

War Song 301

Chapter 301

Eleanor and Jessica's expressions turned incredibly sour.

Eleanor had always prided herself on her refined taste. She had almost acquired Kyle's orchid painting, only for it to be torn to shreds. She was ridiculed for it, and since then, she harbored a grudge against Kyle.

After all, her love for the arts was just a pretense. She didn't genuinely appreciate the painting or the painter.

Serena awkwardly found a corner to sit in, not daring to speak further. Deep down, she felt indignant.

Why should Carissa have such a famous guild senior?

Eleanor and Jessica were now silent. Their earlier comments about Carissa seemed like a complete joke. Even the king and the prime minister had personally gone to visit-how grand must that event be? And here they were, hiding and mocking Carissa.

It was petty, and showed a severe lack of class.

Thinking back to Eleanor and Jessica's slanderous remarks, Serena realized how she had chimed in as well and had acted like a petty person.

Heather's expression was particularly noteworthy, shifting from awkwardness to forced laughter, to a growing sense of unease.

Helen was also unhappy. She hadn't enjoyed the earlier gossip about Carissa, and now, she was even more displeased after the spotlight had been stolen by the latter. Helen had prepared several outfits and accessories to change into throughout the day, but now, she had lost all interest.

Many of the other guests were also becoming restless, eager to visit Northwatch Estate. Even without an invitation, their husbands were there. Surely, they wouldn't be turned away if they joined in on the excitement, right?

Noticing the silence in the room, Natalie suddenly exclaimed, "Oh dear, how forgetful of me! I nearly forgot something important."

Everyone turned to look at her as she slapped her forehead in realization.

"When I left Northwatch Estate, Lady Sinclair knew I was coming here and asked me to bring a painting of the snowy mountains for Lady Helen to admire. This piece is a masterpiece by Mr. Spencer. Before anyone could get a good look, Lady Sinclair mentioned she would put it away to present it to Lady Helen."

Natalie turned to her maid with a hint of annoyance. "You know how forgetful I am. Why didn't you remind me? I almost forgot something so important! If Lady Sinclair finds out and blames me, I'll be too embarrassed to see her."

The moment everyone heard that it was one of Kyle's masterpieces, all eyes turned eagerly toward the painting. The maid presented it to Gillian, who then passed it to Helen.

Helen cradled the scroll in her hands, her emotions in turmoil. When she noticed the envious gazes from everyone around her, she lifted her chin, pride swelling within her like a peacock displaying its feathers. Knowing that everyone wanted to see the painting, she said to Gillian, "Unroll it and let the ladies admire

Mr. Spencer's masterpiece."

At her command, the servants set up a table and carefully unrolled the painting.

Everyone hurried forward, eager to get a closer look. They wished they could burn the image of the snowy mountains into their memories so they could later describe its brilliance to others.

It was, without a doubt, a work worthy of Kyle's reputation.

The painting depicted towering, steep mountains, their tall trees barren and withered. Most of the mountain range was blanketed in snow, with only a few dips revealing patches of brown rock. The sun was just beginning to rise, casting a golden glow over the highest peaks. In the midst of this golden light, the snow shimmered, and within the snow, the gold seemed to merge.

A single beam of sunlight shone upon a tall ancient tree, and it was truly a masterpiece.

All of this was vividly brought to life on paper, as if one could actually see the scene right before them-it was truly magical.

Even someone who didn't understand art would hold their breath when looking at it. It felt as if they were standing on that snowy mountain, wrapped in the warmth of that golden sunlight.

A painting of snowy mountains that could evoke a sense of warmth-it was no ordinary winter scene. It was clearly a depiction of the sunlight on Golden Mountain.

Indeed, upon closer inspection of the inscription, the title of the painting was "Golden Mountain at Sunrise."

"A true masterpiece that will be cherished for generations!" Margaret murmured, her eyes still filled with awe. "Lady Sinclair is so thoughtful, gifting such an extraordinary work to Lady Helen. It truly shows how much she values Her Ladyship."

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Margaret's words left Helen feeling both proud and a bit guilty.

Helen had deliberately not invited Carissa today to give the latter a hard time, but Carissa didn't seem to mind at all. Instead, she even sent a masterpiece from her guild senior as a gift. This made Helen realize that Carissa not only knew how to conduct herself, but was also generous and magnanimous.

In comparison, Helen now felt she had been petty and narrow-minded.

Noticing the envy and jealousy in the eyes of the other concubines, Helen's opinion of Carissa improved- if only just a little. She wasn't willing to give her too much credit, after all.

Eleanor and her daughter walked over to take a look at the painting. While they were indeed impressed, since the painting wasn't theirs, they felt the need to belittle it.

Eleanor disregarded her status and past displays of good manners, and said, "Kyle is known for his orchid paintings. If she truly wanted to give you something, it should have been an orchid painting. Sending a snowy mountain painting is just perfunctory."

If anyone else had said this, it might have sparked some discontent.

But not with Helen. She responded, "I never liked orchids."

Eleanor felt like she had punched a pillow, and was left staring at Helen in frustration.

What did this foolish woman know? The orchid paintings were the true masterpiece.

Just as they finished admiring the snowy mountain painting, Luke rushed in with a message.

"Your Grace, Lady Sinclair had someone send over several paintings. Since you were hosting guests today, she wanted to offer them for your and the ladies' appreciation. If you find any you like, you're welcome to keep them."

Helen was overjoyed. "Really? Bring them in quickly!"

The atmosphere immediately became charged with excitement. Many of the attendees were from noble and cultured families, with ties to literature and the arts. Some were from prominent literary families, while others were high-ranking civil servants. Of course, there were also members of the great

aristocratic houses.

Poetry and painting were esteemed arts, and they were eager to witness the best works.

Opportunities like this were rare-perhaps once in a lifetime.

Helen believed she was the one basking in all the glory. However, those who understood the situation knew that the real star of the day was the one who wasn't even invited-Carissa.

Carissa wasn't narrow-minded or petty. On the contrary, she was incredibly generous and gracious. There wasn't a single person present who could match her magnanimity. Even though she wasn't invited and wasn't liked, she still managed to be so thoughtful and considerate.

Among the paintings sent over, there were two featuring orchids, and one depicting Victory Pass. In the painting of Victory Pass, the scene was striking—a soldier stood resolutely beneath the city gate. His armor was rusted and worn, and he gripped a long spear, its tip still stained with what appeared to be fresh blood.

The soldier's eyes were filled with determination. It was a bitterly cold winter day, and the snow had piled up to his calves. His face was darkened, chapped lips dry, and his hair disheveled. It was likely blown by the fierce wind. His hands were blackened and skin cracked, with dirt caked under his nails. His fingers were slightly bent as he clutched the spear, pointing it forward with unwavering resolve. The scenery and the figure in the painting were so lifelike that it felt as though the soldier was standing right in front of them.

For a moment, the noblewomen could almost see the soldiers of Victory Pass and imagine their hardships. They could see how these men, despite being battered by the elements, continued to stand guard at the city gate, protecting the peace and prosperity of the kingdom.

Margaret, whose ancestors were military officers, was especially moved by the painting.

She sighed deeply, and said, "The peace and prosperity we enjoy today were bought with their blood and sacrifice. Soldiers risk their lives, and the generals are no different. The perils of the Southern Frontier battle were likely far greater than we could ever imagine. The Hell Monarch and General Sinclair are truly loyal servants of the kingdom."

She deliberately called Carissa by her title rather than her name to remind everyone that Carissa was not just a noble lady from the Duke of Northwatch's family, but also a warrior who had fought on the battlefield.

For a moment, everyone felt a sense of admiration and guilt, realizing that their earlier gossip about Carissa was truly unwarranted.

Only Eleanor let out a cold laugh. "Wealth and glory have always come hand in hand with danger. They faced danger, but in return, they gained immense wealth and power"

Margaret had never liked her royal in-law, and she didn't hold back in her retort. "Immense wealth? What immense wealth? If that immense wealth came at the cost of losing your family, would you want it?"

She continued, her tone sharp, "Besides, anyone else could say this, and it wouldn't sting as much. But coming from you, Grand Princess Eleanor, it's a slap in the face to all soldiers. You're enjoying immense wealth and the honor of being the grand princess. How could you possibly understand the dangers of the battlefield?"

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Eleanor was left speechless by Margaret's sharp retort. She was stunned in anger for a long time. Finally, she stood up with a cold laugh.

"You clearly know nothing about art, yet you use this as a pretext to argue. It seems you and I can hardly exchange a single word without clashing. I shall take my leave."

After finishing her sentence, she shot a fierce glare at Helen.

Helen was momentarily stunned-what had she done to offend Eleanor? After all, it was Margaret who had crossed her. Why was Eleanor glaring at her?

Still, Helen had suffered enough under Eleanor's hand before. Also, given their business dealings, she didn't want to provoke her further.

So, she asked, "Your Highness, won't you stay a bit longer to enjoy the paintings?"

Eleanor walked over to Helen and leaned in close to whisper, though her tone carried a clear hint of threat, "I do intend to enjoy them. After everyone's finished, you'll send the paintings to my residence. I expect them delivered by the end of the day."

With that, she left with Jessica in tow.

Seeing this, Serena hurried to follow them out. Some of Eleanor's close confidantes hesitated for a moment, but eventually rose to bid their farewells as well.

However, many guests remained-particularly Rosalind, the royal chancellor's granddaughter. She was utterly captivated by each painting. It was as if she wanted to engrave every line into her

memory. There were some who didn't quite understand the art but chose to stay, not wanting to offend Helen. Reflecting on the earlier confrontations, they found themselves more confused than anything. What they did realize, was that they needed to be cautious of that girl from the Warren family. They didn't

want their sons getting involved with her-she was clearly trouble.

Families with sons nearing marriageable age quickly decided to cross Serena off their list. They would rather their sons remain single than marry a woman like her.

Helen propped up her chin and admired the paintings for a while, but soon found herself troubled. She wasn't well-versed in art, but she knew these paintings were valuable. If she sent them to Eleanor's residence, they would surely never be returned.

So, should she send them or not? If she didn't, who knows what kind of trouble Eleanor might stir up? That mother-and-daughter pair was such a headache!

Not long after, Luke came in to report, "Your Grace, ladies, Lady Sinclair has sent word that if you are still interested in viewing more paintings, you are welcome to visit Northwatch Estate. Lady Sinclair and Mr. Spencer will be ready to receive you at any time."

"I'll go!" Rosalind exclaimed without hesitation, her voice loud and clear. She didn't care about maintaining her composure or decorum-meeting Kyle was far more important than worrying about appearances. With the king himself at Northwatch Estate and so many others eager to see Kyle in person, the rest of

the guests quickly agreed to go as well.

Luke then respectfully bowed, and asked Helen, "Your Grace, should I prepare the carriage?"

Helen was in a quandary. She wanted to go, but today was supposed to be her day to host. Yet now, it had somehow turned into a gathering at Northwatch Estate. The king and all the civil and military officials had gone, and now the ladies were following suit.

She was vexed, but what could she do? She hadn't invited Carissa, and yet Carissa had graciously extended an invitation to her instead.

Since the situation had been pushed to this point, she had no choice but to nod and say, "Prepare the carriage."

As she climbed into the carriage, leading a grand procession of noblewomen toward Northwatch Estate, a sudden thought struck her.

Had she fallen into Carissa's trap? Had she been outmaneuvered?

Who was hosting an event today, really? Who was the true host today?

How had everything changed with just a few paintings?

The more Helen thought about it, the more she felt she had been played by Carissa. Her anger surged, but now, with all the ladies following her lead, it wasn't as if she could turn back. Wouldn't that just make her seem petty and narrow-minded?

No, she had to see this through. And if Carissa dared to show her any disrespect, no matter who was present-the king and all the officials included-Helen was determined to make Carissa pay. Helen's temper flared, unstoppable once it ignited.

To her surprise, when they arrived at Northwatch Estate, it was Carissa herself who came out to greet them. As Helen stepped out of the carriage, Carissa even extended a hand to help her with a warm smile. "Your Grace, please be careful. Allow me to assist you.

Helen had expected Carissa to play some sort of trick, but instead, she was met with such hospitality that she found herself momentarily disarmed.

Still, she reminded herself that she was the elder and held a higher status. Carissa's deference was only

proper.

So, with an air of entitlement, Helen accepted Carissa's assistance. Draped in her rich purple and red robes, paired with a fox-fur cloak, she carried herself with the dignity befitting her rank as she walked into Northwatch Estate.

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As Helen stepped into the main hall, she noticed that Salvador, Jeremiah, and many high-ranking officials were already there. Even Rafael was engaged in conversation with a handsome young man dressed in a blue coat.

The moment they saw her enter, everyone, including the king, rose to their feet and greeted her.

Helen's mood instantly brightened. While she was accustomed to being revered by the other ladies, she rarely had the chance to interact with the men of the court. Now, with even the king and the prime minister paying their respects to her, she felt a surge of pride, nearly to the point of overwhelming vanity.

At that moment, she completely forgot the frustrations she had harbored during the carriage ride. After returning everyone's greetings and gestures of respect, she was promptly escorted to the seat of honor. It felt amazing.

Although Helen had lived a life of unparalleled prestige, never before had she been honored in such a manner being greeted by the court ministers and the legendary figure like Kyle while she occupied the highest seat in the room.

This was a first in her lifetime.

Oh, no.

It seemed her favorable opinion of Carissa had just increased by another notch.

After the servants served her coffee, Kyle approached Carissa and whispered something in her ear, Flattery is the best way to deal with someone like her."

Carissa couldn't help but chuckle. Who said her guild senior didn't have the wisdom to navigate complex social situations?

"You and her will eventually share the same roof. She's your mother-in-law, you can't be at odds with her all the time. As for the noblewomen of the capital, you'll need to socialize with them too. Today's art exhibition is meant to pave the way for you. I hope you won't let down my intentions, and that you'll refrain from resorting to conflict in the future," Kyle advised,

Carissa was touched, but also slightly exasperated.

Did Kyle always see her as someone who only knew how to use violence?

Since returning from Meadow Ridge, she had learned the proper etiquette and spent a year observing the rules of the Warren family. She knew how to conduct herself in the capital.

Avoiding unnecessary conflicts was her strategy-not because she feared them, but because she didn't want anything to negatively affect Ryan.

For Ryan's sake, she had adopted a peaceful mindset, seeing everything in a more positive light. Even today, Helen seemed particularly agreeable to her.

Meanwhile, Salvador was too engrossed in the paintings hanging on the walls to care about anyone else. His eyes were fixed on each piece, scrutinizing them carefully. If anyone attempted to make a comment that was even slightly critical, he would glare at them.

Who had the right to critique Kyle Spencer's work? Did they really think they were qualified?

When Jeremiah approached him, Salvador shooed him away. "Go look at something else. I want to enjoy this in peace. Out of all these paintings, why do you have to be staring at the one I'm focused on?" Jeremiah retreated awkwardly. He had been admiring a painting that depicted the direction toward Fawnrun City, where snow blanketed the entire scene. The atmosphere it captured was so perfect that he had wanted to linger on it a bit longer.

Left with no choice, he moved on to the orchid paintings. Even in the harsh environment of Victory Pass, orchids could be found. Kyle's depiction of them had reached a level of mastery that made it difficult to distinguish them from the real thing.

Yet, Jeremiah was still drawn to the paintings of the buildings and people in the frontier towns. Kyle must have lived in Victory Pass for quite some time, as many of his paintings featured the common folk, soldiers, buildings, and even scenes of daily life.

One painting showed two women arguing, their clothes simple but clean, as they carried wooden buckets to the well. Every village in the border town had a well. Although the people weren't living in luxury, they were getting by.

The ceasefire had been incredibly important for these people. Regardless of whatever happened at Victory Pass and Fawnrun City, Jeremiah hoped that peace would prevail. Even if the two countries didn't interact, it was crucial that war didn't break out again.

After observing for a while, Jeremiah decided to shamelessly approach Kyle. "Mr. Spencer, would you be willing to sell one of your paintings to this old man?"

As soon as he spoke, everyone turned to look at Kyle. Even Salvador's gaze was filled with eager anticipation.

As the king, Salvador could easily command Kyle to gift him a painting. However, he was hoping to acquire more. If the paintings were for sale, he could choose several.

Kyle smiled, and replied, "Mr. Murray, I'm afraid I can't make that decision. I've gifted all of these paintings to my guild junior, Carissa. If she's willing to sell them, I have no objections." Immediately, all eyes turned to Carissa, filled with longing.

One by one, people began to approach her, each pleading for just one painting. They all promised not to ask for more. They knew that Kyle's paintings were priceless, and they couldn't afford too many.

Carissa understood that this was Kyle's way of elevating her status-not just in front of the noblewomen, but in front of the king and the entire court. He was really going out of his way to ensure she received significant re

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Carissa appreciated the sentiment, and joked with a smile, "Since everyone loves Kyle's paintings so much, you'd probably all be complaining about me behind my back if I said I wouldn't sell them." "We wouldn't dare," said Davis, the Defense Minister, with a laugh.

Then he said loudly. "Even if you don't sell them, we wouldn't complain about you, General Sinclair. I'll be the first to take issue with whoever dares do that!"

What a joke!

How could one criticize such a talented young general? Anyone who did would be in trouble with the Ministry of Defense!

The noblewomen outside exchanged glances. They were aware that Carissa had achieved military merits, but she was still a woman. How many men truly held her in high regard? Though Davis' words seemed like a joke, his expression was serious

The ladies who had once spoken ill of Carissa with Eleanor now felt a pang of regret. If their disparaging words reached Carissa's ears and offended her, they might have caused trouble for their husbands. Salvador looked at Carissa with a gaze that made his intentions clear. Pointing to a painting of mountain passes, he said, "Carissa, I won't ask for much-how about just this one?"

Carissa replied respectfully, "Your Majesty, if you favor this one, you may take it. I cannot accept your money. It was Kyle's painting, to begin with, and I wish to offer it to you as a token of respect." Salvador shook his head. "No, I want to buy it myself. If I take it as a gift from you, wouldn't you feel obligated to give one to the royal chancellor? And if you do that, wouldn't you then need to give one to the prime ministers, and also the deputy prime minister? And what about the other members of the Cabinet?"

At Salvador's insistence, everyone laughed.

They quickly suggested, "We'll buy it. Your Majesty should accept it as a gift."

"Are you implying that I can't afford it?" Then, Salvador looked at Carissa and asked, "How much is this painting of mountain passes?"

Carissa smiled and said, "I'll make a gesture of goodwill. Each painting is priced at one thousand silver coins. If any of you like one, you may purchase it."

Everyone had expected her to set a high price, considering that Kyle's paintings were worth a fortune and hard to come by. In fact, a starting price of ten thousand silver coins would have been reasonable. No one expected her to offer it for only one thousand silver coins.

Instantly, the room erupted into chaos. Excited shouts filled the air, with some unable to contain their enthusiasm and screaming with joy.

In the midst of the commotion, an elderly voice called out, "Jeremiah, don't compete with me! I want

these three paintings. Don't shove-I'm about to fall. Rosalind, come quickly! Help me get the paintings. Ronald, stop that brute of a prime minister!"

The voice belonged to Trevor. He stretched out his arms and blocked off three paintings, including one that Jeremiah had his eye on. The two men were jostling with their shoulders, while the elderly royal chancellor urgently called for his granddaughter outside.

Rosalind reacted swiftly. Ignoring her manners, she hurried in and immediately wrapped up the paintings her grandfather wanted. Meanwhile, an old attendant by Trevor's side was holding off Jeremiah, who could only watch helplessly as Trevor secured the painting he desired.

Jeremiah shot a resentful glance at his elderly wife. Why didn't she have a bit more foresight? Why didn't she come in to grab them?

Though he thought this, he dared not voice his complaints. Everyone knew that Jeremiah was a pushover for his wife, and that he had been afraid of her for half his life.

People began selecting their favorite paintings. Davis noticed that Rafael had not yet chosen anything, and asked, "Your Highness, have you not found anything you like? It's no trouble if you haven't, but at a thousand silver coins, it's truly a bargain."

Rafael had his arms crossed, a faint smile on his lips as he replied, "You may take yours first. Carissa is

betrothed, and Kyle is particularly fond of her. I'll ask him to paint one for me later."

His statement was bound to provoke envy, and many shot him glares.

What a showoff, just like his mother!

The ladies present today all saw how Carissa stole the spotlight. Eve understood that Kyle was protecting her with his reputation.

though they were envious, they

With Kyle's favor, Carissa was bound to be highly regarded by the civil officials. For example, someone like Trevor, who valued art above all else, would likely seek more Interaction with Carissa if he wished to maintain a connection with Kyle.

As for the king, the prime minister, and the defense minister, their attitudes today showed their high regard for Carissa, and this respect was not solely due to Kyle's Influence.

Everyone had to admit that Carissa, once dismissed and devalued, had transformed into a favored figure in the capital.

After the paintings were purchased, Ryan was brought out to pay his respects to the king and the others. Carissa had deliberately shown Ryan's face, highlighting him as the future head of the Duke of Northwatch's household.

Though small in stature, Ryan stood straight and proud, evoking memories of the young men of the Duke of Northwatch's family.

Carissa then led Helen and the other ladies to the side hall for tea. As she listened to their conversations, Carissa found the compliments much more pleasant. Occasionally, she heard praise that was genuinely flattering.

However, she could distinguish between true and false flattery. Social niceties required her to reciprocate the compliments, maintaining a flawless demeanor that even surpassed that of the most respected ladies of high society.

Helen observed Carissa for a long time. Somehow, after today, she found Carissa less disagreeable. If Carissa weren't her future daughter-in-law, she felt she might even like her.

Unfortunately, Carissa was to be her daughter-in-law.

The natural friction between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law was expected, especially since her son was so outstanding: even the late king had valued him so much. If even noblewomen from prestigious families weren't worthy of him, Carissa was even more so.

Helen suddenly snapped back to reality. She had been close to being won over by Carissa's display of competence.

Helen should have been angry-today was supposed to be her moment in the spotlight, yet it had turned into Carissa's.

Seeing Carissa's innocent smile only fueled her frustration. That look in Carissa's eyes-so enchanting and captivating-made Helen want to gauge them out

Carissa said sweetly, "Your Grace, please have some coffee."

Helen's stern expression abruptly transformed into a smile. "Yes, coffee. Please, everyone, enjoy the coffee."

Carissa took a sip of her coffee, just enough to mask the smile tugging at her lips. She suddenly found

Helen rather interesting-Indeed, the older woman was haughty, unreasonable, and fond of showing off, but there was a certain straightforwardness in her demeanor that made her more bearable. Meanwhile, Heather sat there, wooden and silent throughout. She felt anxious, especially in Northwatch Estate, which reminded her of how well her elder sister used to treat her. After Melanie's death, Heather had treated Carissa so poorly.

When Carissa had brought Ryan out earlier, she hadn't even asked Ryan to come and pay his respects to Heather. Carissa's gaze was gentle when she looked at Heather, but that gentleness seemed to be reserved for everyone equally.

It was as if Carissa no longer regarded Heather as her aunt.

It wasn't that Heather didn't want to care for Carissa-it was simply that she couldn't. Barrett and Aurora were in high demand when they returned, and Harvey's family had always stayed out of court affairs. Heather had been powerless to act. 1

And it wasn't just her-Avis had also been neglectful. She didn't even return to the capital.

Regarding the matter of Carissa sending bridal gifts to add to Leona's trousseau, Heather still felt she hadn't been in the wrong. On Leona's joyous day, it seemed inappropriate for a divorced woman to s-it might bring bad luck.

Who would have thought that Carissa did anything but bring bad luck? She was even fortunate enough to be marrying Rafael soon.

Heather was puzzled. Why did the child have to hold a grudge against her? She had even brought Leona to catch up and clarify matters! She truly believed that old grievances should have been settled and forgotten.

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After the art exhibition concluded, the king, accompanied by the high-ranking officials, left in high spirits. The ladies also took their leave.

Given today's events, the Duke of Northwatch's household had likely solidified its position in the capital. Even Salvador himself had attended, which was a considerable honor.

As Heather prepared to depart, she felt a pang of dissatisfaction.

Carissa had arranged for a painting to be delivered to Helen, but Heather, her maternal aunt, had received none. The king or officials bought the paintings, and since her husband didn't attend, it was difficult for a woman like Heather to compete with the men for one

However, whether she bought one or not was one thing. Carissa should have at least given her a painting to show that bygones were bygones.

Yet, until her departure, Carissa had never mentioned it. She only curtsied and said, "Please take care of yourself, Aunt Heather."

Heather's smile was strained. "No need to trouble yourself with seeing me off."

One of the noblewomen, Stella, who was leaving with Heather, was known for her bluntness.

Seeing Heather return empty-handed, Stella asked, "Why didn't Lady Sinclair give you a painting, Your Grace? You are her aunt, after all."

Heather's expression darkened immediately, and Stella realized her mistake. She quickly nodded respectfully and walked ahead, leaving Heather behind.

In the carriage, Heather gripped her handkerchief tightly, feeling deeply unsettled. She regretted not bringing Leona to Helen's banquet earlier and then to Northwatch Estate. Had Leona been present, Heather would have certainly received a painting.

Now, Heather had become a laughingstock. Stella had asked the question out loud, but why didn't the others?

They probably thought that she, as Carissa's aunt, didn't handle things well, especially since she didn't come forward to support Carissa during the divorce.

But who could understand her predicament?

People saw her as a princess consort and assumed her life was splendid. Yet, though Harvey was prince, he was timid and unwilling to offend anyone. That timidity extended to Heather.

Heather had once envied her sister when she was alive. Melanie's family was formidable, with each man standing tall and making a mark on history, leaving a legacy that would benefit future generations. But the brutal end of her sister's family was unforeseen.

Everyone said it was Westhaven's spies who had killed her sister and her family. What if any of those spies were still alive? What if they targeted Heather and her family because she stepped up to help Carissa?

What, then?

People were inherently selfish. If the situation were reversed and Melanie was in Heather's position, she would likely have turned a blind eye as well.

The more Heather thought about it, the more aggrieved she felt. Upon returning to her residence, she summoned Leona and cried bitterly while holding her daughter.

Through her sobs, Heather lamented, "How could she treat me so dismissively? I'm her aunt, after all. Would it have been appropriate for me to ask for a painting? She didn't even mention it or ask about it, and that breaks my heart. I used to care for her when she was little. Back then, she didn't remember much, but now that she's grown, she's forgotten the kindness I showed her.

"If you had been there today, you would have seen how they looked at me-as if I were a joke! My entire life feels like a farce. Even though I'm a princess consort, I'm regarded as less than the family of a fourth-rank official. I can't afford to live ostentatiously, and even your dowry had only thirty-six items. Your father is cowardly, and it seems that your cousin looks down on me as well."

Leona had already heard from the maid about the events that led up to this before she entered the room, so she was aware of the situation.

She didn't sympathize with her mother's complaints.

With a serious tone, she said, "Mom, when the Duke of Northwatch's family was in trouble, you chose to stay away. Now that they are prosperous, don't expect to benefit from their good fortune. Besides, my cousin has never blamed you for not helping her back then. Yet, you criticized her for her misfortune when she sent gifts for my wedding preparations.

"Furthermore, with Aunt Melanie gone, you and Cari have little connection. She left for Meadow Ridge long ago to train. When she returned and visited, it was only to play with me. You never even hosted her for a meal. What old ties do you even have with her?"

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Heather was left speechless by Leona's words. After a long pause, she tried to deflect some of the blame

onto the Avis

"Avis is also Carissa's aunt, and she was the one who acted as a matchmaker for them. Why hasn't she come back? It shows that it's not just me who's cold-hearted-everyone's like that!"

Leona sighed. "It's not like you're unaware of Aunt Avis's situation. She's been ill, and likely couldn't make the trip. Besides, she doesn't have control over Prince Yuvan's estate. It's managed by his secondary concubine. It's almost like she's been kept under house arrest."

Heather sighed in resignation. "Forget it. I won't keep up relations with your cousin in the future. You can maintain contact with her if you wish, as we can't completely sever ties. After all, she is Prince Rafael's future wife. You may think we're both princess consorts, but it's not the same. Your father is ineffectual and cowardly. While Prince Rafael may not hold military authority now, he controls the Mystic Army and the Supreme Court. He does hold real authority."

Leona was at a loss for words. Could her father really make a difference? During the reign of the previous king, the grace shown to them allowed them to stay in the capital instead of being sent to the provinces. If her father weren't so ineffectual, they would have been sent to a remote location with no return permitted without an edict.

Heather knew this well, but continued to bring it up.

When a couple didn't get along well, there was no peace in their home.

Heather spoke of the tea party she had been invited to, and also expressed her grievances. She mentioned how she wanted to stand up for Carissa when everyone was gossiping about her. However, due to Harvey's temperament, she dared not speak too much for fear of attracting trouble.

In the end, it was a complaint about Harvey.

Leona frowned, feeling that things were more complicated than they appeared. She went out to find a maid who had accompanied them, and inquired further,

She learned that not only had her mother failed to speak up for her cousin, but she had even nodded in agreement with those who criticized Carissa. And now she was resentful that Carissa hadn't sent her a painting from the exhibition at Northwatch Estate.

Heather's thoughts were never well hidden-her resentment was likely evident to everyone, including

Carissa.

Leona sighed. Although she was a newlywed and still learning about the intricacies of social etiquette, she knew that this was not the way to handle such matters-especially considering how much Melanie had cared for and favored Heather in the past.

The next day, Leona felt compelled to visit Northwatch Estate to apologize on behalf of her mother. She really didn't want to lose the relationship she had with her cousin. Despite feeling an overwhelming sense of grievance, Leona found solace in visiting Carissa. Here, her heart found a moment of peace, a reprieve from her inner turmoil.

Carissa was speaking with Kyle when she heard that Leona had arrived.

"Kyle, you should go and look around. I'll have a chat with Leona," she said.

"Go ahead," Kyle replied with a smile. "I promised to paint for Ryan today. You've already interrupted me quite a bit this morning."

Carissa chuckled. "I've been counting money all morning. Just focus on painting for Ryan, and please don't try to make me pose for you."

Kyle rarely painted people. He had once witnessed Carissa kicking an apple tree, causing a flurry of light and dark pink petals to fall. He had captured her rough actions and grimaces in a painting, which had become quite popular at the Pathfinders Guild.

Thinking of this, Kyle couldn't help but smile indulgently. "Go on and do what you need to do."

"Okay!" Carissa replied, turning to leave. Her steps, once so lively in Meadow Ridge, now seemed subdued.

Watching her retreating figure, Kyle thought of how carefree Carissa had been in Meadow Ridge. It seemed those days were behind her, and he couldn't help but sigh.

Carissa couldn't help but laugh when she heard Leona was here to apologize, and she didn't continue that line of topic.

However, she noticed Leona's deep frown and couldn't help but ask, "Is your husband treating you poorly? Leona paused for a moment before forcing a smile. "He treats me well, Cari. Please don't worry." "You've lost quite a bit of weight," Carissa remarked.

"It's cold, and I don't have much of an appetite," Leona replied with a smile. "Isn't it better to be a bit slimmer? My husband says I look better this way, with a waist so slender that it's barely more than a clasp. It makes people feel enchanted and mesmerized."

Carissa frowned. Was Leona trying to emulate the delicate ladies from romance novels?

Yet, she kept her thoughts to herself.

After chatting idly for a while and sharing a cup of coffee, Leona grew anxious to leave. She explained that her mother-in-law was unwell, and she needed to return to attend to her..

Chapter 309

As Carissa escorted Leona to the door, she couldn't help but say, "Don't always sacrifice yourself and try to please others. It doesn't necessarily mean they'll value you more." Leona looked at Carissa, then shook her head and said firmly, "That's not true, Cari. People's hearts are made from flesh, not stone. I can always warm theirs."

With that, she was helped into the carriage by her maid.

Watching Leona's departing figure, Carissa felt an inexplicable chill. It was as if an ominous premonition had settled over her.

Returning inside, Carissa still felt cold and asked Lulu to bring her a hot water bottle.

Lily noticed this, and asked, "My lady, are you feeling unwell?"

"No, I just suddenly feel very cold," Carissa replied.

Lily was puzzled since Carissa was wearing a fur cloak, and there was a fire going in the room. How could she be cold?

After feeling Carissa's forehead and finding it unusually cool, Lily summoned Rowan from Ryan's quarters to check her.

Carissa said it wasn't necessary, but Lily insisted

Carrying his medical kit, Rowan came over and checked on her.

Smiling, he reassured, "Don't worry, my lady. You're in good health. The bruising from the battle is nearly healed. Continue taking the supplements to help with your blood circulation." 'She says she feels cold,' Lily said anxiously.

"It's probably because she was outside in the wind. Don't worry, Lady Sinclair is a trained fighter and has a stronger constitution than most people," Rowan comforted.

Lily nodded, though she was still concerned. Despite knowing that Carissa's constitution was better than most, she was surprised that Carissa felt cold when even she, an old woman, didn't. The room was heated, but Carissa still needed a hot water bottle. It was indeed worrying.

"Thank you, Rowan," Lily said,

Rowan smiled, and shook his head. "I was just finishing up with Lord Ryan's acupuncture. I'll be heading back now."

Carissa called out to him, "Rowan, I know that Sebastian has sent someone to check on my aunt's condition. How is she doing?"

Previously, she had inquired with Sebastian, who assured her that everything was fine. However, if everything was indeed fine, why had Carissa not received even a letter from Avis? She had sent two Jettlers already.

As Rowan was packing up his things, he lowered his head and said, "I'm not sure about that. It was Ivy who went. I only heard from my mentor that Lady Avis's illness requires a gradual recovery and won't be

resolved in just one or two months. According to Ivy, Lady Avis has now gone to Verdant Monastery to recuperate.

Carissa was momentarily taken aback. "Why go to a monastery for recovery? Can't the people in Prince Yuvan's estate take care of her?"

"It was Lady Avis's own choice. She said that the monastery is peaceful, and she can feel the Lord's grace there. Since the sacrifice of your father and brothers, she has been a vegetarian and praying for everything to go smoothly. She believed the massacre of the Duke of Northwatch's family happened due to her insincerity in her prayers. So, she specifically moved to Verdant Monastery."

Carissa knew that Avis had always been devoted to religion. When her engagement was announced, Avis had come to the capital to accompany Melanie and also to recuperate.

Avis had been the one to recommend Barrett, and it was because she had some connections with Rebecca. When Avis was in the capital, they had socialized frequently, and so she knew both branches of the Warren family fairly well. Though Rebecca was in poor health, she was reasonable and easy to get along with.

On the surface, it was indeed so.

Avis had a soft heart, and wasn't skilled in scheming. Otherwise, the situation in Yuvan's estate wouldn't have been so chaotic, with a secondary concubine in charge and the princess consort abandoned by

Yuvan.

In other words, Avis was somewhat naive. Such a person, after marrying into a prominent family, often ended up suffering. That was why Avis had recommended Barrett to Melanie, to avoid such troubles for Carissa.

But why go to Verdant Monastery? It was far from Yuvan's fief. If something happened, how would Yuvan be informed?

Carissa resolved that she would visit Verdant Monastery after her wedding.

Not seeing Avis with her own eyes made her uneasy.

Chapter 310

After Rowan returned to the physician's office, he reported to Sebastian about Carissa's Inquiry regarding Avis.

Sebastian glanced at him, and asked sternly, "You didn't say anything inappropriate, did you?"

Rowan replied, "I would never do that. I only mentioned that Lady Avis has gone to Verdant Monastery for her recovery."

Sebastian sighed. "We should keep this under wraps for now. Let's address it after the wedding. If she learns of it now, she'll certainly go there herself."

Rowan nodded. "I think the same. With the wedding so close and yesterday's art exhibition drawing even the king, no one in the capital will dare to speak ill of her. If we stir up trouble with Prince Yuvan at this critical moment, it will only lead to endless disputes

"Exactly. She's already facing criticism and jealousy for her second marriage and high status. Yesterday's art exhibition silenced those gossips. If the wedding proceeds smoothly and she hears only good things, then life will be easier afterward."

Rowan chuckled. "Are you becoming superstitious?"

Sebastian shot him a disapproving look, "What do you know? We physicians have to study more than just. medicine. We also have to learn some divination and astrology. Some things just can't be explained. The Duke of Northwatch's family has suffered so much. It feels like the heavens are targeting them for punishment. Hearing more good things and causing less trouble will help them get through this wedding smoothly. That's all I want."

"Yes, sir!" Rowan admitted he was only skilled in medicine and not in divination like Ivy.

Sebastian sat in the inner hall, his apprentice serving him coffee which he didn't drink. Instead, he stared blankly at the liquid in his cup.

He had never married, and had no children. Apart from Hector, he had no close friends. He saw Hector's children as his own, and the suffering they had endured weighed heavily on him. Carissa had lost her parents, and he had to consider her future carefully. Avis cared deeply for Carissa, but how could she protect Carissa while having her own predicament?

And then there was the Sullivan family, stationed at Victory Pass, guarding the frontier. As military generals, they couldn't easily return to the capital. Even if Dominic wished to protect his granddaughter, his strength was limited.

Also, the Sullivan family had suffered greatly. The eldest son had passed away early, the third son had lost an arm, and the seventh son died in the battle at Victory Pass. The Sullivan family had endured much hardship.

Sebastian knew that Dominic had petitioned the king, hoping the king would be more considerate of Carissa. Salvador had indeed been kind to Carissa, but...

Sebastian sighed, troubled by what he saw and worried about what might come. All he hoped now was that his concerns would not come to pass. It would be best if Carissa lived in peace with Rafael.

On the fifteenth of December, a heavy snow fell.

Carissa had initially looked forward to the snow, hoping to play in it with Ryan. But now, with the fifteenth day of December upon them and the wedding only nine days away, she guessed that her master and Winona would be arriving around this time.

Though the journey wasn't exceptionally long, the heavy snowfall made travel difficult by horse. They would have to stay at an inn until the snow cleared.

Carissa felt a mix of anticipation and anxiety, worried that she might not be able to control her emotions upon seeing her master and guild senior. It had been such a long time since she had seen them, and she missed them terribly.

When her life had been less than ideal, she didn't want to go back or let them know of her struggles. In the past, it always felt like she was shrouded in darkness, like there was a wall blocking her path. Now, having found Ryan, she felt a glimmer of light seeping through that wall.

The future, at least with Ryan by her side, seemed brighter. As for Rafael, while he had someone he cared for, she hoped they could still maintain mutual respect and courtesy.

This new life was so much better than before.

