving-they had been arguing frequently, so he had been staying in the study. His visits to the residential area were merely to oversee the renovations of Grace Mansion to prepare for the arrival of his new bride.

When he heard that someone from Northwatch Estate had come to collect a debt, he initially thought it was a matter of old accounts. He asked Frederick to meet him in the study, hoping to avoid alarming his mother.

When Frederick produced the promissory note and handed it over, Barrett read it with growing disbelief. It stated that Aurora, a concubine of the Warren family, had broken a vase at Northwatch Estate. As she was unable to pay on the spot, this promissory note was made and she had promised to repay the amount the next day.

The promissory note bore Aurora's thumbprint.

Barrett stared at the note, bewildered. "What does this mean? When did Aurora go to Northwatch Estate? What do you mean she broke a vase?"

Frederick's expression was flat as he replied, "Your concubine went to Northwatch Estate a few days ago to meet our lady. She broke the vase during an argument and behaved rudely. It's one thing to speak inappropriately, but broken items must be compensated for.

"That vase cost fifty silver coins-it's one of the only few vases of its kind produced in the capital. She promised to pay the next day, but failed to do so. Since she didn't keep her word, I had no choice but to come and collect the debt."

Barrett's face turned ashen, unable to believe that Aurora had acted so recklessly.

"She went to Northwatch Estate and caused a scene?

"Yes," Frederick confirmed. "Our lady originally didn't wish to see her, but she was shouting outside the estate. To avoid disturbing our young lord, she was eventually allowed inside."

Frederick waved his hand dismissively. "The specifics are not important. What matters is that our lady

doesn't want any unresolved issues with the Warren family, especially since both parties are preparing for their respective marriages. Will the fifty silver coins be paid or not? If not, I will take this promissory note to the authorities."

Barrett ordered fifty silver coins to be brought over and handed them to Frederick on the spot.

"You speak well of not wanting any unresolved issues with my family. Convey my apologies to your lady. I hope she can overlook this and not take it to heart," he said, restraining his anger. Barrett was unsure why he was so enraged. After all, Aurora had caused trouble at Northwatch Estate, so he should have been apologizing to Carissa.

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Indeed, he felt some remorse, but his former wife's words were so heartless. Avoiding any issues with the Warren family? Carissa made it sound as if he were a venomous snake!

Frederick spoke coldly, "Since the money has been paid, our lady won't hold it against you. It's merely a person acting in an irrational manner-Lady Sinclair has been through worse. After all, she lived through your irrational behavior after you returned from Victory Pass and obtained the king's decree for your marriage. With time, things will look brighter and clearer."

With that, Frederick paid no heed to Barrett's furious expression and left with his two guards. Technically, these guards were not real bodyguards, but had been hired for their robust appearance at the time they joined the estate.

Barrett watched Frederick's retreating figure, his anger surging. He wanted nothing more than to confront Aurora immediately. But recalling their constant arguments and his own exhaustion, he found himself unwilling to speak with her, at least, not at the moment,

Chapter 290

However, when Frederick came to Valor Estate to collect the debt, the servants reported it to Rebecca. She immediately summoned Barrett to explain the situation. Knowing that the incident couldn't be hidden any longer, as too many servants had seen and heard what happened, Barrett decided to tell his mother everything in detail.

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Rebecca's face turned ashen with fury. "A disaster, truly a disaster! How could you have calamity for a wife? Is it not enough that she wreaks havoc every day at home, now she's even going to Northwatch Estate to cause trouble? Does she think our family can afford to offend the Duke of Northwatch's family now? Has she even looked at herself in the mirror? Did she go there specifically to embarrass us?" Her hand clutching her chest, Rebecca continued to curse, "A disaster, a complete disaster! She must have gone there to deliberately provoke Carissa, trying to interfere with your marriage to the Prince family's third lady."

Barrett suddenly realized that Aurora wouldn't have provoked Carissa without reason-there must have been another motive.

Could it really be, as his mother suggested, related to his upcoming marriage?

This thought left Barrett feeling unsettled.

He had already been somewhat reluctant about this marriage, feeling like he was being pushed into it. Now, with his official duties leaving him little time for home, and the constant quarrels with Aurora, he felt disheartened. Knowing the truth about what happened at the Victory Pass battle had only deepened his disillusionment with her-in fact, he found her frightening.

Moreover, Amelia was weak and unable to manage the household. With how ill Rebecca was, it was crucial for someone to handle the family affairs.

Yet, before the prime minister's wife mentioned it, Barrett had never considered taking another wife.

He was stunned to learn that the prime minister's wife, Natalie Wright, wanted to act as his matchmaker. The fact that she was personally involved meant Jeremiah approved of her actions. What did that signify?

It meant Barrett had caught the prime minister's eye.

Barrett then discovered that his prospective bride was the third lady of the Earl of Silverstone's family. He had learned that Viola was the widow of Thomas, the eleventh son of the Farell family. After Thomas died in battle, the Farell family had issued Viola a letter of divorce, and she returned to her natal home.

Marrying a woman who had already been married once made Barrett uncomfortable. However, her elder brother, Oliver, was currently commanding the Hell Monarch Army. It was strange for Rafael to have handed over control of the Hell Monarch Army to someone else.

Barrett was baffled by many things.

Why had Rafael relinquished command of the Hell Monarch Army? Why had he agreed to marry Carissa? With his status, he could have chosen any noblewoman he desired.

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No matter how valiant Carissa was on the battlefield, how distinguished her family and master were, or how stunning her beauty might be, she was still a woman who had been married before. "Barrett, Aurora must have had some ulterior motive. You should find out exactly what she told Carissa. If she has used any methods to force Carissa into intervening and preventing your upcoming marriage, that would be serious. Carissa despises us, and she will definitely try to sabotage this," Rebecca said with increasing conviction.

"Aurora must have threatened her. Otherwise, considering Carissa's background, why would she bother sending someone to collect fifty silver coins? Forget about fifty silver coins-even five hundred silver coins would not be a concern for her," Rebecca added.

"Mom, don't worry. Aurora won't be able to coerce Carissa to do anything," Barrett replied, trying to calm himself.

Still anxious, Rebecca said, "Even if she can't coerce her, if Aurora says something that upsets Carissa, who then speaks ill of you to the Earl of Silverstone's family, it could ruin the marriage." Barrett shook his head, though he was inwardly wincing.

If Carissa did intervene, it would mean she still had feelings for him. He genuinely hoped she would intervene...

Abruptly, he snapped back to reality.

What was he thinking?

Carissa was already engaged to Rafael. Even if she still harbored feelings for Barrett, it would likely be tainted with resentment. Also, the uproar during their divorce had been so severe. How could she not hold a grudge?

But if she did still have feelings for him...

Amidst his conflicting emotions, Barrett felt a pang of regret. He had always been unwilling to admit it, but he knew better than anyone that he truly and deeply regretted it.

The woman he had once fought so hard to marry was now someone he had discarded like old rags. Only now, after everything that had happened, did he realize how precious she was. Unfortunately, she was about to become someone else's wife. And he was left to marry a woman who had been widowed.

Barrett once believed he felt an unwavering love for Aurora.

In the end, what did it amount to?