

War Song 331

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Upon entering Hell Monarch Estate, Carissa was immediately overwhelmed by a cacophony of voices, all calling out congratulations and well-wishes. Some of the voices were familiar, while others were unfamiliar.

Among them was Eleanor's annoying voice.

Oh, Jessica was present too-how irritating.

Her wedding was becoming a mess.

Kyle was the center of attention, outshining Carissa as the bride. But it didn't matter, because Violet had quietly approached and taken her friend's hand.

"GURG

who?"

"You're so childish! You're Rod!" Carissa joked with a laugh.

"If you say so, Violet replied, chuckling. "Rod is probably in the side hall. After all, he's part of your dowry."

Carissa chuckled too, feeling less anxious.

She had no idea what the procedures were. She was just standing there, listening to them set up a table and other things. Her mind wandered. Why were they setting up a table? Were she and Rafael supposed to swear brotherhood here?

That was so funny.

Well, it wasn't actually funny, but her mind just couldn't stop wandering because she couldn't see anything.

Then, she heard someone call for Helen to sit in the main seat, and to prepare for the rituals that needed to be carried out. Another commotion followed once Helen had taken her seat. Someone requested for another chair because Adrian also needed to sit and receive their salutations.

But Adrian was Carissa's master. The bride should have bid farewell to her parents at home before coming here. How could she give salutations to her master in the groom's family's hall?

It was not the proper etiquette!

Well, proper etiquette or not, Everett would intervene.

A stern voice rang out, "This wedding ritual is about showing respect to their elders. I'm Rafael's master. What's the big deal about him giving me salutations?"

In any case, the Pathfinders Guild was adamant that someone from the bride's side must be present to receive the couple's salutations.

Who cared about etiquette? In the world of martial arts, rules were determined by strength.

Everett's logic was straightforward. As Rafael's master, him sitting there was entirely appropriate. Then, Everett remarked that since his guild senior, Adrian, was present, it was improper for him, as a guild junior, to be seated while Adrian stood.

Was there such a rule in the capital?

Regardless, the rhetorical question made sense and everyone considered it reasonable.

Ultimately, Adrian got his seat.

Thus, a length of white silk ribbon, tied in a double-heart knot, was handed to Carissa, with the other end held by Rafael. The two of them stood together.

Carissa was familiar with this part. Without hesitation, she turned to face outward and even prompted Rafael, "We should show our respect to the Lord first. We need to face outside."

Rafael slowly turned around, his voice calm and even, "We should listen to the ceremonial officer. Today, the Protocol Minister is officiating our wedding."

Carissa fell silent, realizing her mistake. It was already quite unfortunate for Rafael to be marrying someone who had been married before. She shouldn't bring up any other matters relating to her previous wedding.

After the salutation ritual, Carissa was led into the newlywed suite. The journey there was long, and she had to keep the white veil on. The veil was only to be lifted by Rafael once they were in their suite.

Once the veil was lifted, they would drink the ceremonial wine, and the matchmaker would come in to give them a blessing. A crowd would come in to receive blessing gifts from the couple, then Carissa would stay in the room while Rafael mingled with the guests. During the banque

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Once the white veil was lifted, the matchmaker promptly removed it.

The couple's eyes met, and each saw a breathtaking beauty in the other. In that moment, both held their breath.

Rafael's heart raced faster. He couldn't tear his gaze away from his bride's face. She was the most beautiful person he had ever seen-like a fairy hidden beneath a rose tree.

Carissa gazed at Rafael with bright eyes, noting that he looked even more handsome than before. The griffin patterns on his ceremonial robes showed his high status. The usual coldness in his noble presence was absent, with only warmth and tenderness present in his eyes. Standing tall and graceful, he seemed like a divine being.

Both of them blushed and remained transfixed, reluctant to break eye contact.

Some things were wondrous-they both felt it in that shared gaze.

The matchmaker spoke up, "Your Highnesses, the ladies outside are here to receive their blessing gifts and share in your joy."

That Carissa snapped out of her reverie. Were they not supposed to drink the ceremonial wine first? Before she could ask, a crowd surged into the newlywed suite.

Carissa was deeply moved to see Violet, Cynthia, Bun, and even Rod, who was standing at the forefront with a white and gold ribbon tied around his neck. Thus, the other young wives and ladies could only offer their congratulations from behind this barrier of four people.

After the congratulatory messages, many praised Carissa and Rafael's union as a match made in heaven, describing them as a perfect pair who were both so beautiful. A flood of compliments poured in at the same time, accompanied by excited squeals, all astonished by the couple's appearance that day.

In this situation, Carissa was more adept at managing the crowd than Rafael.

She smiled warmly and curtsied. "Thank you, all, for your blessings. Your kindness is deeply appreciated. Please drink a little more today. Lily, please distribute the blessing gifts so everyone can share in the joy."

Lily carried a large bag, filled to the brim with small blue and gold pouches, each containing pairs of gold coins.

For a royal wedding, giving gold coins was not considered extravagant. However, the guests had seen the dowry items, which filled the entire side hall and even extended into the corridor. Even Helen was astonished by the sheer volume.

Most of those who managed to enter were the young daughters and ladies from influential families, who left after receiving their share of the joyous blessings.

But Rafael couldn't linger in the newlywed suite for too long. As the groom, he needed to greet the guests. Reluctant to head out, he turned back three times before finally leaving the room.

As soon as he left, Lily sat down, rubbing her aching legs. It was a happy day, but it was exhausting.

Rod and Bun also needed to leave. With the groom gone, only female relatives could remain in the newlywed suite. Violet and Cynthia stayed behind, while Carissa's female guild members stayed outside to entertain the guests.

From the way Adrian and Everett were behaving today, it seemed as though they intended to turn Hell Monarch Estate into their own domain.

ari, you look so beautiful today," Violet said, cupping Carissa's face, her eyes sparkling with admiration. "How do you manage to be so stunning? If someone else had your looks, I'd have to scratch her face. Cynthia laughed and commented, "There are many people more beautiful than you. Why haven't you scratched any of them?"

"Shut up. Today, my guild had more flair than your guild. You need to wait until I'm finished talking to Cari before it's your turn," Violet insisted, always eager to assert her superiority.

Cynthia refused to back down, determined to challenge the pompous aristocrat.

She sat on Carissa's right side, turning her friend's face towards her and making a few noises of admiration. "If I ever get married, I want to look this beautiful."

Violet turned Carissa's face back towards her with a huff. "Your face will never look as good as Cari's, no matter how much makeup you use."

"Who says so?" Cynthia promptly turned Carissa's face back towards her.

Carissa placed her hands on their shoulders. "Stop. I need to ask you both something. Did Sage Adrian say you couldn't come to the city until my wedding? Is that why you only came today?"

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Talking bad about one's own master and others' masters was something they did without any pressure.

Carissa raised her hand, sending her attendants out to stand guard at the door.

Violet, who was never one to hold back, said, "We've been here for two days, but we weren't allowed to enter the city. It was your master's order. We had to stay at a small inn in a town outside the city. There were so many thieves in that town. Fortunately, we had enough martial experts among us, so the dowry was safe."

Two days ago was when Kyle had left. He probably did it to meet up with Adrian outside the city.

"But your master brought Winona into the city every day, from morning until evening. We don't know what news they were gathering. Today, we waited outside the city around noon. When we saw that your dowry was about to depart, we hurried in," Violet continued, adding, "I've never been so flustered, but it was also quite thrilling. It felt like we were at the center of attention of the entire city."

"I've never seen anything like that. It was so lively! When my guild senior made the announcement for our guild, his voice was so loud. I'm sure everyone in the capital heard him," commented an equally excited Cynthia.

Carissa raised her eyebrow and smiled. "That's for sure."

That was such an exaggeration. Didn't they know how vast the capital was?

"The town was just too cold. The coal used for heating in the inn made our eyes hurt," Violet grumbled. "I'm such a delicate person. You're the only one whom we'd endure such hardship for, Cari." Violet always claimed to be delicate and constantly complained. But when it came to times that mattered, she never uttered a word of complaint.

"It wasn't too bad, except that the food was terrible. The chef didn't seem to be very skilled," Cynthia added.

In every guild, there were always a few excellent cooks who made dishes that were delicious and well-presented. That was especially true for the Crystal Bloom Guild, which was famous for its Wood. Their guild was pretty much like a chef training camp.

Carissa's eyes grew misty. "To have the guild leaders and so many apprentices stuck in that small town inn... I owe you all a great deal."

"You're not the one who has to repay it. Your master said that if any guild on the guest list doesn't attend, the Pathfinders Guild will cut ties with them," Violet said.

Cynthia chuckled. "The Beggar Guild wanted to come, but your master finds them dirty and disorderly, so he wouldn't allow them to attend. The Beggar Guild leader must be feeling quite uncomfortable right now."

"It's better they don't come. Seeing them will only make me angry. They clearly knew that some people were using their guild's name to abduct children and turn them into thieves and beggars, yet they did nothing about it," Carissa responded.

'Since the Beggar Guild changed its leader, it hasn't been the same. I hope they hold another election and choose a more capable person," Violet commented before changing the topic and eagerly asking, "What's it like being married to the marshal? He looked very handsome today. Your heart must have skipped a beat, right?"

Carissa rested her chin on her hand. "We're just partners in life. He used to like someone, but that woman is married now. In fact, I suspect that person might be me, because his gaze today was different from before."

Violet shot her a sidelong glance. "How did you come up with that idea? You've always been in Meadow Ridge and haven't seen him much."

"He's Sage Everett's apprentice. Although I haven't seen him, he has seen me."

"Well, if he saw you in Meadow Ridge, I can guarantee he wouldn't have liked you. There are so many male apprentices there, but how many have fallen for you? They all avoided you. Only Rod and Bun are close to you, and that's because Rod is poor and wanted to gain some benefits by being your friend."

Carissa protested, "I've got the looks."

"Being good-looking is useless. You were always falling and rolling around in the mud like a little monkey. Throughout the year, there were hardly any days when you were clean."

As Carissa recalled her appearance at Meadow Ridge, the idea she had about herself was instantly dispelled. Indeed, who would like a mud-splattered monkey?

She had never thought that Rafael's previous affection might be directed at her. But since she had felt a little flutter in her heart, she began to entertain the delusion that perhaps the person he liked who had married someone else was actually her.

Hell Monarch Estate was bustling with activity today. Most officials and military officers of the fourth rank and above were there. Those who weren't present were either at Silverstone Estate or Valor Estate. However, the main topic of conversation at Hell Monarch Estate wasn't Carissa, the new princess consort, but rather the group of martial artists led by Adrian. His presence alone was enough to spark private whispers and speculation.

Who was Adrian Russell?

The Russell family had once been a powerful family in the capital, but they eventually withdrew from the circles of power to establish their own guild. Some insightful individuals claimed that, although there was no formal leader of the martial arts world, Adrian's position was essentially equivalent to that of a leader.

Why?

Because Adrian was both wealthy and highly skilled.

His combat skills were exceptional-one could only guess at the extraordinary experiences that had honed his abilities to such a level.

As for his wealth, it was beyond measure. Having accumulated their fortune over generations, The Russell family had bought so much land and property that even Adrian might not be able to keep track of it all.

Just look at Meadow Ridge. It wasn't just a single piece of land-it stretched for hundreds of miles, with countless estates and fields. Adrian also owned any properties elsewhere, including numerous shops in the capital.

The people he had brought with him today were unlike the typical martial artists one might expect. They lacked the rough, unruly demeanor commonly associated with such individuals, displaying a sense of refinement and propriety instead.

This shattered the common people's preconceptions about martial artists.

The common people had always thought of martial artists as mere brutes, not worth much consideration. After all, many apprentices from various guilds were merely bodyguards or protectors-hardly worthy of high regard.

The second most talked-about topic was the dowry the Pathfinders Guild had brought.

The dowry items were displayed for everyone to see. It included numerous chests filled with gold bars and ingots. The purity of the gold was unquestionable, familiar to those used to handling such treasures. As for the rare and exotic treasures, some were things they had never seen before.

Just take the Mystic Pearls-how large were they? To put it into perspective, if anyone even owned a single one of those, it would be the talk of the town for quite some time. But here, there were four or five jars full of them.

This wasn't just a dowry-it was clearly meant to support the Hell Monarch's princess, consort for ten lifetimes. Even if Rafael took many concubines and wives in the future, filling his home with children, they would never be able to shake Carissa's status as the primary princess consort.

Even Helen was astonished. Overwhelmed by her love for these precious items, her hands trembled as she examined the dowry, and she kept muttering, "Oh, Heavenly Lord. However, when Rafael led his bride out to make the ceremonial toasts, Carissa immediately became the center of attention.

It was said that when angered, a man would go to great lengths for a beautiful woman. In this case, many would agree that the beautiful woman in the saying referred to Carissa.

Today, she shone with an almost otherworldly beauty, like a dazzling gem. Wherever she went, whether among the distinguished gentlemen or young ladies, all eyes were irresistibly drawn to her. Especially when she blushed and smiled shyly, it was as if everyone's gaze was magnetically fixed on her.

Many of the royal relatives and officials present had seen Carissa before, at the celebration feast after the soldiers returned victorious from the Southern Frontier.

At that time, describing her as messy wouldn't have been enough to explain her appearance. The people present that day had preferred to keep their distance to avoid being affected by her presence. Her skin had been tan, dry, and peeling. It had been better to not look at her at all.

Who could have imagined she would turn out to be so stunning-a beauty who could captivate a nation, breathtakingly exquisite, and enough to make anyone's heart flutter?

Everyone was puzzled. They had seen what Aurora looked like, and wondered how Barrett could bear to abandon such an exquisite wife for another woman. It was truly baffling.

Carissa's flushed cheeks were not due to makeup, but because of a certain someone holding her hand.

So, this was what holding hands felt like.

When Rafael had gone to Northwatch Estate to escort her, he had held her hand. However, she had been reeling from so many emotions then, so the feeling hadn't registered completely. But now, as they moved from table to table, he never once let go of her hand, their fingers always intertwined.

Having drunk quite a bit, Rafael's face was flushed. From her angle, Carissa could see his profile and the line of his jaw. She warned herself to not look any longer, or her heart might no longer belong to her alone.

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After three rounds of toasts, Adrian and the apprentices from the Pathfinders Guild stood up to offer their own. It wasn't just Adrian whom people were impressed by-even if only Kyle were present, their presence commanded respect. When they came to make toasts, even the prime minister stood up to reciprocate.

Trevor was the one who had initially secured this marriage, so Adrian toasted him. Adrian drank the entire cup, while Trevor only took a small sip, which was enough to show his respect as the royal chancellor. Also, considering his health, excessive drinking wouldn't be advisable.

Carissa's eyes reddened as she watched the Pathfinders Guild members rise to make toasts.

They were undoubtedly there to support her. Even though the occasion was hosted by Rafael's household, the Pathfinders Guild members wanted to show everyone that this place would also be Carissa's in the future.

Though such customs were not typically observed in high-society marriages, they were martial artists. Who would dare to challenge their traditions?

Moreover, Adrian came from a noble background, and Kyle was also present.

Who would refuse them?

Who would dare criticize their actions?

As for Eleanor and Jessica, their expressions were dark throughout the event. Even when they weren't frowning, their demeanors were cold and sarcastic.

Taking the opportunity, Eleanor sat next to Helen and sighed softly. "Helen, I'm concerned about your future. With such a powerful daughter-in-law, you, as the mother-in-law, might find it hard to enforce any rules.

"She might even refuse to perform the post-wedding ritual tomorrow. You'll need to be careful in your interactions with her. If your words cause offense, you might face retaliation."

Helen's emotions today were too complex for her to fully understand Eleanor's words.

Certainly, Hell Monarch Estate was the center of attention today, and she was pleased by Carissa's extensive dowry and connections. She felt happy for the benefits it brought. However, this fortune fell to Rafael, not directly to her.

Now, with Eleanor's provocation, Helen felt an even deeper, more indescribable turmoil.

Would she really have to live under her daughter-in-law's shadow in the future? Was there even such a rule? If a daughter-in-law showed any disrespect, the ethical officials monitoring and enforcing moral and ethical conduct would be quick to come after her.

But how could today's scene be judged by ordinary standards?

Helen was worried that Carissa might appear dutiful on the surface while secretly undermining her, which would be troublesome.

Helen had some self-awareness. She had been pampered all her life, and after she entered the palace as a concubine, her elder sister had protected her. So, she hadn't really had to use her brains much. If Carissa were a master of manipulation, Helen would indeed be in for a rough time.

Her initial excitement faded, replaced by worry. Living in Rafael's residence now seemed dull and uneventful.

During the banquet the other day, Helen had noticed that many people didn't seem to regard her with much importance. As an honored concubine, she had expected to have a stronger influence, and hoped that the lack of immediate warmth from others could be attributed to her past failures to cultivate these relationships.

But with Carissa's grand entrance, where would Helen fit in Hell Monarch Estate in the future?

Helen felt disheartened.

Seeing that her brief provocation had worked, Eleanor inwardly called Helen a fool and signaled Jessica, who had been standing by.

Jessica smoothly said, "Mom, I don't agree with what you said. No matter how influential Carissa's background is, our kingdom is governed with kindness and respect. Being disrespectful to our elders is a grave offense. Even as a princess, I must respect my mother-in-law.

When I entered my husband's family, I adhered to the rules for a full year."

This statement made Helen's spirits lift again.

That was right.

It didn't matter even if Carissa had the king backing her. The weight of traditional values would still hang over her. If she dared to be disrespectful, that weight would crush her.

Helen felt a renewed sense of satisfaction.

Eleanor chuckled. "I only fear that may not be the case. Helen, if you're confident, try asking her for a jar of those Mystic Pearls tomorrow and see if she gives them to you. That will show whether she's truly respectful."

Those Mystic Pearls drove Eleanor insane with envy.

Helen, who cared a lot about appearances, immediately responded, "Why wouldn't she give them to me? They're just Mystic Pearls, after all. I won't even need to ask her-I can take them directly."

Eleanor laughed heartily. "Is that so? Then, go and retrieve a few pearls now and give them to me for safekeeping. If she doesn't chase after you, I'll consider myself defeated. I'll return the pearls and give you an additional three thousand silver coins. But if you lose, the pearls will be mine."

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Standing to the side, Jessica smiled as she said, "Mom, that won't do. If Carissa questions us later and blames Aunt Helen, wouldn't it be... Oh, never mind, Aunt Helen wouldn't dare." The mother and daughter duo were clearly manipulating Helen, whose "innocence" bordered on frightening, making her particularly susceptible to provocations.

Helen immediately responded, "It's just a few Mystic Pearls. Do you think she'll really get angry at me?"

Earlier, she had worried about Carissa's powerful backing and how she might struggle as a mother-in-law. But now, after a few words, she felt emboldened. Her concern seemed to have evaporated. Helen rose from her seat, chin held high. Gillian accompanied her as she made her way to the side hall.

Outside, the guests were still enjoying the banquet and making toasts. There were only a few guards watching over the wedding gifts. After all, the guests in the residence were of high status, none of whom would dare to commit petty theft.

It was Jacob who had ordered the guards assigned to watch the gifts. When they saw Helen arrive, they had no suspicions. They simply nodded respectfully and allowed her to enter. Helen walked through the room filled with gifts, marveling at the sheer volume. The room was nearly packed, leaving only a narrow passage for people to walk through.

The four jars of Mystic Pearls were on display, each pearl round and gleaming. The unique luster of these special pearls was incomparable to that of ordinary pearls.

"Four jars there must be over two hundred and twenty pounds of Mystic Pearls! Goodness, I've never seen so many," Helen exclaimed, once again stunned.

Sensing Eleanor's ill intentions, Gillian quietly advised, "My lady, with your status, it's improper to do such a thing. If you were to take your daughter-in-law's dowry, it wouldn't reflect well on you."

Helen looked at her attendant as if she were foolish. "Of course not. How could I do something like that?"

Gillian sighed in relief, having been worried that Helen might fall for the scheme.

But before she could fully relax, Helen said, "I certainly won't take any. Otherwise, why would I have brought you? You take them."

Gillian stared in shock, unable to believe her ears. "What?"

"What are you afraid of? Do you think I can't protect you if something goes wrong?" Helen glanced outside and whispered, "Hurry, just take three pearls. No one will notice. There are so many of them. Even if ten or so are missing, no one will notice."

Gillian could hardly believe her ears. Was this really the woman she had raised? To think she would ask Gillian to commit such a theft.

Ancient wisdom proved true-living too long of a life could be problematic!

But what could Gillian do? This was the young lady she had raised with so much care-this was karma indeed.

Gillian was extremely nervous as she was stealing something for the first time. Although Helen was blocking the view of the people outside, the older woman's hand still trembled slightly as she reached out. Her heart pounded in her chest.

She grabbed a handful of pearls, not knowing how many she had taken, quickly stuffed them into her pocket, and turned around as if nothing had happened. Fortunately, the people outside didn't look in, given that it was Helen who had entered-who would ever suspect her of theft?

With Gillian nervously in tow, Helen made a show of inspecting the room and said, "Well, these dowry items are indeed impressive. There are many rare treasures."

Gillian wiped the sweat from her forehead. Despite the chilly weather, she was drenched in cold sweat.

"Alright, let's go. We need to attend to the guests," Helen said as she headed out the door.

Gillian quickly followed, the guilt of thievery tormenting her. She prayed for forgiveness from the heavens. She had no choice but to do as her mistress commanded.

As Helen and Gillian left, the guards at the door exchanged glances. One of them nodded and hurried off to find Jacob.

"Seriously?" Jacob asked, frowning.

"I wouldn't dare accuse Lady Helen falsely, nor would I obstruct her. I feared causing her disgrace," the guard replied.

"Very well. Return and keep watch. No one is to speak of this," Jacob instructed.

After the guard left, Jacob poured himself a drink and strolled around the banquet, casually observing from behind a partition screen. From his vantage point, he could clearly see the area where the women were gathered. Helen was speaking with Eleanor, then handed something over to her.

Jacob had a clear view of what was exchanged-Mystic Pearls, at least five or six of them.

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Jacob didn't make a fuss. It was Rafael's wedding day, so everything else had to take a backseat.

What was Helen thinking? How could she take items from her daughter-in-law's dowry and give them to someone else? Was such behavior even possible for a rational person? Jacob sighed. He couldn't understand how an honored concubine like Helen, who seemed so "innocent," could have given birth to such a wise and perceptive son like Rafael.

Carissa had only gone through one round of toasts when Rafael took her to their new suite. As the groom, Rafael couldn't leave the banquet so quickly and would have to return soon. Even now, as

Carissa watched him leave after he escorted her back to the suite, her hand still seemed to hold the warmth of his touch.

The room was warmed by a brazier, providing a cozy comfort that seeped into her very heart.

It turned out that matters of the heart couldn't be controlled. Carissa tried to restrain her emotions, but was helpless to stop them from sinking deeper into Rafael's gentle gaze.

Lily entered, calling for Lulu and the others to go downstairs for the wedding banquet. The servants deserved a meal too. The dishes served for them were quite lavish, though they were served in the lower courtyard, not the main hall.

Lulu and the others had been serving the guests all this time and had not eaten yet, so they were quite hungry.

However, Lulu was also concerned about Carissa and asked, "Lily, is there a table of food here for Lady Carissa?"

"We've had some chicken noodle soup prepared for Lady Carissa to have a light meal first. After the prince has entertained the guests, she can join him for dinner. His Highness has only had wine and hasn't eaten any food," Lily replied.

Carissa looked up. "Is it alright to just drink wine without eating? Can't someone stop him for a while and make him eat something?"

Lily smiled. "Oh, are you already showing concern for your husband, my lady?"

Carissa's face turned a deep red. "Lily, don't tease me. Drinking on an empty stomach is really not good."

Lily sent the others out and closed the door of the newlywed suite. There was something the young lady needed to know.

Now that Carissa was officially married, there was no turning back.

Initially, Lily had planned to wait until after the wedding night to discuss this, but having observed Carissa over the past few days, she could see that her mistress had truly developed feelings for Rafael. If she didn't tell her soon, Carissa would be tormented.

Lily moved a chair and sat down in front of her mistress, gazing at her with relief.

Today, Carissa looked truly radiant, far more so than she had when marrying Barrett. It wasn't just about the makeup-it was that her heart truly belonged to Rafael. When a person was in love, their entire being glowed, and the sweetness of that feeling was evident in every corner of their expression.

"Are you happy, my dear?" Lily asked gently.

She took Carissa's hand, applying a bit of pressure as she rubbed the calluses on her palm, then pulled out a small jar of cream she carried with her. This cream was from Sebastian, who claimed it could soften calluses and smelled pleasant.

Carissa used her other hand to rub the back of her neck. "I don't particularly feel happy or not. Getting married isn't exactly a new experience for me."

She was indeed happy, but there was also a tinge of melancholy. Though she had developed feelings for Rafael, he had married her for other reasons. He was settling for her, so how could she appear overjoyed?

She needed to constantly remind herself to stay grounded and avoid giving her heart away entirely. If Rafael grew cold towards her in the future, it would hurt deeply.

Though Carissa usually kept her grievances to herself, Lily could easily discern her true feelings. Lily had watched this child grow up, and even though she had been away at Meadow Ridge, she had been a constant presence over the years. She knew Carissa well enough to know what the young lady was thinking.

"Today, there's something I need to tell you. After I'm done, you can decide if you want to be happy about it," Lily said with a playful look. "But remember, you mustn't keep bringing up your previous marriage." "What's this about?" Carissa asked, her interest piqued.

Lily applied the cream to Carissa's other hand, her brows furrowing slightly to hide the sadness in her eyes.

"When you initially returned to discuss your marriage, you were met with a sea of suitors. Many noble families came to seek your hand."

Carissa nodded. "I know about that."

"Yes, but there is something you may not know. At that time, you hadn't yet returned from Meadow Ridge," Lily continued, gently rubbing the cream into Carissa's hand.

Lily sighed softly. "Back then, the news of the duke and the young masters' deaths reached us. The battlefield needed a general, so the Hell Monarch was appointed as the Grand Marshal to reclaim the Southern Frontier."

Carissa withdrew her hand, rubbing it herself, her gaze lowering as her eyelashes grew damp. "I know all this, Lily. You don't need to tell me."

Talking about her father and brothers made her heart ache deeply.

"Listen to what I have to say to the end," Lily said, fighting back tears, knowing she couldn't let a single tear fall today. "The night before the Hell Monarch was to lead his troops out of the city, he came to the estate. I remember it was already late, and the madam had gone to bed. But upon hearing that the Hell Monarch had arrived, she dressed again and went out to meet him."

Carissa paused, seemingly lost in thought.

Her heart skipped a beat, and her voice trembled slightly as she asked, "Why was he there so late at night?"

Lily recalled the events of that time as if from a dream.

She spoke softly, "He brought a dagger and made a promise. He said that this time, on the Southern Frontier battlefield, he would personally avenge the deaths of the duke and the young masters by killing General Vallar and his army. He used the dagger as a token and asked for your hand in marriage."

Even though Carissa had already guessed part of the story, hearing it directly from Lily still left her stunned and in silence.

Rafael had come to ask for her hand in marriage?!

Carissa's eyelashes fluttered. "Mom refused him, right?"

"No," Lily replied. "Your mother accepted."

Carissa's confusion deepened. "If she accepted, why did she later agree to Barrett's proposal?"

Lily sighed deeply. "Your mother accepted the prince because she wanted him to go to war with a clear mind. But she felt that since even the duke couldn't drive out the Sandorian people from the Southern Frontier, the Hell Monarch wouldn't be able to either.

"Moreover, Prince Rafael was headed to the Southern Frontier battlefield, which was fraught with peril. She was terrified of that place back then. Don't blame her-choosing General Warren was truly done with the hope of providing you with a stable life."

Lily took Carissa's hand once more. "Your mother has always been wise. She has never made a wrong decision in managing the household. The only mistake she made was in your marriage. At that time, she prioritized your marriage above all else, but misjudged General Warren."

Carissa felt a pang of sorrow. It was as if her heart was gripped by an invisible force, making it difficult for her to breathe.

So, Rafael had come to seek her hand in marriage before heading to the Southern Frontier? And he had succeeded in what he promised to do-he had personally killed Vallar and reclaimed the Southern Frontier, fulfilling Hector's unfinished mission.

"Don't overthink this, my lady. Your mother actually held a great fondness for Prince Rafael. When she promised you to General Warren, she spent the whole night talking to her attendant, Gloria. She said that among all the suitors, Prince Rafael was her first choice. Unfortunately, he was going to the Southern Frontier, a place of almost certain death.

"Besides that, she also mentioned that even if the Hell Monarch returned victorious, as a royal prince, he would have numerous concubines and secondary wives in his household. Your temperament wouldn't be suited to such a situation."

Carissa could understand why Melanie had feared the Southern Frontier battlefield so much, and why she believed that once someone went there, they might never return.

In Melanie's eyes, Hector was all-powerful, a mighty general who was unmatched in the world. Her mother had loved and revered her father. Thus, Melanie thought that if Hector and his sons couldn't survive on the Southern Frontier battlefield, then that place was indeed hell on earth.

Chapter 339

After Lily finished speaking, a maid entered with a bowl of steaming chicken noodle soup. Carissa had been hungry moments before, but now, seeing the hot soup, she suddenly lost her appetite. "You should eat. Your mother, watching from above, would be very happy to see you marrying Prince Rafael today. I promise you that," Lily said gently.

Carissa's tears fell into the broth as she held the bowl of soup.

Choking up, she said, "This phoenix crown is so heavy... It's causing me such pain in my neck that I feel like crying."

Trying to hold back her own tears, Lily wiped Carissa's tears away but understood that a new bride could cry if she wished.

"Silly girl, finish your soup, then we'll remove the crown, change your clothes, and help you take a bath. Tonight, there's much celebration outside. Prince Rafael probably won't return to the suite until after midnight."

Carissa took a few spoonfuls of the soup, her sobs softening. "Where's the dagger he sent? Didn't Mom give him a token in return?"

"The dagger was in the duke's armory in Northwatch Estate," Lily said with a smile. "I brought it along and will show it to you tomorrow. Your mother did give him a token in return as well."

Lily's smile widened. "She gave him a handkerchief, saying it was one you had embroidered yourself."

Carissa looked up in surprise. "Huh? That handkerchief was the token of engagement?"

She had thought it was something given to him when she was a child.

"Yes."

"But there were so many things that could have been given. Why choose that handkerchief?"

Carissa's appetite was completely gone.

How could her mother have sent such an ugly handkerchief to Rafael as a token? When Carissa saw it in the command tent back then, she had thought it was extremely ugly and had even made fun of it in her mind.

But thinking about how Rafael had carefully kept that handkerchief on the battlefield, never parting with it even after learning that she had married Barrett, touched her.

Yet, it was still so ugly.

Lily was smiling, though she had tears glistening in her eyes. "Because it was the first embroidery you ever did, and you did such a wonderful job on it. Your mother felt very proud of you."

Carissa was crying and laughing simultaneously, but still couldn't resist eating eagerly as she smelled the delicious soup.

She playfully complained, "There's a table full of food, yet I can only eat this bowl of chicken noodle soup? Seriously?"

"Tonight is the first time you and Prince Rafael will share a meal as a married couple," Lily said.

Though she felt sorry for the bride being so hungry, the significance of this meal was profound.

"In theory, as a prince's bride, you shouldn't have left the banquet so early. But His Highness is considerate of you, allowing you to return and rest early. After you eat, we'll help you with your bath. The staff from Elegance Atelier will help you remove your makeup."

The phoenix crown was indeed too heavy and not kind to the neck. Lily felt sympathetic for Carissa's discomfort.

After summoning the servants to attend to Carissa, Lily marveled at the conveniences of Orchid Hall. The bathhouse was conveniently located just outside the bedroom. It was ingeniously designed with a golden pipe that carried hot water from several rooms into a small basin in the bath chamber.

There was no need to carry hot water from outside, which made bathing extremely convenient. Even in winter, it was warm inside, thanks to the braziers.

Tonight, the hot water would remain running. Simply turning the faucet on the golden pipe would produce a steady flow of hot water. But in the future, Luke had mentioned that the hot water would only be available for a couple of hours at a time, which would be more than sufficient.

Several maids came in to assist, and Sally from Elegance Atelier joined them to help. After removing her makeup, Carissa's natural beauty shone through, still captivating and beautiful.

She changed into a light blue gown made of luxurious brocade, embroidered with butterflies flitting among flowers. The bodice was adorned with delicate orchids, and the outer garment was made of the same soft, flowing fabric that trailed gracefully along the floor. After removing the crown, her hair was tied in a high ponytail with a white silk ribbon.

Chapter 340

In preparation for her marriage, Carissa had acquired numerous new outfits.

Along with the engagement gifts from Rafael, her collection included many pieces of luxurious brocade and cloud satin. Her trunk was filled with clothing for every season—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—all in varying colors and with exquisite embroidery. There was even a separate trunk for fox fur and heavy cloaks.

Looking at the engagement gifts and dowry items now, she felt she had more than enough clothing for a lifetime. The garments she wore today and those freshly arranged in her wardrobe were intended for the coming days. They were mostly vibrant in color but remained elegant rather than gaudy.

Carissa found that blue hues suited her exceptionally well.

The outfit she wore tonight was a gentle shade of blue. Not a dark blue, but rather light blue with a hint of lavender, which highlighted her snow-like skin and complemented her beauty mark.

The outer layer made of cloud satin was incredibly soft, and its glossy surface shimmered with every movement. Though the garment was somewhat thin, the heated floor was enough to keep her warm. Carissa felt remarkably at ease. After her earlier bout of crying, her nose had been stuffy, but it had cleared up once she took a bath.

Word from the front courtyard indicated that Rafael had drunk quite a bit and would likely return to the newlywed suite soon. It was still only about ten at night, earlier than midnight, which was when Lily had anticipated Rafel would return.

Tonight's guests were truly making an occasion of it—how often did one see a wedding feast lasting this long?

It was a mark of great respect.

Lily quickly instructed the servants to remove some of the food and replace it with fresh servings. The food had not been originally intended for immediate consumption, but it was customary to have a full spread in the newlywed suite, symbolizing that the couple would always be well-fed and cared for in their future.

Except for the wine and the wine glasses, everything else was brought in fresh. The food was the same as before, but the chef had prepared these dishes fresh, keeping them warm in pots until they could be served again before Rafael arrived at the newlywed suite.

With everything in place, Dylan helped Rafael back to Orchid Hall.

Turning her head, Carissa suddenly remembered there was a ceremony they might have missed.

That's right, the First Light Revelry.

It was a tradition where the couple's friends and family gathered once more to extend their congratulations. The event was about well-wishing and included lively activities and games, giving guests a chance to receive special gifts from the couple.

Carissa remembered when she married Barrett. Despite his imminent departure for the battlefield, they had carried out the tradition, and people had made a ruckus in their newlywed suite, demanding rewards. It had been quite embarrassing at the time.

If Carissa had still had her old temper back then, she would have thrown them all out.

She quickly asked, "Lily, aren't we supposed to do the First Light Revelry in the suite?"

"His Highness forbade it," Lily replied calmly.

Carissa sighed in relief. "That's wonderful. That tradition is really quite annoying."

Aware of Carissa's memories from her first marriage, Lily quickly added, "Yes, that incident at Valor Estate was excessive. Those people General Warren's younger brother brought in were not reputable individuals. But enough about that. The prince is coming."

Dylan helped Rafael to the door of the newlywed suite but didn't dare to go any further.

Lily called for Carissa to assist her new husband, as Orchid Hall had not yet arranged for servants to be present. They were waiting for Carissa to choose the servants after her arrival. For now, only Carissa's few attendants and Lily remained.

The matchmaker and the staff from Elegance Atelier had already been sent away.

Carissa supported Rafael, who leaned heavily on her. If she were a weaker woman, she might have fallen to the ground. His body reeked of alcohol, indicating that he had been drinking a lot. Carissa had seen him drink extensively when they had gone out together to make toasts with the guests. With so many people present, the toasting had been relentless.

Dylan waved to Lulu, who came over.

He said softly, "His Highness drank a lot tonight. The Pathfinders Guild members and other factions continuously filled his cup. It was difficult for him to refuse. I've already had someone prepare a hangover remedy. It will be brought over shortly."

"He was forced to drink more?" Lulu's sympathy for Rafael grew.

She had spent time in Meadow Ridge and knew that when people there drank, they either drank moderately or were forced to drink excessively by relying on their inner force.

Tonight, Rafael had already been expected to drink heavily. To be forced to drink even more was excessive.

"Has he thrown up?" Lulu asked.

"He has thrown up once already. He rested in the outer courtyard for a while, then had his mouth rinsed and face cleaned before being sent back. He was in considerable discomfort. The rose wine from the Lunar Guild was unusually strong," Dylan replied.