

War Song 291

Chapter 291

Barrett eventually decided to seek out Aurora. He didn't want to argue anymore-they needed to have a proper conversation.

When he entered the room, he found her curled up in a blanket on the chaise lounge, a black veil on her face as usual. Ever since she obtained the scars on her face, she had made a variety of veils in different colors. She refused to leave the house without wearing a veil or a hood.

In the past, whenever they met, Aurora always had the look of someone ready for a fight, as if she could start a battle with Barrett at any moment. But today, she looked weak and sickly. When she saw her husband, she merely glanced up before lowering her gaze, ignoring him altogether.

The maid standing by her side noticed and said, "General Warren, you're finally here. Madam Aurora has been ill for two days."

Barrett knew his wife had called for a physician, so he asked, "Are you feeling any better?"

Aurora turned away from him, refusing to respond.

It seemed that neither of them wanted to argue today.

Barrett sat down in a chair and remained silent for a long time before finally speaking, "Someone from Northwatch Estate came by today to demand payment."

Aurora's eyes grew cold. She already knew, as her maid had informed her earlier,

"What are you trying to say? Are you going to accuse me of causing trouble at Northwatch Estate?"

Barrett looked at her intently. "Why did you go to Northwatch Estate?"

Beheath the black veil, Aurora's lips curled into a mocking smile. "What do you think? I went to demand justice. I asked Carissa why she didn't save me that day in Simonton City, why she caused you to drift away from me, and why you want to marry another woman."

"Didn't I already tell you? She had nothing to do with it. At the time, how could anyone have gone up the mountain to save you? The Westhaven troops were stationed all over the mountain. Going up there would have been suicidal," Barrett replied, growing agitated.

Aurora laughed sarcastically. "You're really good at defending her, aren't you? Look at you-your heart must be with her, right?"

Barrett's expression darkened. "What nonsense are you talking about?"

"Too bad!" Aurora turned her head away, pulling the blanket closer around her. "You may have feelings for her, but she has none for you. In her own words, she asked what you're worth. To her, you're not even worth mentioning."

It felt like something had struck Barrett's heart with a heavy blow, sending a dull ache through him. He turned his head to look at the doves painted on the partition screen. The pair of birds playing in the water looked so intimate, their affection for each other causing his eyes to sting.

the

he worth?

What was he worth?

Indeed, what was he worth to Carissa now?

Carissa was the beloved daughter of the Duke of Northwatch's family, a hero of the Southern Frontier, the Hell Monarch's betrothed, and the deputy commander of the Mystic Army and the Capital Guards. She held power over Barrett's direct superior, and even the superior of his superior.

"If you hadn't used your military achievements to marry me, what would you and Carissa be like now?" Aurora asked softly.

Her question struck Barrett right in the heart, shattering all of his defenses into dust.

His face instantly went pale.

It wasn't that he hadn't thought about it-he just didn't dare to dwell on it.

Barrett had tried hard to mask his thoughts, convincing himself that everything was already decided and that there was no point in looking back. But deep down, he knew why he couldn't afford to think too deeply about it. If he hadn't asked to marry Aurora, he and Carissa would likely be very happy now, and his career would have been smooth and promising

Carissa and Barrett would have made their mark together on the Southern Frontier battlefield. After that, he might have even become the deputy commander of the Mystic Army, since Rafael was always willing to promote young generals.

The king also held Barrett in high regard. So, if he hadn't used his military achievements to marry Aurora, Salvador would have surely entrusted him with a significant position.

Regret-oh, the deep regret that came too late.

Barrett never dared to look back or think about it, for fear that the regret would eat him

That was why B alive.

A cold gleam flickered in Aurora's eyes. "So what if Viola is the third lady of the Prince family? Who cares about the other noble ladies of the capital, or heiresses of prestigious families? Who could possibly compare to Carissa? Even though I hate her for not saving me that day, I can't deny that any man who has seen her valor on the battlefield or her stunning beauty would want to marry her."

She suddenly let out a sharp laugh. "And that same woman was once your wife."

As Barrett's eyes dimmed completely, he left the room, utterly dejected.

Aurora's cold smile of satisfaction lingered.

Yes, she wanted Barrett to realize what he had lost-a dazzling gem that no lady from the Prince family could ever replace. Even if that lady did enter his family, she would never find a place in his heart. If Aurora couldn't have it, no one else would.

But the words she spoke were a double-edged sword. They engraved Carissa's name deep into Barrett's heart, but they also pierced Aurora's own heart mercilessly.

"As she laughed, tears began to fall and her smile turned bitter. So, this was how adept she had become at

using such tactics to vie for affection.

Chapter 292

As Barrett stepped out of the estate, a sudden impulse surged within him-a strong desire to rush straight to Northwatch Estate.

He wanted to ask Carissa in person if there was still any chance between them.

Even though Aurora had said today that Carissa thought nothing of him, even though Carissa's attitude on the battlefield had been clear, even though he had been so resolute in divorcing her back then, he still couldn't believe that his former wife could have erased him from her heart so quickly.

He thought she was merely angry at his ruthlessness, that she hated him for not keeping his promises. As long as she still felt anger and hate, it meant she still cared.

But the biting cold wind brought Barrett back to reality-or perhaps he had been clear-headed all along and had just been momentarily overwhelmed by emotion. Things were already set in stone.

There was no point in seeking out Carissa. Even if she still had some lingering feelings for her former husband, she was going to marry Rafael, and Barrett was going to marry Viola.

Their paths would never cross again.

Barrett quietly returned to his study, sitting there for what felt like an eternity. His mind was haunted by the memory of the day he married Carissa, particularly the moment he lifted her white bridal veil and saw her calm and beautiful face.

The stunning sight from that moment still made his heart race, even now,

Carissa was such an extraordinary woman, and he had let her slip through his fingers.

"Barrett! Barrett!" Serena called from outside the door, accompanied by the sound of her knocking. He pulled himself together and asked, "What is it?"

"Barrett, give me some money. I found a hairpin that I like," Serena said coyly from behind the door.

"What money? All the money we have has been spent on the wedding preparations," Barrett replied irritably.

An angry Serena retorted, "What money does it take to marry a second-hand woman? Just bring her in with a simple litter! I'm at the age to discuss marriage, and have been invited to attend the garden party Lady Jessica is hosting in a few days. I don't even have a decent piece of jewelry to wear!" 1

Barrett opened the door, his displeasure evident as he said, "Watch your mouth. She is soon to be your sister-in-law. And you should stop associating with people like Lady Jessica-it's damaging your reputation as a young lady."

Serena snorted, her delicate face now cold and frosty. "Sister-in-law? She's just a widow who got divorced and was sent packing. So what if she's from the Earl of Silverstone's family? When I marry the Hell Monarch and become his concubine, she'll have to bow to me."

Barrett froze. "What did you say? Become the Hell Monarch's concubine? Are you out of your mind? The Hell Monarch is marrying Carissa-when did he ever say he'd take a concubine?"

Serena's expression was full of pride. "Barrett, all it takes is Lady Helen's approval for him to take a concubine. Lady Jessica told me that Lady Helen is afraid of Grand Princess Eleanor, so she listens to whatever the grand princess says. If I can win Grand Princess Eleanor's favor, she'll recommend me to Lady Helen."

Barrett's voice grew harsh, "Have you lost your mind? What makes you think you can win Grand Princess Eleanor's favor? And what makes you think you can become the Hell Monarch's concubine? Those people are just using us. Don't be fooled."

"I don't care. I will be his concubine. As long as Lady Jessica helps me, I don't mind being used," Serena stubbornly replied, refusing to listen.

"Don't be ridiculous! Do you even know what kind of person Lady Jessica is?" Barrett's voice was filled with anger as he glared at his headstrong sister. "And Prince Rafael isn't someone to be trifled with. If he doesn't like you, marrying him will only bring you misery."

"That won't happen! He just doesn't know me yet. Once we spend time together, he'll surely grow to like me. Besides, if I win Lady Helen over, she'll protect me. Who would dare to mistreat me? Carissa? She's not even a chaste woman anymore!"

Serena spat on the ground in contempt, her feelings toward Carissa a mix of anger and jealousy.

Barrett slapped his sister across the face, his expression livid. "Who are you calling unchaste? Say it again!"

Chapter 293

The slap left Serena stunned and disoriented. She covered her face, staring blankly for a moment before finally bursting into tears.

"You!

hit me? You hit me for that shameless woman?! I'm telling Mom about this!"

With that, she ran off, still covering her face.

Barrett pounded his fist against the study door, his face a mask of anguish.

Carissa was unchaste? Quite the opposite.

She was pure, as he had never touched her.

It was laughable that now, having realized his own feelings, Barrett found that he had never truly possessed Carissa. If he had consummated their marriage before going off to war, then when he married Aurora, Carissa would never have so easily asked for a divorce.

After a while, Rebecca summoned her son.

Before he could say a word, Rebecca spoke up, "I think it's good that Serena is so determined. I support her wholeheartedly. As long as Grand Princess Eleanor is willing to recommend her to Lady Helen, and she can marry into the Hell Monarch's household, it will be the best match. I will support her fully."

Serena had stopped crying, and now looked at Barrett with a challenging glare.

Barrett shook his head. "It's impossible. The Hell Monarch won't be interested in her."

Rebecca, clearly having considered this carefully, responded, "Don't be so quick to diminish others to make yourself feel better. If the Hell Monarch can be interested in a discarded woman, why wouldn't he be interested in the legitimate daughter of the Warren family?"

"I raised your sister personally. Despite her sometimes spoiled demeanor at home, the public sees her as graceful and dignified. Moreover, if she wins Lady Helen's favor, the Hell Monarch will have to heed his mother's advice if he wants to remain a good son."

Seeing the near obsession in his mother's and sister's expressions, Barrett chose to remain silent.

Whether or not Serena could enter the Hell Monarch's household was neither a good nor bad matter. At most, if she was deceived by Jessica and learned her lesson, Serena might become more astute and not foolishly seek to marry royalty.

Already overwhelmed with his own troubles, Barrett had no desire to deal with their issues.

On the first day of December, Helen, accompanied by Kiera, moved into Hell Monarch Estate.

The quiet estate became lively as she brought along everyone from her palace, filling the once tranquil residence with activity. The atmosphere grew quite vibrant and somewhat noisy.

The first thing Helen did after settling in was to send out numerous invitations. She invited various ladies from both inside and outside the palace, along with their children, to come for a tea party and enjoy the beautiful sight of snow falling. She also extended invitations to all the concubines of the late king.

Now, those concubines had either become noble or honored concubines.

Helen had always enjoyed flaunting herself in front of them, and now that she was living with her son, she was determined to show off once again.

What was so great about living in the inner palace? Living with her son was a true blessing. Although her status as an honored concubine couldn't match that of noble concubines like Dakota and Josephine, Helen considered herself fortunate and wanted to make sure everyone saw just how content she was

now.

As for the noble ladies and officials' families, Helen intended to maintain good relations with them. Her departure from the palace was not just to avoid being confined to the inner palace, but also to live a full and happy life.

Her happiness involved showing off, which she did in various ways.

She also saw this as an opportunity to put Carissa in her place. The best way to do that was to invite all the families of officials of fourth rank and above, while intentionally leaving Carissa out

Helen knew her future daughter-in-law was not to be underestimated. Simply keeping her confined by propriety would not be sufficient. Helen wanted Carissa to face a significant setback and become the subject of mockery, so that she would think twice before acting out of line in the future.

Helen even made a point to explain to Rafael why Carissa was not invited. It was because their wedding was approaching, so the future princess consort of the Hell Monarch shouldn't attend as a guest at this

time.

Rafael agreed, secretly pleased. He understood his mother's nature all too well. The so-called tea party to enjoy the snowfall was merely a chance for her to flaunt her expensive jewelry and beautiful attire. He imagined that such an event would surely make Carissa feel stifled and uncomfortable.

Chapter 294

Carissa naturally had no desire to attend Helen's tea party. Relieved that Ryan was finally able to speak again, she now turned her attention to organizing the defensive strategy maps and tactical diagrams left by her father and brothers.

Whether it was Victory Pass or the Southern Frontier, her family had guarded these strategic points. They were well-acquainted with the fortifications and had drawn numerous defensive strategy maps. Even during times of peace, they had sent scouts to explore the surrounding forts, meticulously marking every detail on their maps. However, some of the sketches were a bit haphazard and disorganized, so Carissa decided to create new, more refined versions.

This was, of course, a time-consuming task. Looking at the stack of rough drafts, Carissa estimated that if she were to do it herself, it would take at least two or three months to complete.

She sighed, thinking how much easier it would be if Kyle were around. His keen eye and sharp mind meant that he could glance at something and have it firmly imprinted in his memory. With a quill in hand, it was as if he were possessed by the spirit of a calligrapher, producing work at lightning speed:

After working for two or three days, Carissa had made little progress, and her eyes ached from the effort.

Rafael had visited only once since Ryan had regained his ability to speak. It seemed that the position of Minister of Justice was indeed quite burdensome, or perhaps it was outside his expertise, requiring him to learn gradually.

The last time he came over, he had been muttering legal codes under his breath-things like "thirty lashes for this crime," "exile for that," and "imprisonment for three to five years", listing the punishments for various offenses.

Seeing Rafael so overwhelmed, Carissa felt a bit sorry for him. It was one thing to command troops and train soldiers, but memorizing the laws of the kingdom was evidently a struggle for him. She

had advised him, "You don't need to memorize everything. There are books to refer to, and the clerks at the Ministry of Justice are knowledgeable. You can always ask them for help."

He had responded earnestly, "As the Minister of Justice, not understanding the laws would be a dereliction of duty. Either I don't take the position, or I do it to the best of my ability."

Carissa had laughed and said, "Does the king have it out for you? Why else would he assign you to the Ministry of Justice? In this position, you not only have to review cases but also handle matters involving high-ranking officials. It's a job that can easily earn you enemies"

What had started as a joke seemed to weigh heavily on Rafael.

His expression darkened momentarily, but he quickly recovered, forcing a smile. "Don't you understand? When it comes to authority, who besides the king can rival me? My years of battle have seen me subdue all manner of treacherous and dangerous people."

He lifted his head with a haughty air. "Moreover, the government ministries are of critical importance. The king trusts me, which is why he has appointed me as Minister of Justice."

Despite his proud words, Rafael had left with his head bowed. He looked as though he were about to cry as he continued muttering the legal codes under his breath.

Sitting at her desk, Carissa recalled the scene with a chuckle. She made a sweeping motion with her quill, striking through a document with such force that it almost plerced through the paper. Well, that piece of paper was now useless.

She knew she shouldn't be thinking about men-it had a significant impact on her daily life and work.

As Carissa was struggling with her tasks, Frederick came running in with excitement. His legs were practically moving in circles as he burst into the study, panting.

"My lady, a guest has arrived. He says he's your guild senior, Kyle Spencer."

Frederick's excitement was so palpable that his eyes were trembling and he fidgeted with his clothes. Carissa had never seen him so nervous before.

Her face lit up. "Really? I'm coming right out!"

It seemed like her wish had been granted-her eldest guild senior had arrived, so she didn't have to do this work anymore.

As she dashed out like a whirlwind, Frederick called after her, "My lady, put on a cloak. It's outside."

Seeing that he couldn't stop her, Frederick grabbed a cloak and hurried after her.

very cold

In the main hall, a man dressed in a black cloak sat in a chair. His long black hair was partially tied back with a blue ribbon, with the rest cascading down his back. A faint smile graced his handsome face, as if the snow, rain, and hardships of the journey had not marred his appearance in the slightest.

Wildly free-spirited, yet elegant and refined-these qualities made this legendary figure even more captivating.

Carissa burst into the room like a gust of wind.

Before she could even get a good look, she called out excitedly, "Kyle!"

Kyle stood up, his eyes soft and affectionate as he looked at his guild junior, whom he considered as a younger sister.

"It seems you've grown a bit taller and more beautiful," he said.

Chapter 295

Brimming with excitement, Carissa eagerly linked her arm with Kyle's.

"Kyle, where did you come from? From Meadow Ridge? Did you come alone? What about our master? What about Winona?" she asked one question after another, rapid-fire.

Kyle rapped her gently on the head, his eyes still filled with affection. "I didn't return to Meadow Ridge. I came from Victory Pass. As for Winona, she will arrive in a few days. She's been keeping an eye on the movements in Sandoria and has sent numerous reports through carrier pigeons."

"Winona is coming too? That's wonderful!" Carissa's face lit up with joy, her smile as radiant as a blooming flower.

Frederick had brought a cloak but then remembered that the main hall had a fire going, making the cloak unnecessary.

Nevertheless, as he stood by the door, watching the legendary Kyle Spencer, he felt a surge of emotion that almost made him tear up. He desperately wanted to fetch some stationery and have Kyle write something for him, which he would treasure as a family heirloom.

Carissa was too caught up in her own excitement to notice Frederick's emotional response.

She eagerly asked, "Kyle, does anyone in the capital know that you're here? Do you know that the influential families and scholars in the capital admire you greatly? Even the king thinks highly of you! If they knew you were here, I'm sure the gate to Northwatch Estate would be trampled down."

"I did present my travel permit upon entering the city, but the city guards probably don't know who I am. so I don't think anyone is aware," Kyle replied.

He led Carissa to a seat, his gaze softening with a hint of concealed pain. Trouble had befallen her family, but she hadn't informed their guild. When the guild members found out on their own, they had decided to come see her. Even then, she had refused, saying that she wouldn't be able to stay strong if she saw them. Thus, although Kyle felt a pang of sympathy, he dared not show it. Seeing Carissa still acting as if she were in Meadow Ridge, playful and lively, reassured him somewhat.

"Since there are people in the capital who admire me, let them know that they are welcome to come to Northwatch Estate. I have completed several paintings while at Victory Pass and would be happy to have people come and appreciate them," he said.

Carissa paused, knowing that her guild senior was not one for social gatherings or showcasing his work to strangers. He rarely sold his paintings and never invited people he did not know to view them. Kyle only gave his paintings as gifts to those who shared his temperament.

Conversely, Everett would sometimes sell or give away Kyle's paintings. However, it wasn't out of financial need-since the Pathfinders Guild was never short of funds-but because Everett felt that there were simply too many paintings cluttering up the place.

Nowadays, most of Kyle's paintings that people had were the ones Everett had sold, though the sales were not numerous. Everett was not a fan of appreciating art. He believed that a person's eyes were meant to see the world's wonders firsthand.

Even if Kyle's paintings of the orchids at Meadow Ridge were exquisite, they could never compare to witnessing the real blossoms in person.

Everett was indeed quite dull, and Carissa could not fathom Rafael had chosen him as a mentor. If the prince had chosen the same mentor she had, she felt she would have been a great senior for him.

"Why?" Carissa asked. "If we host a banquet, you'll have to mingle with many people and converse with them. Also, not everyone will be on the same page. Aren't you the one who dislikes uncomfortable conversations?"

"It doesn't matter. In life, one has to deal with all sorts of people. I talked to many people while at Victory Pass, I even chatted with the innkeeper until dawn. I'm not mute; I can talk, and I can speak pleasantly when needed," Kyle replied.

Carissa fell silent for a moment before saying. "You're doing this for me, aren't you? Kyle, there's no need to go to such lengths. I can hold my own in the capital. With my skills, no one dares to truly offend me." "In the circles of the capital's nobility, violence won't solve problems. Don't always think about fighting. Remember why our master taught you martial arts?" said Kyle.

"Naturally, it's to be unbeatable in the world," Carissa replied.

Kyle tapped her head again. "It's to strengthen your body and prevent you from being bullied." He smiled wryly. "Let's talk about the day after tomorrow. That's when we'll host the banquet at Northwatch Estate."

Frederick, who had been listening at the door, couldn't help but interject, "Oh? Isn't Lady Helen hosting a tea party the day after tomorrow? What a coincidence."

Chapter 296

Carissa knew that Helen had not invited her to the tea party, but she was unclear about when exactly. Helen planned to host it.

She looked at Kyle. "When did you arrive in the capital? This can't be a coincidence, can it?"

Kyle smiled. "I've been here for a few days, just strolling around the city to enjoy some peace and quiet. I didn't expect to hear your chatter so soon."

"What? You arrived in the capital and didn't come to see me immediately? That's really too much!"

"Well, go ahead and cry about it," Kyle said, sitting down leisurely with his coffee.

After sipping half a cup, he looked up and saw Carissa's eyes had reddened. He couldn't help but sigh.

"You never tell us about your problems, so of course I had to come and check on you myself. I needed to see if you were doing well or not. Even if you don't need our help, at least I should be aware of the situation."

"Kyle, I'm doing very well now." Carissa said as she sat beside him, still trying to act spoiled like she used to. Though she had managed to play the part of a pampered girl when they first met, she could no longer maintain the facade.

"Ryan has been found, so I have family now, and I'm about to get married. The Hell Monarch treats me quite well."

"Your guild junior wouldn't dare neglect you." Kyle's authoritative tone was clear, as he said the term with ease. "He's Sage Everett's apprentice, but he only comes to the guild a month each year and spends the time in isolation training. Sage Everett rarely allows him out, so you probably haven't seen him before." "I didn't even know he was our guild junior. It feels like a misunderstanding-why didn't I know that we were practically family?" Carissa said with a bright smile.

It seemed she didn't even realize how much she enjoyed talking about Rafael.

"Are you trying to show off in front of him now? Let me tell you, Sage Everett values this apprentice very much. You mustn't bully him. Besides, the most skilled fighter in the Pathfinders Guild is him, not you. You have a talent for martial arts, but you're lazy. He, on the other hand, is both talented and hardworking. Even if he only trains for a month each year, he trains better than you."

Carissa didn't feel disheartened—in fact, she was quite pleased. "I know he's impressive, and I'm not envious. I feel honored."

"Your shamelessness hasn't changed." Kyle glanced at her, then turned to Frederick, who was excitedly standing at the door. "You're the steward of Northwatch Estate, aren't you? Please go outside and announce that I will be displaying my paintings at Northwatch Estate the day after tomorrow. There's no need to specifically invite anyone—just spread the word."

"Alright, I'll get on it!" Frederick hurriedly took on the task. "I'll go and spread the word. Oh, and we need to have our refreshments prepared in advance."

"There's no need to prepare any snacks. A cup of plain coffee will be enough," Kyle said.

"You're right! With a renowned artist like you, Mr. Spencer, snacks would only be superfluous. Frederick

scampered off, eager to get started.

Upon hearing that Kyle had arrived, the people in the residence gathered at the door to sneak peeks.

Only Lulu had the courage to come in and greet him. "Greetings, Mr. Kyle!"

Although Lulu was not an apprentice of the Pathfinders Guild, she was familiar with the guild's customs and had always addressed people according to how Carissa did. After all, in the guild, the only distinction was based on age or seniority, not one based on rank or status.

In the Pathfinders Guild, Lulu was never treated like a mere maid.

"You've grown taller and look even better now, Lulu," Kyle said, assessing Lulu with a thoughtful expression. He was relieved that she was still here and would be accompanying them.

Lulu blushed a bit. "Thank you for your kind words, Mr. Kyle."

Kyle sipped his coffee, casting a brief glance at Carissa. He let out a barely audible sigh.

Back in Meadow Ridge, even the smallest grievance made her want everyone in the Pathfinders Guild and even all of Meadow Ridge to know, seeking comfort from everyone.

But when something truly serious happened, she kept it all to herself, swallowing her pain.

As her eldest guild senior, how could he not feel heartache?

Everyone in the guild felt for Carissa, but was hesitant to approach. She chose to endure her struggles alone, so who would dare to trouble her further?

Chapter 297

On the day of Helen's gathering, ladies from both inside and outside the capital, as well as the families of high-ranking officials, all arrived at Hell Monarch Estate.

Despite the invitation being framed as a snowfall viewing event, it hadn't snowed that day. Furthermore, the garden's orchids had been transplanted to a secluded area. After the relocation, the blossoms hadn't bloomed at all this year.

Even with Rafael's return and the meticulous care of a specialist, the garden had only a few blooming flowers.

However, whether it was flowers or snow was secondary. Everyone understood well enough that Helen organized this tea party to show off.

As expected, today she wore a deep red brocade gown embroidered with large lilies. A pristine white fox fur draped elegantly over her shoulders, and her hair, touched with a few strands of gray, was styled in an elaborate updo. It was adorned with a gold crown set with rubies, giving her an air of undeniable nobility.

Eleanor had also dressed up for the occasion, but her attire paled in comparison to Helen's splendor. After all, Helen had been pampered in the palace for many years, her skin was fair and rosy, with no wrinkles around her eyes.

In contrast, Eleanor's skin, already dry from the winter, made the fine lines around her eyes more pronounced, and the powder she wore made her look older.

The two noble concubines did not attend, claiming illness due to the cold. But in reality, they simply didn't wish to witness Helen showing off.

As for the other ladies and officials' families, they had to come. Even if they had no respect for Helen, they had to show respect for the Hell Monarch.

Among them were many flatterers who lavished praise on Helen.

Jessica had brought Serena with her. Serena was dressed beautifully, her clothing and jewelry gifted by Jessica and in the latest winter fashion. With her naturally fair skin, she appeared even more charming than the flowers.

Serena had prepared thoroughly for this meeting, knowing that Helen liked to be praised for her youthful appearance.

When she greeted Helen, her face displayed a momentary look of astonishment before she quickly knelt and apologized, "Lady Helen, please forgive me. I was momentarily struck dumb by your fair skin, which surpasses that of a young maiden. My reaction was truly inappropriate."

Hearing this, Helen immediately beamed with delight. "Which family are you from? Such sweet words! How could a woman in her forties like me compare with a young maiden?"

"My name is Serena Warren. I'm Barrett's younger sister. I wouldn't dare to lie. Lady Helen, your beauty and grace are truly divine. As someone who hasn't seen much of the world, I initially thought you were a goddess when I first saw you."

Serena's flattery hit its mark, and Helen was thrilled. She felt she had everything material and favored in this lifetime, but it would be wonderful if she could be admired like a goddess!

Helen beamed, her smile stretching widely. She turned to Gillian beside her, and said, "She's such a clever girl. Reward her. Give her that coral bracelet of mine."

Gillian hesitated for a moment, but followed the order and brought the precious coral bracelet to Serena.

Serena's heart was soaring with joy, but she maintained a respectful and grateful demeanor.

"Thank you, Lady Helen. To receive such a generous gift today is a great honor. I will be forever grateful and will pray daily for your peace and health."

"What a good child. Rise," Helen said, giving Serena an approving look.

The girl's flattery had brightened Helen's day, making her feel completely at ease. "Come visit me often when you have the time. I would enjoy your company."

Serena's eyes sparkled with delight, and she almost wanted to leap with joy on the spot. However, in the presence of so many witnesses, she simply smiled and replied, "Thank you, Lady Helen. I will certainly come by regularly to keep you company."

The other ladies looked down on Serena from the bottom of their hearts. Serena put on a respectful facade, but her words dripped with insincerity.

How could Serena liken Helen to a goddess? Goddesses were compassionate, but they didn't flaunt themselves like Helen did.

At that moment, someone asked, "Why isn't Lady Sinclair here today?"

Chapter 298

When the question was raised, everyone realized that Carissa was absent.

It was indeed strange. Given that she was about to marry into the family, she should have been present at Helen's tea party today.

In the midst of the confusion, Helen said coolly, "This tea party of mine isn't an event that just anyone can attend "

Her words made everyone understand the situation-Helen clearly did not favor her future daughter-in-

law.

That made sense.

Though Carissa came from a distinguished family and had military achievements, she was a woman who had once divorced. Rafael was a prince, and he was far above her in status.

Whispers and murmurs spread among the guests. Margaret felt uncomfortable, and disapproved of Helen's behavior. Even if Helen didn't like Carissa, the marriage had already been confirmed, and a certain level of decorum should be maintained.

Margaret glanced at her daughter-in-law, Jessica, who was engaged in conversation with Serena. She shook her head.

After all these years, how could she not know what Jessica was scheming?

Margaret recalled how Jessica and Eleanor had tried to undermine Carissa's reputation by spreading rumors. They had ultimately reaped the consequences of their actions. Given their character, it was unlikely they would let Carissa off easily.

Now, as Carissa's wedding to Rafael was approaching, Helen had been introduced to a sweet-talking girl from the Warren family.

It was clear what kind of scheme was at play.

Margaret chose to ignore it, focusing instead on enjoying the tea and pastries. Helen had a refined taste in food, and the pastries were particularly delightful. Margaret was simply there to enjoy a good meal. The flatterers were out in full force. Hearing Helen's remark, many began to speak ill of Carissa. It was unclear whether Eleanor had intentionally arranged it or if someone was deliberately

flattering Helen. Though the comments seemed complimentary, the undercurrent of sarcasm was evident.

On the surface, they praised Carissa's military achievements but implied that she was difficult to manage and would be hard to control as a future daughter-in-law. They suggested that even the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law might become strained.

Helen's displeasure was apparent. It was likely that Eleanor had orchestrated this, aiming to sow discord between Helen and Carissa.

Seeing that the conversation was reaching its conclusion, Eleanor gave Jessica a discreet signal. Jessica smiled, then stepped forward and said, "Aunt Helen, my cousin is about to marry Carissa. Although Carissa holds the position of deputy commander of the Mystic Army, it's only an honorary title. I'm afraid she might not serve my cousin well. I think this girl, Serena, is quite suitable. With her family's

background, having her as a second wife for my cousin would be a good match."

Jessica and Eleanor were adept at manipulating Helen. They knew that Helen, who clearly disliked Carissa but was pleased with Serena, would likely be influenced by their words, especially in front of so many witnesses

was almost certain that this proposal would be accepted.

Jessica harbored deep resentment towards Carissa. She had endured Carissa being talked about for so long Carissa was just a discarded woman-how could she so easily marry Rafael?

Jessica would ensure to disgust Carissa somehow using Serena, her former sister-in-law!

However, Jessica had miscalculated this time

Although Helen disliked Carissa, she had already faced ridicule for Rafael and Carissa's marriage. If Serena was brought in as a concubine, her family would become a complete joke!

Furthermore, despite Helen's dislike for Carissa, she still preferred Carissa over this sweet-talking girl from the Warren family. Helen enjoyed praise, but she preferred it from outsiders rather than from schemers who were after her son.

After Jessica's suggestion, Helen's gaze shifted coldly towards Serena.

Without answering Jessica, Helen said to Gillian, "Why did you give this girl my coral bracelet? That was a birthday gift from Rafael. Haven't you embroidered many handkerchiefs recently? Give her one of those Instead."

Serena's face turned ashen. All eyes in the room were on her. She felt humiliated and stood frozen, unsure how to react, as Gillian removed the coral bracelet from her wrist and handed her a handkerchief instead.

"Be sure to thank Lady Helen," Gillian added coldly.

Chapter 299

With a tearful expression, Serena bowed deeply to thank Helen. She then cast a desperate look towards Jessica.

Jessica's face darkened.

What foolish woman doing today? She had directly embarrassed her!

this

The onlookers suppressed their laughter. Helen was easily flattered-a few compliments could make her open her heart. It was easy to please her or to deceive her out of money, but she took great pride in her

son.

Anyone who aimed for Rafael was crossing a line that could not be tolerated.

Jessica was seething with anger, but had no choice but to maintain silence with a stiff expression.

However Eleanor simply smiled and took a slow sip of her tea.

She said, "It was merely a jest. Why would anyone take it seriously? Rafael's princess consort hasn't even married into the family yet, so what talk of a second wife? Jessica, you were too kind-hearted. That girl from the Warren family shed a few tears and you pitied her, so you spoke up for her before Helen. And Helen, how can you make decisions for Rafael? Forget about a second wife-even taking a concubine requires his consent. Without it, nothing can be done."

The few concubines present chuckled quietly, their eyes filled with scorn as they looked at Helen. Helen was furious but at a loss for words, especially when faced with Eleanor, who was speaking the truth. She had no way to counter her.

As Helen's face reddened, Eleanor took another sip of her tea and continued casually, "I've never been one to interfere in other people's family matters, but Rafael is my nephew. After his great service to the country, why should he be forced to marry Carissa when there are so many noble young women in the capital? If you had invited Carissa today, I wouldn't have come. A woman like her, who can't even tolerate a husband taking a concubine, is too narrow-minded for my taste."

Eleanor lifted her gaze to scan the other noble ladies present. "Remember my words. Some people are worth associating with, while others should be avoided to prevent catching their petty airs and ending up with a reputation for jealousy."

Eleanor was openly exposing her discord with Carissa.

Many of the noble ladies present had close ties with Eleanor. This was due to her previous hospitality, as she often hosted gatherings and occasionally provided them with benefits. Not to mention, her connections through her makeup shop and jewelry store ensured that the latest fashions were always available to them first.

Over time, these relationships had naturally grown strong.

Furthermore, many of the alliances and marriages within the official families were orchestrated by Eleanor, which only increased her circle of supporters.

Eleanor's gaze turned cold as she seized the opportunity, knowing that Carissa's absence was a chance to further slander her.

She continued, "This time, Helen didn't invite her. Rafael should have, but he didn't. Clearly, the future princess consort of the Hell Monarch is not as well-regarded as one might expect. There might be more to this marriage than meets the eye."

Jessica laughed lightly. "What other secrets could there be? Isn't it just like Barrett and Aurora? I'm sure she gave herself to him on the battlefield, then naturally compelled Rafael to marry her."

This statement shocked everyone.

"Oh my, could that really be the case?"

"It's hard to say. Otherwise, why would the Hell Monarch marry her?"

"That makes sense. With so many noble ladies available, why choose someone...with such a dubious background?"

Whispers and malicious speculations spread through the room.

Heather lowered her head and remained silent.

I must be mea

On the other hand, Margaret interjected sternly, "When making statements, and provide evidence. If you have no proof and only speculate, it is best not to voice such opinions. lead to misunderstandings and harm General Sinclair's reputation."

Margaret, being Jessica's mother-in-law, carried significant weight in her rebuke. This caused the others. to hush and stop their discussions.

Jessica didn't dare to offend her mother-in-law, so she glanced at Eleanor.

Eleanor set her tea cup down with a dismissive smile..

"Well, what's true will not change, and what's false can't be made true."

Chapter 300

Eleanor's casual remark undoubtedly confirmed Jessica's claims.

"It's no wonder Lady Helen dislikes Carissa-she must have used such underhanded tactics."

"It's shocking to think that someone of the duke's direct lineage would resort to such a despicable method."

"Lady Heather, now I understand why you've kept your distance. It turns out there's a reason for it."

Heather held her cup of tea; she looked as though she wanted to speak, but caught Eleanor's icy gaze. She managed a bitter smile, took a sip of her tea, and remained silent.

Helen felt unsettled. The decision not to invite Carissa was meant to show her who was truly in charge, a reminder not to get above herself. Yet, the fact that Carissa was Rafael's future wife was a reality Helen could not change. She didn't want her future daughter-in-law being talked about in such a manner.

Eleanor's words, however, left her at a loss. Though Eleanor spoke with apparent sincerity, Helen had no way of disproving the latter's claims. In the end, could only sulk quietly while sipping her tea. "Oh dear, everyone's arrived so early?"

A voice broke the tension. The crowd turned to see the prime minister's wife, Natalie, entering with her maid. She was wrapped in thick layers of clothing, and was carrying a hot water bottle. Her slow steps were accompanied by a warm smile.

"Greetings, Lady Helen," Natalie said as she approached.

Helen recognized Natalie, and responded with a smile. "No need for formality, Mrs. Murray. Why have arrived so late?"

Natalie smiled and replied, "I had to stop by Northwatch Estate. Oh, it was so crowded there that I couldn't get in, so I came by to visit you."

Helen was taken aback. "Northwatch Estate? Why was it so crowded? Are they hosting a tea party too?" "A bunch of stinking men!" Natalie said, giving a nod of respect to Eleanor before taking a seat.

"A bunch of stinking men?" Jessica's voice rose in surprise. "Carissa invited men to her gathering? Why would you go there, Mrs. Murray?"

"Of course it's because my husband also went there!" Natalie laughed and shook her head, as if helpless about the situation. "I told him I didn't want to go, but he insisted. He said he wanted me to gain some new insights."

"Oh? What kind of insights did you gain? Perhaps you could enlighten us, Mrs. Murray," Jessica asked.

"What insights? I barely saw anything! So many men were crowding up the room-half the officials have already left, and the rest are probably still on the way! Forget it. I was terrified of how crowded it was, and left as fast as I could," Natalie replied with a smile, dabbing her nose with a handkerchief.

"Men were crowding up the room? What is she planning?" Jessica's voice rose again as she glanced at Helen.