

War Song 311

Chapter 311

Snow had fallen for two days, not continuously but intermittently. The grounds were covered in a thick layer of snow, though the servants had cleared paths that made walking possible.

The orchids were in full bloom, but buried beneath the snow. With a kick, the snow would scatter, and the flowers would flutter down along with it.

Amid the sea of white, with purple petals drifting down, Carissa and Ryan had built a snowman. Ryan enthusiastically found two pebbles to use as the snowman's eyes, giving it a quirky, adorable appearance. Carissa draped a cloak over the snowman, and added a hat. From a distance, it looked remarkably lifelike.

Not far away, Kyle had set up his easel and had been painting for some time. It had been a while since he had seen Carissa so lively, and this painting would eventually be sent back to their guild.

By the twentieth day of December, with the wedding imminent, Carissa found herself overwhelmed with preparations.

The wedding gown had arrived; after months of painstaking work, it was as splendid as one could imagine.

The outer garment was sky blue, looking heavy but feeling surprisingly light and smooth when worn. The wedding gown featured intricate gold embroidery of cloud patterns, a traditional design reserved for women of the highest rank.

The ceremonial shawl was a blend of turquoise and gold, with woven dove motifs in shimmering gold. The phoenix crown matched this color scheme, adorned with over a dozen blue and silver gemstones. At the back of the crown, delicate fan-shaped accents in pale cyan and yellow added a touch of elegance, curving gracefully and enhancing the overall beauty of the ensemble.

Given that it was a winter wedding, a fine piece of leather and fox fur had been used to create a white cloak. The outer layer was covered with cloud satin, and before it was sewn, intricate patterns were

embroidered on it.

It was decorated with large peonies stitched in gold thread, symbolizing prosperity and wealth. Sincer weddings were a rare occasion to break traditional norms or use symbols and elements that are usually reserved for higher statuses or occasions, both griffin and phoenix motifs could be used. So, alongside the peonies, phoenix patterns were also embroidered.

When Carissa donned the outfit, everyone was so awestruck that they hardly blinked.

Lulu sat Carissa down in front of the dressing table to apply her makeup. After Lulu finished, everyone's eyes finally moved again.

What had Lulu done? Carissa looked more beautiful without makeup. With it, she appeared at least three years older.

Carissa usually did not wear makeup and was naturally elegant, with a complexion as smooth as silk. With such a complexion, she hardly needed any powder or rouge!

Holly patted Lulu's hand. "Alright, that's enough. Go attend to your tasks and stop causing trouble here. What kind of bride's makeup is done like this? Her face looks so pale."

Lulu giggled. "My lady usually doesn't wear makeup. If she does, she applies it herself. I haven't learned that skill."

"Lady Sinclair took you to Meadow Ridge and spoiled you," Holly said, dipping a cloth in hot water and using it to remove the makeup from Carissa's face.

Natural beauty was always best, though a bride did need makeup on her wedding day. Holly had already invited a skilled staff member from Elegance Atelier to apply the bridal makeup. Lily admired the embroidery on the wedding gown, and could not stop praising it. "It makes sense that it's so expensive. I could never embroider such exquisite patterns and designs!" Carissa looked at herself in the mirror, feeling a bit dazed.

When she married Barrett, Melanie had arranged for an experienced woman to do her hair. Then, Melanie had held her hand in the room and gave her many instructions. Melanie reminded her how to interact with her husband, how to respect her in-laws, and how to treat her younger siblings and relatives.

In the year she lived at Valor Estate, Carissa had followed her mother's advice. Carissa knew that one shouldn't be overly indulgent, but she had adhered to her mother's teachings nonetheless, especially after the Duke of Northwatch's family had been wiped out.

With no home left, she had completely embraced the Warren family as her own. She had followed her mother's words to the letter, feeling that this was the only way to show her devotion and bring peace to her mother's spirit in the afterlife.

In the blink of an eye, she had divorced and remarried.

Looking at herself in the wedding gown in the mirror, it felt as if no time had passed. It was as if, any moment now, a maid would come in to assist her mother, who would take her hand and offer her last-minute advice.

Her eyes instantly filled with tears. She quickly stood up, went to the inner chamber, and changed back into her regular

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With only four days left until the wedding, Carissa was growing increasingly anxious as her master and the others hadn't yet arrived.

She went to ask Kyle, "Has Master sent any pigeon post? When will they get here?"

Kyle was busy carving something with a chisel, and only seemed to remember when she asked.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Master did send a pigeon saying that they won't be coming to your wedding. He said that once you have time, you should bring Prince Rafael to visit them at Meadow Ridge." "They're not coming?" Carissa was deeply disappointed. "But didn't they say they would?"

Kyle chuckled, "You know, Master doesn't like to move around much these days. He prefers to lie down when he can, sit when he can't lie, and stand only when absolutely necessary. Especially in this cold weather, he's even lazier. So, he decided not to come. Instead, you'll have to visit them when you have the chance"

"But if Master isn't coming, what about the other guild seniors? They could come, couldn't they?"

Kyle shook his head. "If Master isn't coming, they won't be coming either. You haven't visited Meadow Ridge since you left at fifteen, and you haven't kept in touch. It's no surprise that the bonds have weakened. It's already good enough that they still remember you as their guild junior. But as for traveling hundreds of miles to attend your wedding... I doubt they're invested enough to go that far now."

"Our bonds have weakened?" Carissa was deeply hurt. Is that what they really think?"

Kyle continued carving the seal he had promised Ryan. He and Ryan were quite close.

"It's not surprising. You haven't shared anything with Master over the years. Whenever you faced difficulties or felt wronged, you never went back. Naturally, they think you don't need them." Carissa felt a profound sense of loss, but she also realized that Kyle was right. She hadn't kept in touch, and she had only sent a pigeon to her master and involved Kyle and Winona when she was in urgent need of help.

However, Violet hadn't arrived either. She had sent a letter earlier, saying that she would come with the others. Could it be that since Carissa's master wasn't coming, their master forbade them from attending? Carissa suddenly felt that this wedding was not as exciting as she had hoped.

She sat beside Kyle as she sniffed. "I'm glad you're here. Otherwise, it would only be Ryan seeing me off."

Kyle turned his head to look at her, his warm eyes glinting with amusement. "I'm not sure about that. Master instructed me to handle some matters, so I might have to leave in a couple of days."

"What?" Carissa jumped to her feet. "Can't you wait a few more days? What's so urgent that you have to leave right away?"

She was genuinely upset. First, her master and the other guild members had said they would come, but then decided not to. Now, even Kyle said he might leave soon.

Frederick had mentioned that they would hold a grand wedding feast at Northwatch Estate. What was the point of such a grand affair if no one was coming? They could just have a few tables and Invite

Theodore's side of the family for a simple meal.

Carissa sat down feeling aggrieved, though she knew her feelings were not entirely justified. She realized she hadn't been very considerate, and it was no wonder that others didn't treat her like family. She had once believed that the affection of her guild would remain constant, but she learned that any emotion, if neglected, would change.

Yet, looking back, when she had asked the guild to investigate the situation at Victory Pass, Kyle and Winona had responded immediately. Moreover, Kyle had brought so many paintings as favors, making sure that both civil and military officials, even the king, acknowledged her.

In reality, everyone had done so much for her already, and she couldn't ask for more. After the wedding, she would visit Meadow Ridge with Rafael. She would apologize to her master, and also make amends with her guild seniors to mend their relationship.

Seeing her dejected, Kyle's eyes softened with sympathy. "Feeling down?"

"A bit, but I do understand that it's my fault. I'll find a way to seek Master's forgiveness," Carissa said, her voice tinged with sadness.

"Okay," Kyle said with a smile, and he didn't add anything further.

Kyle thought their master was being quite harsh. If their master were here in person, he surely wouldn't have the heart to scare her like this.

Instead, it fell onto Kyle to play the role of a villain.

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On the twenty-second day of December, Kyle indeed left.

Carissa held onto his sleeve as she saw him to the door. The biting cold wind whipped around them, and the overcast sky suggested that snow was once again imminent.

Carissa sighed inwardly.

Even Kyle was leaving. She could only hope for clear weather on her wedding day. If it didn't snow, at least the bridal carriage would have an easier time moving. She had no other extravagant wishes.

Kyle smiled and said, "I've ordered some jewelry for you at the Gilded Tower. Send someone to collect it. The payment has already been made, and the receipt is with Frederick."

"I'll have Frederick go over later," Carissa replied, watching as the stable hand brought out Kyle's horse. She couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness. "You're really in a hurry to leave? Can't you stay a couple more days?"

"No, it's urgent," Kyle said, gently rubbing her forehead. "We'll see each other soon enough. Aren't you planning to go back to Meadow Ridge?"

"Yeah!" Carissa nodded, and added, "Then be careful on the road."

"I got it. No need to see me off. Go back inside," Kyle said as he took the reins, mounted his horse, and waved at her. "Go on back."

Carissa shook her head. "I'm going to see you off."

Without further ado, Kyle spurred his horse and rode away.

Carissa stood at the gate, watching Kyle leave, her heart heavy with unspoken disappointment.

How had everything they planned so carefully fallen through?

Her mood sank to a new low.

After returning to the house and sitting for a while, she asked Frederick for the receipt from the Gilded Tower and set out with Lulu to collect the jewelry Kyle had ordered for her.

The Gilded Tower was quite large, with two connected storefronts and both a ground floor and an upper floor. The name of the store was simply "Gilded Tower."

They sold not only gold jewelry, but also other types of precious gems and ornaments. The designs were decent, though they couldn't quite compare to those of the Golden Tower.

The Gilded Tower had been open for only a few years, and seemed to be trying to capitalize on the Golden Tower's reputation. However, their backers appeared to be substantial, and their business was doing well.

Carissa handed the receipt to the manager on the first floor. The shopkeeper ordered someone to serve refreshments and asked her to sit for a while he personally went to retrieve the item

The shopkeeper, who looked as thin as a monkey, moved quickly. In no time, he returned with a box and handed it to Carissa.

"Please inspect it, my lady," he said.

Carissa opened the box and found a large gold bracelet inside. It was the kind of flashy, garish gold bracelet that looked almost tasteless.

Kyle had a refined taste, so she had high expectations for his gift.

But this...

The only redeeming feature was that it was indeed quite large and heavy. When worn on the wrist, it gleamed with a golden brilliance. It looked completely like something a nouveau riche would wear.

The shopkeeper's elaborate reception was likely due to the bracelet's size and weight. Carissa felt a pang of disappointment, but she reminded herself that it was the thought that mattered.

She tried on the bracelet briefly before quickly removing it and placing it back in the box. The Gilded Tower was quite crowded, and she didn't want to be seen by too many people.

As she handed the box to Lulu, she happened to run into Evelyn.

"Good day, Madam Prince," Carissa greeted respectfully.

"Lady Sinclair," Evelyn responded with a faint smile. "With your wedding approaching, why are you still out and about?"

"I'm just picking up something." Carissa replied.

Evelyn stepped closer, and said softly, "Lady Sinclair, could we have a word in private?"

Noting the gentle and almost pleading expression on Evelyn's face, Carissa agreed.

"Certainly. There's a coffeehouse next door. Let's go there."

They requested a private room at the coffeehouse, leaving Lulu and Evelyn's maid outside.

Once seated, Evelyn spoke first. "I haven't had a chance to congratulate you yet. I wish you and His Highness a lifetime of happiness and many children."

"Thank you," Carissa responded graciously. "And congratulations on your daughter's marriage to General Warren. I pray it goes smoothly."

Evelyn smiled bitterly. "Thank you. When I visited Northwatch Estate with my daughter that day, it was truly out of necessity."

Carissa reassured her, "There's no need to be so formal, Madam Prince."

Evelyn nodded. "I understand. Lady Sinclair, you concealed some of the truth that day. In fact, we knew that before you left the Warren family, they had intended to claim half of your dowry."

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Carissa had not been entirely clear when she spoke that day, primarily because it seemed that Viola was quite happy with her match with Barrett.

If she had outright said that Barrett was also interested in her dowry, it would only have led to Viola's resentment and suspicion, making her think that Carissa was intentionally slandering him.

"But my daughter is foolish," Evelyn continued. "When Mrs. Murray came and asked her about this match, Viola agreed without a second thought. It was a marriage we couldn't refuse, and I suspect you understand the reasons behind it."

Carissa nodded. "I have a general idea."

The crux of the matter was Oliver taking over the Hell Monarch. The king's wish was for Barrett to marry into the Prince family, as this alliance would allow Oliver to promote Barrett. If the Earl of Silverstone's family objected, it was likely that the Hell Monarch Army would change its general.

Given that the Earl of Silverstone's family and reputation were already on the decline, they could not afford to miss such an opportunity.

"You didn't say a single bad word about Barrett that day, and Viola believes you didn't tarnish Barrett's reputation. Because of that, she doesn't hold a grudge against you for it."

At first glance, this logic seemed flawed, but Carissa understood the implication.

That day, Carissa had not pondered deeply-she had merely observed Viola's words and realized that Viola was interested in Barrett. Regardless of whether Barrett had schemed to keep Carissa's dowry, Viola was set on marrying him.

Thus, when Viola and Evelyn came to see her that day, their real intent was not to gauge Barrett's character but to assess Carissa's feelings towards him-whether there was animosity or affection. If there was hatred, Carissa might have slandered him. If there was affection, she would naturally be adversarial.

Since Carissa had neither, Viola felt reassured.

It was because Carissa had understood Viola's true intentions that she chose to reveal only part of the

truth.

Evelyn continued, "The Warren family had originally planned for Barrett to divorce you unilaterally in order to claim your entire dowry, Barrett disagreed, insisting that he didn't want a single penny of it. However, when Aurora sent a letter asking him to withhold half of the dowry, he changed his stance. You didn't mention this part of the story that day, which made Viola feel much better." Carissa thought that it seemed Amelia truly couldn't control things in Valor Estate. The servants'

gossip was so extensive that even the inner court's private matters were easily uncovered and detailed. Carissa smiled slightly. "I see."

She had little to say to Evelyn, and was unsure why she was revealing these things now.

Seeing that Carissa remained silent, Evelyn was quiet for a moment before speaking softly, "If Viola ever offends you in the future, I hope you can forgive her."

That was the crux of the matter.

"I don't quite understand. Could you please clarify, Madam Prince?" Carissa asked.

Evelyn's expression became awkward. "It's the young lady from the Warren family. She visited our residence a few days ago and said something in front of Viola. It's somewhat difficult to speak of, but... Well, she suggested that you're still pining for Barrett. She implied that the divorce was likely something you had to do, hoping he would try to persuade you to stay. Little did you know, he didn't try to keep you. That's probably the gist of it."

Carissa took a sip of coffee, her expression unchanged. "Are you talking about Serena? And Ms. Prince believed this?"

"I told her not to believe it, but she did. She thinks..." Evelyn hesitated, clearly uncomfortable, and struggled to articulate her thoughts. Carissa set down her cup, and raised an eyebrow slightly as she spoke for the older woman.

"She thinks that a general as mighty and handsome as Barrett must be loved by every woman, especially since I was once his wife. It's only natural for a wife to deeply love her husband, and it would be inconceivable for me to forget him so quickly. Moreover, we once fought on the battlefield together. But since the Hell Monarch has a prestigious status, I'm marrying him so that Barrett would regret his decision. Is that what she believes?"

Evelyn was stunned, her eyes wide as she murmured, "Did you overhear her speaking in our residence? How is it that your explanation is almost identical to what she said?"

Carissa looked at her calmly. "Madam Prince, please inform Ms. Prince that since I never loved him, there is nothing to forget. Goodbye!"

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After leaving the coffeehouse, Carissa was both angry and amused.

What was wrong with Viola? How could she believe Serena's words?

Carissa understood well enough why Serena had concocted such a story. She knew what had happened at Helen's tea party, and was aware of the details.

Serena had her sights set on Rafael and wanted to become his concubine. By spreading these rumors, Serena hoped to create trouble. If Viola believed the rumors and caused a scene, Rafael might ignore or even disdain Carissa if he heard what Serena had said.

Carissa was certain that Serena thought this way. Viola's nature, to put it kindly, was straightforward. In other words, Viola was rash and easily influenced. It seemed that finding someone to truly manage the Warren family household was no simple task. Given Viola and Aurora's personalities, their future interactions were likely to be tumultuous.

Carissa had initially chosen to meet with Viola and speak candidly to avoid further animosity and misunderstandings. However, once she discerned Viola's true feelings, she decided not to reveal everything. If Viola chose to believe Serena's claims, so be it. As long as it did not cause her direct trouble, Carissa was willing to let it go.

In the carriage ride home, Lulu was visibly agitated. She had overheard the conversation through the door, and was fuming.

"Does everyone from the Warren family have something wrong with their head? You've divorced and left them for so long, yet they're still trying to interfere in your life. We have completely severed ties with them! Serena's malicious intentions are obvious-she wants to marry Prince Rafael as a concubine," Lulu fumed, her face cold with anger.

Carissa tapped Lulu's nose lightly. "I'm not upset, so why should you be? It's not worth getting

over,"

worked up

"How can you not be angry? You're usually the one who gets angry the most," Lulu replied, looking distressed. "Back in Meadow Ridge, you'd go straight to their door if anyone offended you, even if it was just gossiping."

When Lulu mentioned Meadow Ridge, Carissa's mood darkened further.

Her master wasn't coming, and neither were the others.

Carissa sighed deeply, her brows furrowed in frustration.

Things were so carefree back then. We had protection and support from others. Now, even my master has turned his back on me. I've been so willful-how can I continue like this? Should I even bother with Ryan anymore?"

Lulu understood that her mistress was upset about the situation, and refrained from saying more. She opened the box, and presented it.

"Here, this is Mr. Spencer's wedding gift. Take a look. It's heavy, uh, precious. But most importantly, it's the thought that counts."

Lulu sighed as she closed the box. The bracelet was indeed heavy, but it was also rather old-fashioned. The style seemed too heavy for an elderly lady and too gaudy for a young woman.

Why couldn't Kyle choose something more stylish and current? At least it would show he put thought into selecting the gift. If he had done that, Carissa would have felt much better, even if he couldn't attend the wedding.

Seeing the gold bracelet made Carissa want to cry.

"Never mind. Kyle gave me so many paintings, and he also added all the money from selling them to my dowry. Money is the best. It's practical and useful," Carissa said, trying to comfort herself.

Lulu nodded vigorously. "You're right! Nothing is more practical than money. Precious jewelry is lovely, but money is far more useful."

She took out her own purse, and began counting. "I haven't spent my monthly wages for the past few months. I'll save them in a small cabinet. By mid-next year, I can exchange them for silver ingots." Lulu smiled cheerfully as she finished talking.

Carissa chuckled and teased, "You little money-grubber."

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Preparations for the banquet had already begun at Northwatch Estate. Since there weren't enough servants in the household, Theodore called some of the younger members of the family to come and help. They brought along some of the family's servants as well.

In noble families, when marrying off a daughter, it wasn't customary to host the banquet on the same day as the wedding. Typically, a feast would be held the day before, inviting members of the extended family. Afterward, a three-day-long banquet would be held, allowing the townspeople to partake in the joy and festivities.

However, since this was Carissa's second marriage, she didn't bother inviting a local fortune teller to style her hair. Instead, she decided that one of the ladies from Elegance Ateller would handle it on the day. Perhaps it was because her master and the others weren't attending that Carissa seemed indifferent to the pre-wedding rituals.

It wasn't that she didn't care about marrying Rafael. She was determined to fulfill her duties as a proper wife after the wedding. She would take charge of the household affairs, and wouldn't let anything distract Rafael from his work.

But no matter how good the man she was marrying might be, the absence of her family left her feeling joyless. Naturally, she didn't feel the same reluctance as when she married Barrett—there were no tears, no pangs of sorrow at leaving her family behind.

Seeing Carissa so downcast before her wedding, Lulu felt uneasy as well.

She turned to Lily and said, "Lily, what do you think about arranging for a little entertainment? Hell Monarch Estate has a theater. We could book a few performances from the local theater troupe, or perhaps even a private show. It might help lift her spirits."

Lily thought for a moment and replied, "At such short notice, I'm not sure if we can get one, but you can ask Mr. Carter to try."

Lulu went to find Frederick and explained the request for a theater troupe.

Frederick said, "I already went to invite the Harmony Troupe today, but they've been booked by the Silverstone Estate."

Harmony Troupe was the best theater troupe in the capital, especially renowned for their performance called Twilight Serenade.

"If we can't get the Harmony Troupe, can we invite another one? After all, the Sinclair family has sent so many people to help us. It would be nice for them to have some entertainment during their downtime." Frederick nodded. "Alright, I'll send someone to invite another troupe. There's one called the Mirthful Fish Troupe that's quite good as well."

"Mirthful Fish Troupe? The name sounds a bit odd."

"Who cares if they have a strange name? It's fine as long as they put on a good show." Frederick paused. Although, I've heard that the Mirthful Fish Troupe's performances are quite...unconventional. Many say they've never seen anything like it."

"Really? Well, just have them perform something cheerful. We are celebrating, after all. Go ahead and invite them, then let Lady Sinclair choose the songs."

"Alright then, the wedding procession is scheduled for tomorrow evening. Let's focus on keeping Lady Sinclair happy today and tomorrow. Even if she isn't happy, at least she'll be distracted and won't dwell on the fact that her master isn't coming." Frederick said.

Lulu agreed. "You'd best head out and make the arrangements. With the year-end festivities approaching, I worry that the troupes might already be booked for other banquets."

"Alright, I'll head out now. You should stay with Lady Sinclair," Frederick said, then gathered his guards

and headed out..

The buffet-style banquet preparations were already in full swing outside, and Frederick was stretched thin with the responsibilities. If it weren't for Carissa's happiness, he wouldn't have bothered to go out of his way to find a theater troupe.

Thankfully, Theodore had mobilized the Sinclair family, and many willing members had come to help. This display of support left Frederick both relieved and deeply grateful.

Fortunately, the Mirthful Fish Troupe hadn't received any other bookings yet, so Frederick was able to secure their services without much difficulty.

No matter how grand or modest the wedding feast might be, the atmosphere in Hell Monarch Estate needed to be lively enough to match its status.

Upon Frederick's return with the troupe, the women of the family immediately pulled Carissa along to watch the performance.

Since the wedding was scheduled for tomorrow, today was the day they would traditionally move the dowry to the groom's house. The favorable time chosen by the fortune teller was in the evening, but it wasn't suitable to transport the dowry at night. So, it was decided that the dowry would be moved early tomorrow morning before the wedding ceremony.

It was said that the Silverstone Estate was handling it the same way, planning to move the dowry on the wedding day itself. The dowry was substantial, including everything that had been retrieved from the Farrell family. Now, all of it would be sent to Valor Estate. The Earl of Silverstone's family had also added even more to the collection.

This wasn't just about showcasing Viola's status; it was also meant to bring honor to the Warren family.

Frederick checked the dowry, making sure everything was in place. Everything was arranged neatly, giving him peace of mind.

Over the past few days, Rafael hadn't visited at all, likely because the wedding was so near, and it wasn't appropriate for them to meet.

However, Hell Monarch Estate was abuzz with activity. In addition to the continuous banquets, they had set up a stall to distribute bread to the poor, which would run for three months.

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Carissa accompanied her relatives and friends to watch the theater troupe.

Ryan wanted to go, too. Back when he was a beggar, he used to sneak into the theater to beg for food. Sometimes, he would get so engrossed in the performance that he would be caught and beaten before being thrown out.

way. His difficult t past

This time, he was able to sit in a proper seat, without any fear of being chased away. made him cherish everything he had now,

As the music and drums of the performance began, the festive atmosphere grew, and Carissa could feel the joy of the celebration. Her mood lightened a little.

After all, one had to move forward in life step by step, no matter what.

At least she still had Ryan by her side.

Carissa glanced at the program. She'd never been particularly interested in theater performances, so she didn't know much about it. She decided to let Solomon's wife, Emily, choose the performance instead. They enjoyed theater performances, and knew which performances were best suited for a joyous occasion like this.

Emily selected a performance called A Happy Union. Whether it was an entertaining performance or not was beside the point-it was certainly fitting for the occasion.

The story was about a general who fell in love with the daughter of a high-ranking official. Their marriage was arranged by their parents and a matchmaker, which led to a mutual love, so they got married. Shortly after their wedding, the general was sent off to war, where he remained for three years. During that time, his wife managed the household and cared for his parents, enduring many hardships. Meanwhile, the general faced numerous life-and-death situations on the battlefield.

In the end, the general returned victorious and was granted a marquis title. On the day of his ennoblement, he hosted a banquet. He held his wife's hand with tears in his eyes, and he shared with

everyone how hard she had worked and how grateful he was. He declared that marrying her was the greatest blessing of his life.

The performance concluded with a happy ending, as expected.

Halfway through the performance, Emily realized she had made a mistake in choosing this particular performance, but it was too late to stop it. She could only watch the rest of it with a growing sense of unease, frequently glancing at Carissa, worried that the performance might upset her.

Everyone watched the performance in silence, and when the actors came out for their final bows, it was Carissa who led the applause and offering praises, prompting the others to follow suit. Emily leaned over to Carissa, and whispered, "I hadn't seen this performance before. I didn't know it would be like this. Please don't take it to heart, and don't be upset with your aunt." Carissa smiled and said, "Aunt Emily, the performance was quite good, and it had a happy ending."

Seeing that Carissa genuinely wasn't upset, Emily felt more at ease. "Yes, that's how it should be. Any man with a conscience would appreciate his wife's hardships. But there are some who lack that conscience...

Well, for those without it, they aren't worth thinking about. From now on, may every day be a good one for

you.

Everyone joined in, offering their well-wishes and hoping to spread some good fortune.

After the performance, no one was in the mood to watch more, so they all decided to go and take a look at the dowry instead.

The Sinclair family had added quite a bit to the dowry. Although it was mostly made up of silk, furniture, and other such items, the sheer number of chests being delivered to Hell Monarch Estate would certainly be impressive. There were also plenty of gold and silver jewelry-elegant gold bracelets and rings, much more refined than the heavy gold bracelet that Kyle had given her.

Carissa felt no trace of anger anymore. She understood that she had been at fault in the first place. Kyle and Winona had already helped her so much. If she continued to hold a grudge, it would show a lack of maturity and an insatiable heart.

Her earlier discontent stemmed from being pampered at Meadow Ridge. She had assumed that, aside from Everett, everyone in the guild would spoil her forever.

But who was to blame for her failure to nurture those relationships properly?

Meanwhile, Hell Monarch Estate was abuzz with grand festivities. The celebration was nothing short of extravagant. They had begun the feasting the day before, and all invited guests could partake in the banquet for three days..

Rafael was feeling an indescribable sense of urgency.

Every moment seemed to crawl by. It was so slow-painfully slow. From morning to noon felt like a year had passed, and from noon to evening, another year seemed to drag on.

His mind was constantly occupied with finding an excuse to visit Northwatch Estate. It had been many days since he last saw Carissa, and he was desperate to see her again.

But the Royal Astronomer, who had been summoned by the Protocol Department's minister to oversee the ceremony, had declared that it was bad luck for the couple to meet in the days leading up to the wedding.

So, Rafael couldn't find

a valid reason to leave.

On the surface, he appeared calm. But inside, it felt like a thousand ants were gnawing at him, pushing him towards Northwatch Estate.

As night fell, he finally stepped out of Hell Monarch Estate, only to be stopped in his tracks by Jacob.

Jacob's face remained expressionless as he issued an order to the guards.

"Escort His Highness back to entertain the guests. He is not to leave the estate until tomorrow evening. when the wedding procession begins. If he leaves before then, all the guards will have their salaries docked for three months."

With Jacob's command, the guards all turned their hawk-like eyes to Rafael, forcing him to step back. Slowly, Rafael retreated, getting increasingly further from the entrance. Rafael rolled his eyes. "What are you all trying to do? I just had a bit too much to drink while entertaining the guests. I wanted to go out and get some fresh air to sober up." Jacob gave another order. "Bring a bucket of hangover remedy for the princel"

A whole bucket...?!

Rafael glared at Jacob furiously, but Jacob remained unmoved, his heart as hard as a stone. Even if Rafael looked at him like he wanted to gouge his eyes out, it didn't faze Jacob.

Luke, who had been running around non-stop, came jogging over. Despite the cold weather, he was sweating from all the work and used a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"Your Highness, can't you just give everyone a break? Who goes running to the bride's house the day before the wedding? People would laugh at you if they heard about it!"

"Fine, whatever. Stop nagging." Rafael waved him off irritably. "I'll go back and have a few more drinks with Davis. That old guy's been here for two meals already, and while everyone else has left, he's still drinking."

"Hey, you can't say that! Keep your voice down. Mr. Lloyd came as a sign of respect," Luke whispered.

He wished he could somehow seal Rafael's mouth shut. These past few days, the usually composed prince had been saying things that were bound to offend someone. Rafael shot him a stern look from his lofty height before striding back inside to entertain the guests.

Meanwhile, Helen was busy hosting the women. With her son getting married, she was reveling in the attention, changing outfits five or six times a day and swapping out her jewelry sets just as frequently.

In the palace, no matter how much she flaunted, there were only the other noble concubines looking at her. Or perhaps when visiting Victoria, Helen might show off a bit when the more junior concubines came to pay their respects to the queen dowager.

But outside the palace, it was a different story altogether.

There were so many noblewomen, so many matriarchs of prestigious families, and the wives of countless officials. Over the past two days of hosting banquets, Helen had barely managed to recognize a third of them.

Seeing all these women bowing their heads humbly in her presence greatly satisfied Helen's vanity. With the new daughter-in-law yet to enter the household, Helen was already planning to host more banquets after the wedding to establish her authority as the mother-in-law.

Eleanor was always hosting banquets, wasn't she?

Helen thought she should learn from Eleanor. After the wedding, she planned to visit the makeup shop. She wanted to figure out why the business had been doing so poorly for so long and why it constantly needed more funds.

Eleanor and Jessica didn't attend the banquet. They were probably waiting until the wedding day to make their appearance. Trevor and Jeremiah's family hadn't come either, likely saving their arrival for the main

event tomorrow.

After showing off with several outfit changes, Helen decided she had done enough for the day and headed to the newlywed's suite for a quick inspection

The suite was set up in Orchid Hall, where everything was themed around orchids-a flower Helen didn't particularly like.

She had even suggested changing the name, but her son was adamant about keeping it. He said that while other matters were negotiable, this name was not.

At least the orchids, which had been transplanted two or three times, hadn't blossomed yet, which was a small comfort to her.

However, the newlywed's residence still didn't make her happy.

It was quite large, as it combined two courtyards, with a spacious yard and big buildings.

Since there were two courtyards, there were naturally two main buildings. One was located on the east side, while the other was on the west side. The eastern side was the living quarters, while the western side housed the study and storage rooms.

The expansive courtyard was connected throughout, and they had even built a few additional rooms to the north, supposedly for the servants who would attend to the couple.

What a joke!

Who ever heard of servants living in the same courtyard as the lord and lady of the household? It was one thing for the maids, since they had to stay nearby to be on duty at night, but if the male attendants and servants were to live here too, it would be laughable.

Helena hadn't seen her son treat the household servants this generously before. Could it be that he was preparing accommodations for Carissa's maids and servants?

It seemed he was really serious about Carissa. Had he forgotten the woman he was once infatuated with? So much for his previous declarations of undying love.

He claimed he would never marry anyone else if he couldn't have her.

So what was this now?

Chapter 319

Thinking about all of this, Helen felt a mix of emotions.

When Rafael was on the battlefield before this, he would refuse any mention of marriage. The resoluteness he expressed in his letters had led her to believe that this son of hers was prepared to remain a bachelor for life.

Yet, as soon as he returned victorious, he announced he wanted to marry Carissa.

Granted, Carissa was a divorcee, but at least it meant he was willing to take a wife. Besides, after investigating, they found out that Barrett had never touched her. She was still a virgin, so it was acceptable, if only barely.

Accompanied by Gillian, Helen entered the newlywed suite on the eastern side of the building. White wedding banners adorned every wall, and new furniture was draped in white silk, tied with intricate decorative knots. The intricate knots were a traditional wedding touch, and they were called Eternal Knots, which represent eternal love and harmonious union.

Nearly every new item had a white ribbon on it. Even the large folding screen had a white shawl draped around and tied in the middle with a big, intricate bow.

Helen muttered to herself, "So many Eternal Knots-did I give birth to a son or a daughter? Why is it all so feminine?"

As she stepped into the inner room, she was met with a sea of white and gold. New brocade quilts were neatly stacked on the bed, and the bluish-white bed curtains draped to the floor. Though the bride had yet to be brought in, the room was already heated, making it comfortably warm.

All the furniture in the newlywed suite was brand new, and the quality was no less than what Helen had in her own quarters. The only things missing were the antique shelves and the antiques themselves. Rafael had previously hinted that Helen was too extravagant and wasteful. Yet, it seemed that it was because the extravagance was reserved for him and his bride.

Helen made a round of the room, then rubbed her temples and said to Gillian, "I don't like Carissa."

Gillian smiled and replied, "My lady, I think everyone can see that."

Despite her words, Gillian was actually pleased-after all, Rafael was finally getting married.

"But from the looks of it, she seems quite devoted towards me. She's sent me several of Kyle's paintings."

Gillian responded, "Isn't that a good thing? Why would that make you unhappy?"

Helen's eyes narrowed as she snapped, "Of course, it makes me unhappy! When you accept someone's gifts, it softens your stance. She's already made the first move, offering kindness and gifts, and she even elevated my standing. How am I supposed to keep her in line."

Gillian chuckled. "That's a separate matter altogether. Keeping her in line is still necessary. After all, what daughter-in-law doesn't have to follow the rules when she enters the household?"

Helen nodded in agreement. "You're right. It's only natural for me to make sure she follows the rules. No matter how many gifts she gives me, the rules must not be broken."

She

cast another glance around the newlywed suite, her frustration evident. "In a few days, I'll go pick out some more furniture. The chaise lounge in my room is uncomfortable. It should be made of cherry wood for it to be the best."

"Then we'll replace it," Gillian replied with a smile, accompanying Helen out.

Whatever Helen wanted, they would buy. After all, even if Helen didn't have the money, it was only natural to spend her son's money.

Gillian had entered the palace with Helen to serve her. In truth, Gillian had been Helen's nanny. To put it bluntly, she saw Helen as her daughter. Gillian had no family to return to, so spending her life with Helen suited her just fine. Besides, she couldn't rest easy without watching over the younger woman.

In Gillian's heart, even though Helen was now a mother-in-law, she was still the same baby she had once cradled in her arms.

Suddenly, Helen stopped in her tracks.

"Gillian!" she called out. "Do you think it's possible that the woman Rafael truly loves is Carissa?"

She had been suspicious for some time now, especially after seeing the grandeur of this wedding. It was far from the casual marriage Rafael had claimed it would be. He might have downplayed it, but everything had been carried out to the highest standard. The new residence was as luxurious as it could be.

Even the betrothal gifts had outshone those given when the king married the queen. Of course, back then, the greatest gift in marrying the king was the status of becoming the crown princess and eventually the queen. Material things were of much less importance compared to that title.

Gillian responded, "If that's true, then it's even better. At least the prince would be marrying the one he truly loves."

But Helen shook her head, her worry deepening. "That might not be good. If she's the one Rafael cherishes most, won't he end up protecting her in everything once she's through the door? What authority will I, as the mother-in-law, have left?"

Gillian tried to reassure her. "We're only guessing here, so let's not jump to conclusions. If she were truly the one he loved, why would he have allowed her to marry Barrett in the first place?"

Chapter 320

Helen thought it over, and realized that it made sense.

Even though Rafael was on the battlefield at the time, if he had truly wanted to stop the marriage, it shouldn't have been too difficult, right?

But she failed to consider the vast distances involved. Even if Carissa had married and had children, Rafael might not have known about it. She also didn't realize the dangers he faced on the battlefield, where he was focused on winning the war. He had assumed Melanie would keep her promise, so he didn't worry about it and only wanted to secure victory and return to the capital as quickly as possible. Unaware of these details, Helen simply felt that having Carissa as her daughter-in-law was a blemish on her otherwise perfect life. Her emotions were conflicted. She was happy that her son was getting married, but unhappy that he was marrying Carissa.

Meanwhile, preparations were also underway at Valor Estate and Silverstone Estate for tomorrow's grand event.

This would be Barrett's third marriage, but his feelings about marrying Viola were vastly different from those he had experienced in his previous marriages.

When he married Carissa, he was overjoyed. He felt that to have someone as pure and graceful as her as his wife was a blessing he had earned over three lifetimes. Even on their wedding day, when he received the orders to go to war, his heart was still full of happiness. But that happiness was mixed with an even greater sense of reluctance. When he lifted her white veil and saw how stunning Carissa was in her wedding attire, his heart nearly melted.

At that moment, his promises were sincere. He vowed never to let her down.

But, unfortunately, he missed his chance with Carissa.

When he married Aurora, he believed he had found his true love. Their connection felt spiritual. Although Aurora had once sent a letter asking him to withhold half of Carissa's dowry, which made him uncomfortable, it didn't diminish his hopes for their future together.

But this time, his marriage to Viola was arranged.

He had only met Viola once. Though she was slightly older, she was more attractive than Aurora but still could not compare to Carissa. Most importantly, there was no emotional connection between him and Viola. Even when he looked at her, he felt nothing.

Moreover, his last marriage to Aurora had nearly drained his finances. This time, even after spending the hundred gold coins granted by the king, he still couldn't give Viola a proper wedding.

Fortunately, even though the Earl of Silverstone's family was gradually declining, it still retained a considerable amount of wealth. Moreover, his brother-in-law Oliver had become the commanding general of the Hell Monarch Army, earning widespread praise and flattery.

As a result, the festivities at Silverstone Estate were far more lively than those at Valor Estate.

However, their wedding clashed with the wedding of Rafael and Carissa.

This created a dilemma for many officials who, in their efforts to please both sides, had to attend two separate weddings. But honestly, most people came out of respect for Oliver, not for Barrett.

This left Barrett feeling deeply frustrated, so much so that he even considered calling off the wedding. The frustration was overwhelming, to the point where he started to question the very purpose of it all.

would

Aurora's mood also required careful handling. If she caused a scene on the wedding day, things spiral out of control and he would become a laughingstock in the capital.

So, Barrett went to Aurora's quarters. She sat quietly in a chair, her demeanor eerily similar to when he had informed Carissa of the king's edict for their marriage. But in hindsight, he realized that Carissa had always remained calm, with only a hint of mockery in her expression.

Aurora, however, looked at him with nothing but resentment.

Barrett sat across from her, trying to calm himself, intending to have a sincere conversation.

"I know you feel wronged," he began. "I made promises to you that I haven't kept. But Mrs. Murray made it clear that this marriage is by the king's order. Since the king once granted a marriage between us with an edict, he can't do so again with another one. It's his will, and I cannot defy it."

Aurora looked up, her gaze sharp and mocking. "Is this what you told Carissa when you sought to marry me?"

He shook his head. "No. Back then, I was direct. I told her that the one I loved was you."

A sudden, unsettling smile spread across Aurora's face. Without her veil, the smile combined with her scars looked dark and sinister. "And now? Who is the one you love?" t

Barrett remained silent for a long moment, unable to answer her question.