

## War Song 381

### Chapter 381

Rafael and Dylan led the way on horseback, while the carriage followed slowly behind.

Helen grasped Carissa's hand, her excitement almost impossible to contain. "I truly didn't expect you to successfully get all the money back. Others may not be aware, but I know Grand Princess Eleanor very well. She may appear amiable to everyone, but in reality, she's quite domineering."

Carissa gently pulled her hand away. "Now that you know what kind of person she is, it's best to keep interactions with her to a minimum in the future."

Helen nodded, but her expression grew worried. "I'm just concerned that if we fall out with her, she might speak ill of us in front of other ladies and tarnish our reputation."

"What's there to worry about?" Carissa said dismissively.

"Of course, you're not concerned. Your reputation is already in tatters, but I've just left the palace and can't afford to gain a bad name."

Carissa gave her mother-in-law a sidelong glance. Helen was really harsh with words, especially when speaking to those she considered her own.

Helen quickly realized her mistake and tried to clarify, "That's not what I meant. It's just that Kiera is currently looking for a husband. Eleanor has connections with many prominent families, so I'm worried she might spread rumors that could harm Kiera's reputation."

"Kiera is a high princess, and she's protected by the king and queen. She also has the backing of the Hell Monarch's household. Who would dare gossip about her? They'd be courting disaster," Carissa responded.

She recalled her conversation with the queen, who seemed keen on having Logan marry Kiera. Carissa planned to first learn about Logan's character. If he was trustworthy, she would then discuss her thoughts with Kiera.

Naturally, she would also need to ask Logan about his intentions. After her failed marriage with Barrett, Carissa felt that simply following parental orders and the advice of matchmakers was no longer sufficient -mutual agreement between the two people involved in the marriage was crucial.

"Are you upset?" Helen asked after Carissa had been silent for a while.

"I'm not upset," Carissa said, pushing those thoughts to the side. "I was just thinking about a few things."

Helen generously said, "You don't need to worry about it. I said I would give you half if you got the money back for me. I promise I won't go back on my word."

Carissa chuckled softly. "Please keep your money, Mother. I can't accept it from you."

"You don't want it?" Helen was puzzled. "If you don't want it, why did you go to such lengths to confront Grand Princess Eleanor for me?"

"You're my mother-in-law. If Aunt Eleanor and Jessica deceived you and took your money, isn't it only right for me to stand up for you and recover it?" Carissa replied.

Helen glanced at her

daughter-in-law's calm profile,

recalling the time at Harmony Palace when they had been reviewing the accounts. When Helen felt extremely cold, Carissa had instinctively wrapped her in a cloak to keep her warm. The memory brought a fleeting warmth to Helen's heart.

"You've been kind to me. I'll remember that. I'm not like those ungrateful people."

Helen was, of course, referring to the Warren family.

Carissa smiled but remained silent.

Helen observed her closely, thinking that her daughter-in-law was not as insufferable as others had claimed. In fact, she was quite the opposite. It was clear that the former accusations by Eleanor about the Duke of Northwatch's family were nothing but lies meant to deceive and stir trouble.

Reflecting on it now, Helen realized she couldn't just blame others—she had been the one to look down on Carissa because of her past. Thinking of how Carissa had helped her twice now, shame and fear crept in.

If Carissa were like other noblewomen and had made a fuss upon discovering that her mother-in-law had stolen her dowry, would Helen's reputation still be intact?

But it wasn't just about reputation.

Helen wouldn't have been able to assert any authority over Carissa. Her daughter-in-law had turned things around on her, there would have been nothing Helen could do to

stop her.

After all, who ever heard of a mother-in-law stealing the bride's dowry on her wedding day? Even common folk wouldn't stoop so low.

Helen's anger flared as she thought about Eleanor's cruelty and her own foolishness.

How could Helen have been so easily provoked by a few words, all for the sake of a little pride?

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With so many thoughts swirling through her head, coupled with the chill she had endured, Helen's mind became muddled and her body ached slightly.

When they returned to Hell Monarch Estate, Carissa helped her out of the carriage and immediately instructed the servants, "Prepare a pot of chicken soup. Everyone has been out in the cold for a while. They need something to ward off the lingering chill."

Helen felt even more ashamed after hearing that.

Carissa was truly considerate, remembering that her mother-in-law had suffered at Harmony Palace. Who could match such devotion and attentiveness?

Little did she know, Carissa's concern was not for her but for Rafael, who had been outside in the cold and wind.

The kitchen chefs soon brought up the chicken soup, and each person was served a bowl. Carissa watched Rafael drink two bowls before she was satisfied. Turning around, she noticed her mother-in-law sipping her soup slowly and said, "Mother, drink a full bowl first, and have some hot food later as well." They had left in the late afternoon, and ever since the accounting began at Harmony Palace, they hadn't been offered even a sip of water, let alone any food. "Okay," Helen replied, her voice heavy with emotion, deeply moved. "I will finish it."

"Alright then, I'll go soak myself in a hot bath. You should have someone bring you hot water later to warm yourself up as well."

After saying that, Carissa didn't wait for Helen to respond and took her disgruntled husband back to their room.

Rafael was simmering with anger. The things his mother had done were truly shocking.

Helen had survived the cutthroat harem. Yet, she had handed over money to Jessica without asking further questions. Then, when Jessica asked for more, Helen had given it to her without even a second thought.

Carissa had only been married to Rafael for a few days. And already, she had had to run around twice because of his mother.

Rafael had waited outside Harmony Palace tonight, not because he doubted Carissa's ability to handle the matter, but because he felt uneasy letting his wife run around for his mother's sake while he stayed home doing nothing.

Since it was a matter involving the

women of the inner household, it wasn't his place to intervene-at least not until Carissa asked for help. There was a private grudge between her and Eleanor, and

Carissa would prefer to handle it

herself.

As they returned to Orchid Hall, Carissa's hand in his was no longer cold. Holding the warm bowl while she drank two bowls of chicken soup had finally made her feel warm throughout.

"Don't be angry," Carissa said softly. "Everyone has their weaknesses. Mother's just happens to be that she easily trusts others and naturally fears Eleanor."

"As her son, it's hard for me to criticize her, but this... Anyone with a bit of common sense wouldn't do something like this."

Rafael's tone was still harsh, but

was

after being comforted by his wife, he

managed to swallow his anger, albeit with difficulty. Carissa wanted to nod in agreement, but doing so would feel like kicking someone when they're down.

So, instead, she smiled and said, "Well, everything has been taken care of now. No need to stay upset."

"I'm just worried about you. Having to deal with Eleanor over such trivial matters in this freezing weather-I'm sure you didn't have an easy time."

"It wasn't too bad. Besides, after these two incidents, Mother won't treat me harshly anymore."

"She wouldn't dare," Rafael replied, his brows furrowed in anger.

"She's my mother-in-law. If she expects me to follow the rules, serve her meals, and take care of her needs, I can't refuse. It's common

for mothers-in-law to give the et

daughters-in-law a hard time to assert their authority and maintain discipline."

Rafael tightened his grip on his wife's hand. "There's no such rule in my residence."

Carissa gave him a warm smile and said nothing more, holding his hand as they walked into Orchid Hall together.

One of the perks of Orchid Hall was the hot water bath, which was always available whenever needed. Since they were both chilled, Carissa suggested her husband take a soak first.

Rafael wrapped an arm around her waist. "I noticed the bath is quite large. It's more than enough for two people. Why not save the trouble and soak together?"

His dark eyes held a mix of subtlety and raw intensity. The warmth of his body against hers sent a wave of heat coursing through her, like a spark igniting a flame. Her cheeks and ears flushed red. Noticing a few maids nearby covering their mouths to stifle giggles, Carissa playfully hit her husband's chest. "Aren't you embarrassed?"

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Embarrassed or not, the two of them did end up bathing together in the end. After soaking in the bath, they continued their passionate night under the white canopy of their bed.

Fortunately, both were trained in martial arts. So, even with only getting an hour or two of sleep, they were still able to go about their day without feeling tired.

As they got up the next morning, two unfamiliar attendants entered to serve Rafael. Luke had arranged this. These two elderly women, Sydney and Qiana, had originally worked in the embroidery room. But now that Rafael had no one to serve him, it wouldn't be appropriate to have a young servant help him with dressing and personal needs.

As for the maids serving Carissa, Joy and Winter had gone to attend to Ryan. Meanwhile, Lulu, Snow, and Pearl remained by Carissa's side to serve her personally.

Lily was in charge of managing the entire Orchid Hall, so naturally, it wouldn't be appropriate to ask her to take on these duties. And if younger servants were sent to attend to Rafael, there was a risk they may harbor inappropriate thoughts.

So, it was better to have Sydney and Qiana serve Rafael. Both women were in their forties and had a reputation for their steady and reliable work. They were unlikely to cause any trouble. These two women had been sent by Victoria when Rafael first established his estate. They had previously served the queen dowager herself, so their trustworthiness was assured.

Rafael didn't need to go to the Supreme Court today. With the year coming to a close, the court had already sealed its documents, and no new matters would be addressed until the eighth day of the new year. Carissa mentioned that she needed to return to Northwatch Estate today. After the couple dressed and had breakfast, they sent someone to fetch Ryan so he could accompany them back.

However, just as they were about to leave, they saw Violet arrive with Travis.

As soon as she entered, Violet said, "They left the city yesterday evening. They said they were in a hurry to leave and couldn't inform you." Hearing this, Carissa's eyes reddened. "It's always like this. I can't trust my master. We had clearly agreed that they would tell me before leaving."

"Your master was afraid you'd start crying. Let it go, okay? We'll return to Meadow Ridge together when the weather warms up."

"Are you planning to stay here until then?" Carissa looked at her friend. "Does your master allow you to stay in the capital for so long?"

"It's not that I want to stay. Winona said she might need someone to run errands for something, so I stayed behind. She even left a few people with me to gather information," Violet whispered in Carissa's ear. Carissa felt a mix of sadness and gratitude. Winona's people were not easily lent out. That was why few in the martial world knew that Carissa's guild senior ran Skywing Spire.

"You don't even like the capital. Isn't it a burden for you to stay here?" Carissa hugged Violet, feeling like she might cry.

"I'm not just here for you. My master asked me to stay in the capital for a while. If I happen to see a noble young man that I fancy, he'll secretly kidnap him. Then, I'll come to the rescue, we'll have some close encounters, and voilà-a perfect match."

Violet spoke as if it were the simplest thing, as if kidnapping someone was no big deal. Hearing her friend's words, Carissa's urge to cry vanished instantly.

"Fine, if you find someone you like, I'll help you arrange a proposal. No need to resort to kidnapping," she promised.

Marriage for the daughters of the

Spencer family was a tricky matter.

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While it wasn't impossible, it often required a willingness to marry below their social status. However, in a prominent family like theirs, not every woman was prepared to make such a compromise.

For someone like Violet, marrying a martial artist was absolutely out of was

the question. She could practice martial arts; but marrying a man

the martial world was forbidden

With an aunt already having eloped with a scholar, Violet marrying a martial artist would make it even

harder for the other daughters of the

Spencer family to find suitable

matches.



Meanwhile, Rafael had taken Travis to the study, where Jacob and Luke were already present.

When he heard that Rafael wanted him to take the lead in forming a household army, Travis' eyes widened in surprise.

"You mean that I'll be in charge of establishing the household army, and then I'll manage it? How much are you planning to pay me per month for that?"

Travis was straightforward. After all, he had stayed in the capital to make money.

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Jacob chuckled and said, "With Lady Carissa here, you won't be short-changed. Just make sure to do the job well. Once the household army is established, you'll be in charge of their management and training. Given the hard work involved, there will definitely be an additional reward."

Not interested in vague promises, Travis asked directly, "So, how much are we talking about?"

Jacob held up one finger. "This much."

At that moment, Travis wished he had an actual rod in his hand to smack Jacob over the head. Couldn't Jacob just say the amount instead of making him guess?

"Just tell us whether you'll do it or not," Rafael said.

"I'll do it!" Travis immediately agreed, planning to ask Carissa later to find out exactly how much the pay was.

Either way, he had already decided to take the job. He would be in for a beating if he didn't bring some money back to the guild.

"Alright, you won't need to worry about the recruitment process. Just focus on being the drill instructor and teaching them martial arts," Jacob said.

"Fair enough, but can the estate accommodate so many people?" Travis asked.

Luke chimed in, "Don't worry about that. There's a piece of empty land behind the estate. After the New Year, we'll bring in some craftsmen. As long as we have the funds, it'll be built in no time."  
"So, I'll be paid during this period too, right?" Travis questioned.

Jacob felt a twinge of frustration.

The man really couldn't go three sentences without mentioning money. His intentions were clear as day.

"Of course," Jacob assured him.

He wasn't stingy and would give what was due. Besides, Travis was an old friend of Carissa's and had even temporarily held the rank of battalion commander in the military. Given his background, there was no doubt that an appropriate salary would be part of the arrangement.

Satisfied, Travis grinned widely. "Great!"

The snowfall continued to get heavier.

Although the Supreme Court had sealed its documents for the year, Rafael, as the commander of the Mystic Army, found himself busier than ever. He stepped out to inform Carissa that he needed to return to the Capital Guard Headquarters to gather the commanders for a meeting to discuss the duty roster and patrols during the upcoming New Year celebrations.

"Alright, you take care of your business. Vivi, Rod, and I will head to Verdant Monastery to visit my aunt," Carissa responded.

"You're going to Verdant Monastery? Why don't you wait for me? I'll finish up my work quickly and accompany you," Rafael suggested.

"It's fine. Vivi, Rod, and I can manage on our own. You focus on your duties. The Capital Guard Headquarters has a lot going on with the New Year celebrations approaching," Carissa replied.

Even though she only held an

honorary title as deputy

commander, she knew that it was during major festivals like this that the capital guards and garrison unit were busiest and most prone to errors.

Rafael wanted to accompany her, but he knew the responsibilities at the Capital Guard Headquarters couldn't be ignored. Besides, it had been snowing heavily lately. Avis was in poor health, so Carissa couldn't afford to delay her visit.

People often said that the New Year was the hardest time for those gravely ill.

"Alright, be careful on the road," Rafael said after a moment's thought. "I'll finish up as quickly as I can and join you there."

He should meet Carissa's aunt as well, now that he was officially Carissa's husband.

"Okay," Carissa agreed, noticing the lingering affection in his gaze.

Not wanting Violet and Travis to tease her, she quickly averted her eyes. "You go ahead and get to work."

Rafael felt a twinge of

disappointment. Carissa always seemed eager to distance herself from him in front of others. Even when their eyes met, she would immediately look away. He couldn't understand it—he constantly wanted to be near her.

"Your Highness, the horses are ready," Luke announced as he entered.

"Alright," Rafael said, walking over to Carissa and taking her hand. "Be careful on the road. Wear extra layers. It's snowing today."

"I got it," Carissa replied with a smile, gently pulling her hand away. In a proper, almost formal tone, she added, "We're taking a carriage, Your Highness. You should focus on your work." Seeing her withdraw so quickly, Rafael couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment.

Violet noticed this and gave Carissa a glance but chose to remain silent.

Carissa then went to see Helen, informing her that she would be visiting her aunt at Verdant Monastery and might be away for two or three days, but would definitely return in time for the New Year. Helen was momentarily confused before realizing that Carissa was referring to Avis.

"Then, hurry and go. Make sure to come back soon," she urged.

Kiera, who was also present, asked curiously, "Why is Aunt Avis living at Verdant Monastery? Isn't she supposed to be at Uncle Yuvan's residence, Horizon Estate?"

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"She's ill, so she moved to Verdant Monastery. She wanted peace and quiet to recover, and the monastery has the blessing of the Lord," Carissa replied. Kiera was puzzled. "But if she's sick, shouldn't she stay at Horizon Estate? At least there, if anything happens, the household can be notified immediately." Even Kiera understood this logic, so how could Yuvan not know?

Carissa was actually quite concerned. Yuvan's fief was in Valken, which was not too far from both Verdant Monastery and the capital.

If it were truly about recuperation, wouldn't it have been better to bring Avis back to the capital? After all, the royal family was in the capital. There were also the royal physicians and Sebastian to watch over her.

Now that Avis was at Verdant Monastery, Sebastian had sent two of his apprentices, Jasmine and Ivy, to care for her. But still, without any family around, it must be lonely.

"I'll find out more once I get there. In the meantime, Mother, please keep an eye on Ryan for me," Carissa said.

"Of course, leave it to me," Helen agreed, patting her chest in assurance, clearly eager to help Carissa.

Helen's response left Kiera stunned. She had been preoccupied with all sorts of snacks recently and wasn't aware of what had been happening in the estate.

As soon as Carissa left, Kiera quietly asked, "Mom, weren't you at odds with my sister-in-law? How did you become so close?"

Helen sighed. "Your sister-in-law is a pitiful person. Ryan is all she has left. As her mother-in-law, I shouldn't make things harder for her. I ought to treat her like my own daughter."

Kiera found this odd.

"But back when we were in the palace, you didn't say that. When I tried to advise you, you wouldn't listen."

"Who said I didn't listen? I listened, and that's why I'm treating her well now."

Seeing her mother's slightly guilty expression, Kiera decided not to press further. As long as her mother treated her sister-in-law well, that was all that mattered.

When Carissa set out, she didn't bring many people with her. Travis drove the carriage, while she and Violet sat inside. Even Lulu was left behind.

It was only then that Violet began to share the information Skywing Spire had uncovered with Carissa.

"Your aunt was sent to Verdant Monastery to recuperate not because she wanted to, but because it was orchestrated by Lady Fiona Judd, Prince Yuvan's secondary concubine.

"What's worse, your aunt's two

daughters have completely disregarded their own mother's wellbeing, treating Lady Fiona as she were their own birth moth Such ungrateful behavior is utterly infuriating! If your aunt is completely disappointed in them, then I definitely have to teach them a lesson," Violet said, her voice laced

with contempt.

Carissa had suspected Fiona's involvement from the start, but hearing that her two cousins were complicit still chilled her to the core.

She pressed on, "And what is Yuvan's stance on this?"

Violet let out a cold laugh. "Men... Do you really expect a man to cherish his wife from humble beginnings? Your aunt never bore him a son. The son under her care is actually from a concubine who passed away. She raised him as her own, even hiring the best tutors in Valken for him.

"But after your aunt fell ill, Lady Fiona took control of everything in the household. Though the boy has the status of a legitimate son, in reality, he's the child of a concubine. Lady Fiona would never allow him to outshine her own sons. She dismissed his tutor and arranged for him to take a minor position as a chief constable at the Valken's local authorities office."

Carissa frowned. "He's a scholar, untrained in combat. How can he possibly serve as a chief constable? And he has royal status. Even if he was born of a concubine, he's still registered under my aunt's lineage."

"Who doesn't know all that?" Violet scoffed. "Lady Fiona's family is powerful in Valken, while your aunt's family has lost its influence. Her relatives in official positions haven't achieved much.

"Ultimately, she's an aging woman with faded beauty, lacks support from her own family, and has no legitimate sons of her own. With poor health and a disloyal husband, it's no wonder she's become a victim of others' schemes."

Yuvan's favoritism towards his concubine and neglect of his wife was well-known in Valken, and it was likely no secret in the capital either.

Carissa recalled that when she returned from Meadow Ridge, Avis had been in the capital for treatment. Melanie had even asked Sebastian to attend to her. When Avis returned to Valken, Sebastian had sent some of his apprentices to accompany her.

Even then, Avis had seemed burdened with worries. However, she never revealed anything when asked. She insisted that aside from her declining health, everything was fine in Valken.

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Carissa mulled over past events in her heart, then sadly said, "I fear that her sudden worsening condition is not unrelated to me." Violet had initially intended to keep this from her friend, but since Carissa had already guessed as much, she decided to come clean.

"You're right. Lady Avis didn't know about your divorce at first, but Lady Fiona specifically told her about it. After hearing the news, Lady Avis coughed up blood and her condition deteriorated. These details weren't uncovered by the people from Skywing Spire. Rowan told me directly, asking whether or not he should inform you," Violet explained.

"I had a feeling," Carissa said, her voice filled with melancholy. "Aunt Avis arranged my marriage. Although she was the one who recommended it, my mother also made inquiries. The Warren family had indeed been quiet for years, with no significant troubles.

"With Amelia being ineffectual and weak, there was no oppressive sister-in-law to deal with. Also, the relationship between the main and second branches of the family remained superficially harmonious." Violet replied, "Don't dwell on it too much. Let's wait until we reach Verdant Monastery and see your aunt. We can make plans from there."

Violet was not skilled at offering comfort, always believing that to solve problems, the person involved must first stand up for themselves.

No matter how low her status might have fallen, Avis was still Yuvan's rightful wife. No matter how powerful Fiona's family might be, and even though she had borne children, she remained a concubine. There was no reason for a concubine to overshadow the rightful wife.

"Yes, I understand that." Carissa nodded. "Now that I'm married to Rafael, my aunt should find some solace in that."

"Exactly," Violet agreed, leaning back against the soft cushion.

The standing collar of her cloak was trimmed with white fox fur, highlighting her face with a blend of strength and allure.

Carissa glanced at her. "Is there anything else I don't know?"

"No, just some of my own troubles." Violet's brows furrowed. "But it's not worth mentioning."

"Family matters?"

"My aunt returned home for a visit, and she brought that scholar with her," Violet said, her expression clouded with worry. "To be honest, I used to hate her. She brought shame to the Spencer family, and because of her, several of the women in my family, including myself, had difficulties finding suitable marriages."

"But before I came to the capital this time, I made a special trip home. I saw her with that scholar, and for some reason, I didn't find her as detestable as before."

"Oh? Why is that?" Carissa asked, intrigued.

She had known about Violet's aunt's situation for a long time. Whenever Violet spoke of her, her tone was always filled with bitterness.

Violet looked at her friend. "I'm not sure. Perhaps it's because the scholar treats her well."

"The Spencer family allowed them into the family residence?" Carissa asked.

"No, they rented a small place outside. The scholar is only a low-ranking examination candidate now. After marrying my aunt, he effectively forfeited his future. After all, how could any academy accept him after he eloped with a woman from the Spencer family?"

"Even academic officials would not recommend him, so he survives by selling books and paintings now. My aunt also makes some embroidered goods. They manage to get by," said Violet. "What about children? How old are they?"

"My aunt hasn't had any children. She is infertile due to her condition, but the scholar remains devoted to her."

Carissa nodded. "That is indeed rare."



Violet continued, "When I saw her, she no longer had the grandeur of the eldest daughter. She was dressed as an ordinary woman. But she didn't look aged. There was not a single white hair on her head and her complexion was good.

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appearance, it's obvious that she is

happy."

Violet looked thoughtfully at Carissa. "I've been thinking, with so many cold-hearted men in the world, like Barrett and Yuvan, it's truly rare for her to have found a man willing to stay by her side through poverty or wealth.

"Although I was angry at her for eloping and making it difficult for the women in my family to find marriage prospects, what fault did she truly have? She simply loved that person, and he wasn't acceptable to my grandfather.

"Eloping was the only way they could be together. When I consider that, I find I no longer hate her as much. If my grandfather had agreed to their union, they wouldn't have needed to elope."

"Are you saying that the fault lies with the world and the wealthy families' prejudice against poor scholars?" Carissa asked.

Violet sighed. "Yes, but my grandfather treated me very well, and I can't harbor resentment toward him. So, I'm deeply conflicted."

Carissa responded thoughtfully, "In

such matters, it's hard to judge right

or wrong when they don't directly affect us However, your aunt's willingness to forsake wealth, and the scholar's acceptance of his ruined prospects for her, shows they truly care for each other

Tears suddenly welled up in Violet's eyes as she leaned against Carissa's shoulder and sobbed softly.

"What was I thinking? I used to hope the scholar would treat my aunt poorly so she would regret it. I also hoped that the scholar, after suffering through all the hardships, would come to regret it too. I wished they would become resentful partners, hurling insults at each other."

Carissa gently rubbed her shoulder. "You're not a cruel person."

"I really did think that way. I was cruel, but you didn't know," Violet said, her gaze vacant. "Now, apart from me, everyone in my family disapproves of them. Even the old servants who have been with the family for years secretly curse them when they see them."

"Then, why did they come back?" Carissa asked.

Violet explained, "My grandmother's health has worsened. My aunt wanted to return to see her, and perhaps she missed her family. So, she rented a house nearby and kneels at the door every day, hoping that over time, my grandmother will be willing to see her."

"But how could my grandparents be willing to see her? Even letting her step through the entrance of our family's residence is impossible. It would only inflame the anger of the other family members."

Carissa understood this well.

The women of the Spencer family, burdened by the issues caused by Violet's aunt, would surely harbor resentment towards her. Even if Violet's grandmother wanted to see Violet's aunt, she couldn't be allowed inside.

Carissa felt a deep melancholy and wanted to comfort Violet, but as she was about to speak, Violet sat up straight.

"I'm fine. It's just that thinking about your aunt and comparing her to my own aunt makes me conflicted. Your aunt married well. She married a prince and became a princess consort, but she is now worse off than my aunt who eloped. And you originally married Barrett, which, well, we all know how that ended."

Carissa fell silent. After a long while, she finally said, "Everyone has their own fate."

At that moment, Carissa couldn't fully grasp Violet's feelings. However, when she arrived at Verdant Monastery and saw her aunt, she understood.

Over the past two or three years, Avis' condition had deteriorated significantly. She seemed like a withered tree, pitifully thin and lacking any vitality. Her cheeks sunken, she lay in bed as if she were weightless, wrapped thickly in blankets. Despite the warm stove in the room, she continued to shiver.

She seemed to not recognize Carissa at all, her eyes staring blankly and devoid of any emotion.

Sebastian's apprentice, Jasmine, leaned closer and whispered repeatedly, "This is Carissa, your niece, the eldest daughter of the Duke of Northwatch's family Don't

you recognize her?"

Avis continued to gaze at Carissa with a blank expression, her mouth forming a word that was muffled and unclear. But Carissa could hear it distinctly-Avis said it was cold.

"How could this be? What illness has she contracted to be so thin?" Carissa asked, tears streaming down her face.

Sebastian's other apprentice, Ivy, was standing nearby. She softly said, "Ever since she received the divorce agreement from Prince Yuvan a few days ago, she has been like this." "Divorce agreement?" Carissa was taken aback, "Why did he divorce her?"

Ivy sighed. "The reason stated is that she has a grave illness, bore no sons, and has been jealous."

Carissa was enraged, her entire body trembling.

"She's already so ill-why would Prince Yuvan still divorce her? Is divorce something to be proud of? Has this been reported back to the capital?"

"I don't know, but it's likely to be delayed and will be reported after the New Year." Ivy glanced at Violet, then added, "Ms. Spencer, I recognize you. Prince Yuvan's divorce is related to your family."

Ivy knew Violet because when Violet's grandmother was ill, Violet had asked Carissa for help and requested that Sebastian attend to her. At that time, Sebastian had brought Ivy along.

Violet's expression changed dramatically. "Related to my family? What do you mean?"

Ivy looked at her in surprise. "Don't you know? Prince Yuvan went to the Spencer family to propose to you." "Preposterous!" Carissa was furious, her face flushed with anger. "When did this happen? Why wasn't I informed?"

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Due to Carissa's wedding, Violet had first returned home to help her family, then gone to assist the Inferno Guild with the gifts to add to Carissa's trousseau.

Though this had occurred more than a month ago, Yuvan would have had to travel from Valken to the Spencer family's residence in Ebonflow if he had gone to propose marriage. Considering the time it took to travel, Yuvan likely arrived to propose shortly after Violet's return to the Inferno Guild.

The Spencer family had sent people to help with the gift preparations just a few days after Violet's return to the Inferno Guild. That meant that by the time Violet met with the other Spencer family members in the capital, they probably hadn't heard the news yet.

"How shameless can Prince Yuvan be? How old is he? How dare he come to propose marriage to me? When was the divorce agreement sent? It's possible he came to propose first, then sent the divorce agreement. That old scoundrel-I'll have him chopped up!" exclaimed Violet, outraged.

Perhaps it was because Yuvan's name was repeatedly mentioned, but the tears in Avis' eyes began to fall. Then, her dull eyes finally focused, and she looked steadily at Carissa.

Recognition dawned on her face.

With a sob, Avis began to cry. Her tears flowed uncontrollably, and her cries were piercingly sorrowful. Her weeping was so intense, it seemed like she might choke. She gasped for breath but could hardly catch it. Soon, she was coughing and vomiting blood, the bright red droplets staining the floor.

A horrified Carissa gently patted her aunt's back and wiped away the blood. Yet, the blood kept coming up in steady streams until Avis eventually lost consciousness.

Ivy and Jasmine, seemingly accustomed to such emergencies, helped Avis lie down and began administering acupuncture. They crushed pills and forced them into her mouth. The attending maids cleaned up the blood and attended to Avis with practiced efficiency.

Carissa stood frozen. Even when a maid brought water to clean her blood-stained hands, she remained unresponsive.

Violet tapped her lightly. "Wash your hands. We'll see how she is after the acupuncture."

Only then did Carissa finally submerge her hands in warm water, her whole body trembling uncontrollably. She was aware of her aunt's illness, but hadn't realized it was this severe.

A chill of fear and dread settled in Carissa's heart—a fear she knew all too well, the kind that came with the thought of losing a loved one. Her heart seemed to sink into darkness.

After the acupuncture and another dose of medicine, Avis gradually began to regain consciousness. She looked even more frail than before, but she recognized Carissa. Avis reached out for her niece's hand, her eyes welling with tears once again.

Carissa hurriedly reassured, "Aunt Avis, I'm doing fine now. I'm married to Prince Rafael, and he treats me very well."

"Is that true?" Avis' eyes widened in disbelief. "Are you sure you're not... lying to me?"

"No, it's true. You can ask them." Carissa gestured to Ivy and Violet. "Ask them."

Violet looked at Avis and nodded. "It's true."

Violet was conflicted.

Yuvan, that old scoundrel, had caused Avis so much suffering, and now, he wanted to cast her aside and marry someone else. Just thinking about it was revolting.

Violet wondered how her

grandfather and father would refuse him-would they scold him fiercely and chase him away? Probably not. Her grandfather and father always cared about their reputation. No matter how awful Yuvan was, he was still a prince. It wouldn't be proper to openly confront him.

But if Violet had been present, she would have pointed a finger at him and berated him.

Who cared if he was a prince?

Violet felt that this situation was the most disgusting thing she had ever encountered in her entire life, bar none. Yuvan was in his forties by now, wasn't he? What on earth was that old man thinking, trying to marry her?

Meanwhile, Carissa focused on comforting Avis. Once the older woman's emotions had stabilized a bit, Carissa began to tell her about her current situation.

Avis grasped her niece's hand,

crying as she spoke, "I know about your divorce. I also know you went to the battlefield, and I worried every day that you would... I'm so relieved that everything is well now and that you've found a good husband. It

eases my heart."

She sighed deeply, her complexion now tinged with gray. "It's all my fault for arranging that marriage for you. Every night, I dream of your mother coming to scold me. Her spirit must hate me deeply." As she spoke, she began to cry once more.

Chapter 389

To prevent Avis from becoming too agitated again, Ivy administered acupuncture to calm her nerves and instructed her to get a good night's sleep. She also prescribed some sedative medicine that needed to be taken for the next couple of days.

Upon reading the divorce agreement, Violet became so enraged that she smashed a table.

The nuns from Verdant Monastery came to offer a simple meal. Ivy had them bring it over, and they dined in the side courtyard.

According to Ivy, the head of Verdant Monastery was a kind-hearted person who had a lot of sympathy for Avis. The other nuns did not intrude and provided plenty of food and drink, though they could not offer meat due to their dietary restrictions.

"Given Aunt Avis' current condition, she can't even drink a bit of broth with meat. How can she manage?" Carissa expressed her concern.

"If she were to drink it, she wouldn't be able to keep it down," Ivy, who was dressed in coarse cloth and thick cotton garments, replied, shaking her head. "She's been unable to drink broth for a while now, even back when she was living in Horizon Estate. Even the smell of meat makes her uncomfortable. She's been vegetarian for some time due to various reasons."

The information Ivy shared was consistent with what Violet had told Carissa.

Avis had one son and two daughters. The son was not her biological child, though she had raised him. He was grateful to her, but he had yet to achieve anything significant.

The two daughters, Sabrina and Stephanie, were her biological children, but they proved to be of little help. Resenting Avis for not being favored by Yuvan, they turned their allegiance to Fiona. She provided them with fine clothing and luxurious food, as well as promised them favorable marriages. Both daughters were granted titles of nobility, but not the higher rank of duchess.

In Valken, Fiona's family was a prominent one, surpassing Avis' now-diminished family. Avis had always been kind-hearted, which might have appeared as weakness to others, even to her own daughters.

Ivy provided further details, "Lady Sabrina rarely pays any attention to Lady Avis. Even when Lady Avis was in the residence, she seldom came to see her.

"On the other hand, Lady Stephanie still held some respect and devotion for her mother. She occasionally helped with Lady Avis' medicine. Still, she speaks unpleasantly and shows great disdain if Lady Avis' medicine stains her clothes.

"Also, all the maids and servants

who used to attend to Lady Avis have been reassigned by Lady Fiona. They've all been replaced with her own people. The maid who came to the monastery with Lady Avis is also one of Lady Fiona's people. That's why I needed to speak with you here."

Carissa observed that while the maids were attentive in their care of Avis, their expressions were devoid of any concern, indicating that their efforts were merely superficial.

"What about Prince Yuvan?" Carissa asked, her eyes flashing with a cold glint.

Ivy snorted derisively. "Since

Jasmine and arrived at Horizon Estate, we haven't seen him step into Lady Avis' quarters more than a

few times. Even when he does

come his words are cold. He looks at her with utter disdain, as if he wishes she would die sooner. I've seen cruelty before, but this is beyond anything I've witnessed."

Carissa was puzzled. "Given how my aunt is now, why does he still want a divorce? And getting divorce is not so simple for a prince. Has he submitted the divorce agreement? Even if he has, the king might not approve."

The claim of not giving birth to sons and jealousy didn't seem like valid grounds for a divorce.

The supposed lack of a son didn't

make sense. Since Avis had taken in

a son from a concubine, that should count as her own. As for jealousy, it was even less likely. With Fiona's constant bullying, it was



questionable whether Avis even had the chance to be jealous

Ivy shook her head. "We don't know that."

A prince's divorce wasn't straightforward. Carissa feared that this wasn't a genuine divorce but rather a death warrant. Yuvan wanted Avis dead to make way for a new princess consort.

Chapter 390

Carissa looked up at Ivy and asked, "Is there no other way to treat my aunt's illness? Could we ask Sebastian to come over?"

"My mentor has already come here, but he didn't tell you. He said Lady Avis is just enduring, and it's uncertain how long she can last. If we stop her medication, she might only have a day or two left," Ivy replied.

Carissa's eyes widened in alarm. "You can't stop her medication!"

Ivy looked resigned as she said, "Even if we continue with her medication, she may make it through the end of the year, but she certainly won't survive beyond the fifteenth of the new year."

Tears streamed down Carissa's face. She hadn't realized how severe Avis' condition was. Sebastian had kept her in the dark, and Rowan had always seemed on the verge of saying something but held back. Carissa should have guessed earlier.

"At least the current medication and acupuncture will ease her suffering. When the time comes, she won't be in too much pain," Ivy consoled.

As a physician, Ivy had witnessed many patients pass away. However, she felt a deep sense of regret for Avis.

It was a bitter pill to swallow.

How unfortunate could a person be to be despised by both her husband and children? Her family wasn't much help either. They were stationed far away and unable to visit even once during the harsh winter.

If a person had done wrong and met an ill fate, others would sigh and say it was well deserved. However, Avis had always been kind-hearted and had done many good deeds throughout her life. How had she ended up in such a dire state?

"Vivi, you return to the capital tomorrow. I'll stay here with my aunt," Carissa said, wiping her tears. "I can't allow her to not have a single family member by her side."

Violet, ever loyal, replied, "I'll stay here with you. As for Rod, there's a wooden house outside the monastery specifically for accommodating male guests. Let him stay there."

"But the monastery is isolated and quiet with the New Year approaching. You'll have to endure hardships," Carissa protested.

"I've endured hardships when facing the trials of the battlefield," Violet replied firmly. "What hardship can I not bear?"

Carissa clenched the handkerchief in her fingers, momentarily stunned by her friend's words.

Was Yuvan's desire to marry Violet somehow related to her battlefield experience?

Carissa shook her head. No, it

couldn't be. If a prince with military power had such thoughts, Carissa might have found it plausible. However, Yuvan commanded only five hundred soldiers. Even as a prince with no real military force in Valken, the king surely kept a close watch on him.

Besides, Yuvan was not known for his talents. How could he possibly entertain thoughts of rebellion? It seemed too absurd to believe. Carissa thought it was more likely that Yuvan simply wanted to consolidate his power in Valken.

Yet, Carissa was cautious and perceptive. Some things might sound far-fetched, but human desires were insatiable. Who knew if Yuvan was deliberately exposing his shortcomings? Could he be a schemer with deep motives?

Moreover, among the many princes, he was the closest to the capital. It was odd. His temperament was similar to that of Harvey. Yet, while Harvey remained in the capital, Yuvan was sent to his fief.

Perhaps the late king had difficulty understanding him, so he chose to place Yuvan in Valken under close surveillance.

The late king had foresight. He sent nearly all his brothers to their fiefs, stripping them of their military powers. Even if they harbored rebellious thoughts, they lacked the means to act on them.

But the late king was not infallible. Even in their fiefs, there were ways for the princes to evade the court's scrutiny and secretly gather troops. Such occurrences had happened before, leading to internal strife that caused great suffering among the people. That eventually led to the rise of the current era.

What was curious was how Yuvan, who seemed so inept, would dare to divorce his wife and try to marry Violet, who was not only a daughter of the influential Spencer family, but had also proven herself on the battlefield.

That evening, Carissa and Violet stayed in the small courtyard. There was only one bed, so they had to share it. Neither of them could sleep.

Violet had only picked at her dinner, not because it was all vegetarian, but because she was feeling intensely nauseated. Meanwhile, Carissa hadn't eaten at all. Seeing her aunt in such a state made her feel miserable.