

War Song 391

Chapter 391

"Cari, I'm thinking of sneaking into Horizon Estate and getting rid of him," Violet said after tossing and turning in bed.

"Don't be foolish. Plotting against a prince-are you trying to have your entire family implicated?" Carissa glanced at her friend. "Are you worried that your family might agree to the marriage?"

Violet folded her arms behind her head. "I don't know, but I'm sure my father wouldn't agree. My grandfather has always doted on me, so I believe he wouldn't consent either.

"However, my family is desperate for a high-status marriage to restore their reputation. I'm afraid that the pressure from the rest of the family members might force my grandfather and father into agreeing." "Even if they agree, you wouldn't marry him," said Carissa confidently.

"That's right, I wouldn't," Violet's voice was tinged with frustration. "But if the marriage is agreed upon and I refuse, another woman from my family will be married off in my place. How can I bear to let someone else sacrifice themselves for me, especially if it's a relative from my own family?"

Violet was deeply worried. She wished she could return to the Spencer family's residence immediately.

"Do you want to go back?" Carissa asked.

"I want to, but I can't. Didn't Winona leave some of her people in my care? I'll have Claire go instead," Violet decided.

Carissa sighed and pulled the blanket over her head, tears streaming down her face. In the end, she barely slept and was up before dawn.

Determined to do something, Carissa personally made some oatmeal and carried it to Avis. Maybe due to the fact that her niece was feeding her, Avis managed to eat half a bowl.

Jasmine noted, "This is actually quite a bit for her. Usually, she can only manage a couple of bites. Without the chicken soup and all those expensive medicinal herbs keeping her alive, she'd probably be gone by now."

Then, she added, "If her children could come to see her, there might still be hope."

"I doubt that will ever happen. Her son can't come, and her two daughters neither dare to offend Lady Fiona nor truly wish to visit," Ivy said.

Carissa felt a pang of discomfort and frustration in her heart. As she turned to leave, she bumped into Violet, who was returning from outside. Violet was wrapped tightly in her cloak, with the white fox fur covering her chin. She also had dark circles under her eyes.

"Where did you go?"

"I sent a pigeon to Claire and asked her to look into it."

Carissa hummed softly in response.

Violet smiled bitterly. "I'm worried that if my family agrees to the marriage, we would be considered an accomplice in helping Prince Yuvan divorce Lady Avis and putting her in such a tragic state." Carissa remained silent, her heart aching deeply.

The next day, Rafael and Dylan arrived.

Though they were men, the abbess still allowed Rafael to visit Avis.

When Carissa saw that her husband

had braved the snowstorm to reach her, the emotions she had been holding back for days nearly erupted. Tears streamed

no

uncontrollably down her face.

Rafael tenderly wiped her tears and cradled her face. "Let's go in and see her."

When Avis saw Rafael holding her niece's hand, her tears flowed freely. She couldn't be mistaken- Rafael's deep affection for Carissa was evident in his eyes, and he couldn't hide it at all. In fact, he showed no intention of hiding it.

Previously, Avis had worried that

Rafael might be put off by Carissa's status as a divorced woman. But now, seeing the joy in Rafael's eyes as he looked at Carissa, she knew he did not hold any such disdain. The anxiety in her heart slowly eased.

"Don't worry, Aunt Avis. I'll take good care of Carissa." Rafael assured.

"I'm not worried anymore," Avis said, deeply touched that Rafael addressed her as "Aunt" as Carissa had done.

Her joy was overwhelming, and she couldn't stop the tears from flowing.

Rafael's presence was a form of redemption for Avis. She had always felt guilty toward her late sister, but seeing Carissa find happiness in a second marriage, she felt that her guilt would be somewhat alleviated even if she were to die now.

Her mood improved, as did her appetite. That day, Avis managed to finish a full bowl of oatmeal, giving everyone a glimmer of hope.

However, Rafael could only stay for

half a day before needing to return to the capital. After the New Year, celebrations in the capital would be in full swing. The celebrations would last for fifteen days, from New Year's Eve to the day of the Starfall Festival.

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During these fifteen days, the king would personally visit Skyward Sanctum, the sacred platform for ceremonies. He would then enjoy the festivities at the city gates with the common folk and watch the fireworks.

The Capital Guard and the garrison unit needed to make early preparations, urging the Ministry of Housing to build high platforms outside the city walls so the king and court officials could watch the fireworks. After visiting Avis, Carissa and Rafael talked in the small wooden cabin outside. Travis had used the cabin for a night, but the bedding was neatly arranged. Although the furniture was old, it had been cleaned thoroughly.

Carissa shared the situation regarding Avis with Rafael, who was equally shocked upon hearing about Yuvan's reasons for the divorce.

"That's absurd, isn't it? Having no sons and jealousy-none of those accusations are convincing," he said, frowning.

"There's always something that can be used to convince others, like Aunt Avis' grave illness," Carissa replied, her frustration evident. She felt a weight in her chest that wouldn't ease.

"And he plans to marry Violet? What is Uncle Yuvan thinking?" Rafael mused.

He frowned, his sharp mind quickly piecing things together. He and Carissa were on the same page.

If Yuvan proceeded with this, his actions could very well lead to his own downfall.

The Spencer family was a prominent family from Ebonflow. Although they didn't hold official positions in the capital, they had a strong influence through numerous local officials across various regions.

Also, their business ventures were extensive. They weren't quite wealthy enough to rival entire nations, but if someone were to claim they were the richest family in Starhaven, few would argue otherwise. However, Fiona's family, the Judd family from Valken, was also quite wealthy.

Rafael wondered if Yuvan was seeking more than just wealth from the Spencer family. His insistence on marrying Violet made the situation far more complicated.

"I'll keep an eye on it," Rafael said.

After a pause, he remembered that he was also currently under Salvador's suspicion.

He softly added, "I can only observe in secret."

Carissa understood his dilemma.

Despite the tough battle at the Southern Frontier, Rafael had returned with only superficial glory. Behind the scenes, Salvador was wary of him and had taken away his

military power.

If Salvador discovered that Rafael was secretly investigating another prince, he might become even more suspicious of him.

"Perhaps it's best to not get involved?" Carissa posited, worried about her husband.

Rafael smiled warmly, reaching out to touch her cheek. "If we ignore it and chaos erupts, won't it be the men in our army who suffer? Won't it be the common people who bear the brunt?" Carissa sighed. "I understand. It was just a moment of frustration."

Only soldiers truly understood the horrors of war, and only genuine military leaders felt the pain of the soldiers who charged into battle.

"Don't worry. be careful," Rafael

said, gently stroking his wife's cheek

with his fingertips. "Given how serious your aunt's condition is, I'm afraid you can't leave yet. I'll come back to fetch you before the New Year's Eve palace banquet

"Okay. Carissa nodded. "Be careful on your way back."

Rafael kissed her forehead and reluctantly pulled away. Then, he and Dylan mounted their horses and left.

Carissa returned to the small courtyard, where Jasmine was preparing Avis' medicine. Though Avis had usually been unable to keep even half of it down, today she managed to get it all down. Seeing her niece enter, Avis' once-pallid face gained a hint of color. "Cari, you've come."

Carissa sat by the bed, taking the medicine bowl from Jasmine. "I'll feed her."

"Alright." Jasmine stepped aside to watch.

Carissa was about to give her aunt the medicine when Avis reached out to stop her. "Carissa, remember this: if something happens to me, don't go looking for trouble with anyone. Just focus on living your own life."

"Why are you saying such things? You're getting better and will continue to improve. Don't talk like that."

"Everyone has to die eventually," Avis said with a smile, though her eyes were full of deep sadness. "Sometimes, living is torment and death is the only relief."

"Aunt Avis!" Carissa's expression hardened. "I don't want to hear that."

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Avis gripped Carissa's wrist tightly, glancing anxiously outside. Her breathing was rapid, and she struggled to keep her voice steady.

"Listen to me. Prince Yuvan is not a good man. He has been conspiring with Grand Princess Eleanor."

Carissa was stunned. "What?"

She hurriedly sent everyone out, instructing Violet to stand guard at the door.

"Aunt Avis, what do you mean by that?"

Avis' head sank, her voice filled with fear and cold dread as she continued, "Over the years, he has been secretly raising troops in Valken, funded by Grand Princess Eleanor and Lady Fiona. Those soldiers are hidden in Stonebridge County."

Carissa knew Stonebridge County. It was Eleanor's fief, the dowry the late king had given her.

"Do not offend him. Do not become his enemy. He is not as simple as outsiders think," Avis said, her breath growing weaker.

Perhaps the revelation of this secret had frightened her deeply.

"Over the years, he has caused a scandal with his favoritism and abandoning his wife. Do you really think he favors Lady Fiona? It's just a ploy to create a bad reputation and deceive the current king," Avis added.

Carissa was horrified.

Everyone believed Yuvan to be a worthless, idle man-at least, Carissa had thought so.

Salvador might have had spies in Valken, but Stonebridge County was Eleanor's territory, and she hadn't even settled there. So, why would Salvador keep an eye on Stonebridge County?

No wonder Eleanor was so brazenly amassing wealth.

After revealing this, Avis lost strength and drifted into a deep, exhausted sleep.

On the twenty-eighth day of December, Avis seemed slightly better, eating half a bowl of oatmeal for lunch and another half for dinner. She even asked if there was more, and ended up eating an additional half bowl.

Carissa was overjoyed at her aunt's improvement. She urged Avis to rest well, hoping that after the harsh winter, everything would be better with the arrival of spring.

Avis' eyes shone as she smiled faintly. "Alright."

Carissa was wrapped up in her own joy, oblivious to the silent exchange of glances between Ivy and Jasmine, both of whom sighed quietly.

In the middle of the night, Carissa and Violet heard Jasmine's frantic knocking at the door and her choked voice coming through, "Lady Avis has passed away!"

Carissa shot up, gasping for breath as if she had just emerged from drowning. "No!"

Jasmine, who had been keeping watch through the night, discovered that Avis had stopped breathing when she got up to offer her some water.

Avis had passed away peacefully in her sleep. She had not survived the year, dying quietly in the stillness of Verdant Monastery.

Rafael arrived early on the twenty-ninth day of December. Upon hearing the news of Avis' death, he held Carissa tightly. He expected her to cry, but she remained remarkably composed, with not a single tear in her eyes.

Nestled in his arms, her voice was faint, "She's gone. Perhaps it's a release."

Rafael looked around at the withered trees of Verdant Monastery. The desolation they exuded seemed to carry a faint aura of despair.

Avis had died in such grim

circumstances, without her husband or children by her side. Thankfully, Carissa Kad come. Otherwise, when Avis passed, she would have been entirely alone. And with her exalted status as a princess consort, it

seemed all the more tragic.

The few maids who had accompanied her were from Yuvan's household. They would send someone to report the death, and the arrangements for Avis' funeral were not Carissa's responsibility.

However, Carissa personally washed

Avis' face and wiped her hands. With no luxurious garments available, she could only dress her aunt in simple clothing while waiting for Yuvan's people to come and take her body for burial.

Throughout the journey back to the capital, Rafael stayed with Carissa in the carriage, while Violet rode Rafael's horse and Travis drove the carriage. In the somber atmosphere, silence hung heavily over them

all.

Rafael kept Carissa in his arms, never letting her go. Meanwhile, she remained still, not even uttering a word.

As they approached the city, she

spoke softly, Aunt Avis told me that Grand Princess Eleanor and Prince Yuvan had frequent dealings, and that Prince Yuvan has been raising troops in Stonebridge County with funds from Grand Princess Eleanor and Lady Fiona."

"I never would have guessed that," Rafael said, his brow furrowed.

Who could have imagined that someone so weak and incapable of managing his own household harbored such grand ambitions?

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By the time they arrived at the capital, it was already New Year's Eve.

The New Year was the most anticipated and joyous festival of the year for the common folk. Every street to

and alley was filled with festive cheer, with households putting up decorations and preparing firework

usher in the new year.

Amidst this time of universal celebration and family reunions, Avis had passed away quietly, her death not causing even the slightest ripple in Yuvan's family. As Yuvan and his family had already arrived in the capital, the news of her death may not have reached them yet.

When Carissa entered Hell Monarch Estate, she learned that Yuvan's family had arrived and that Helen was hosting them.

As Violet handed over her horsewhip to the stable hand, she clenched her fists upon hearing the news. Her anger was so intense, she could hardly contain herself. She felt an overwhelming urge to storm in and confront Yuvan.

Rafael frowned. "When I left, they hadn't yet arrived in the capital. Clearly, they've only just come. Instead of visiting the palace first to pay respects to the queen dowager, they came straight to Hell Monarch Estate to visit me. It seems that I've underestimated my uncle in the past."

Carissa kept her gaze down, not lifting her eyes. "His visit to Hell Monarch Estate is merely a display for the king. It serves to inform His Majesty that now, in Starhaven, only the Hell Monarch is known, not the king. That's why even upon returning to the capital, Prince Yuvan must first visit Hell Monarch Estate."

Rafael, understanding his wife's pain, clearly did not want her to face them.

"Carissa, don't go see him. Go rest in our room. I'll go see what they're up to."

Carissa's eyes were dark with a hint of cold determination. "Why shouldn't I see him? It's New Year's Eve, a perfect opportunity to spread joy by letting them know of Aunt Avis' passing."

Rafael grasped her arm, his eyes full of concern. "Don't be like this. If you're upset, just cry it out."

Since her aunt's death, Carissa had not shed a single tear. On the way back, Rafael had expected her to weep in his arms, but she remained quiet and still, neither crying nor speaking. Even when she finally spoke to him, it had only been about Yuvan's collusion with Eleanor, her demeanor as calm as ever.

Carissa slowly shook her head. Crying wouldn't change anything. It would be like carving another piece of flesh from her already festering heart. Tears could not alleviate her pain.

Without even bothering to change her clothes, she accompanied Rafael to the main hall. Violet followed without hesitation.

Laughter and conversation filled the air as they approached the main hall.

"Lady Helen, you're truly blessed to be able to leave the estate and live with Prince Rafael. Few concubines in the palace have such fortune as you."

You speak so well, Lady Fiona. What a clever tongue. I truly appreciate it," Helen said with a broad smile, clearly delighted by the flattery.

"Lady Helen, every word from me is sincere," Fiona said, her tone steady and earnest. If e only listened, they might believe it to be utterly heartfelt.

"Prince Rafael and Lady Carissa have returned," Gillian announced as soon as she spotted them from afar.

As Rafael, Carissa, and Violet entered the main hall, they saw a middle-aged man in a brocade robe looking toward the door. He was handsome yet somewhat reserved.

Fiona sat beside him. She was

dressed in a striking coral-red gown

with intricate gold and silver

embroidery. Though she was in her early thirties, her complexion was smooth and healthy. Her hair was styled in an elaborate updo, adorned with two pearl-inlaid hairpins, giving her an air of elegance.

On the right side was Yuvan's eldest son from his previous concubine, who had been raised by Avis as her own. He was slim and bore a strong resemblance to Yuvan, with a dignified posture that spoke of refined

manners.

Two younger boys, approximately

fifteen to seventeen years old, were

seated nearby. Their clothing was

more luxurious than the eldest son's, and their expressions were even

more haughty.

The two young women present, Sabrina and Stephanie, wore matching lake-blue dresses. Due to the heating in the room, they had removed their cloaks.

Rafael and Carissa entered, surveyed the room, and remained silent.

Fiona was just a concubine, not Yuvan's rightful wife, so she stood up to greet them.

"Greetings, Your Highness, Your Grace."

The three young men and two young women also stood and bowed.

Rafael's voice was cold and indifferent as he said, "Sit

Yuyan had expected Rafael and Carissa to come forward and greet him, so he felt somewhat embarrassed when they remained standing in place.

He forced a smile and asked, "Rafael, my nephew. Where have you been?"

"Verdant Monastery," Rafael replied, his gaze as frosty as his voice.

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When Verdant Monastery was mentioned, the faces of Yuvan's family members changed immediately. Yuvan's eldest son, Randall, was about to sit down when he heard it.

He abruptly asked, "Verdant Monastery? Do you know how our mother is faring?"

"Not well!" Carissa looked directly at Randall. "If you care about her, why didn't you go see her yourself?"

Randall glanced at Yuvan, who remained indifferent and said nothing.

...I was at the academy and couldn't leave," Randall replied awkwardly.

"Is that so? With so many people in Horizon Estate, no one could leave? Only two maids were sent to attend to her. If it weren't for Sebastian's apprentices, Jasmine and Ivy, how long could she have lasted at Verdant Monastery?"

Sabrina, who never thought much of Carissa because she had been divorced, was displeased by her words and said, "I didn't realize that my cousin-in-law had a penchant for meddling in other people's affairs."

Carissa's gaze cut through Sabrina like a knife as she retorted, "And I didn't know there were such ungrateful daughters in this world."

"How dare you!" Sabrina's eyes reddened immediately. "What an outrageous accusation. How could you possibly know if I'm ungrateful? Have you seen how I treated my mother?"

"I didn't, but I saw that when your mother died, not a single one of you was there," Carissa replied coldly.

Randall staggered back in shock. "What? Mom has passed away?"

He seemed unable to believe it, tears streaming down his face. Seeing his tears, Carissa was unsure whether they were genuine or not.

Sabrina and Stephanie both stared blankly for a moment before their eyes filled with tears, though none actually fell.

Yuvan pressed his hand to his chest and sighed heavily, "If I had known her illness was so serious, I would have stopped her from going to Verdant Monastery. She insisted on going to fulfill a vow made years ago, so that Melanie's family could find peace in the afterlife."

Before Carissa could respond, Violet, standing behind her, was visibly enraged.

"This is the first time I've heard someone blaming his dead wife because he abandoned her for a favored concubine.

"No one wants to be away from their husband and children when seriously ill, only to die quietly in a cold, desolate monastery. It's clear you forced her to go. If you had treated her with any kindness, she wouldn't have died so early," Violet ranted.

"Preposterous!" Yuvan's face darkened. "Who are you to dare speak so recklessly about my family matters in my presence? She went of her own volition Everyone in the household can testify to that." Violet sneered coldly. "Once someone is dead, you can say anything. But I hope that before you die, Prince Yuvan, you also find a monastery to die alone in without any of your children by your side. If you

can manage that, then I might believe your deceitful words."

Fiona sized Violet up, noticing her haughty and aloof demeanor. Fiona guessed she must be a noble lady from the capital.

She asked, "May I ask which family

you are from? Why speak so

harshly? Do you know that cursing a prince is a serious crime? I won't hold your youthful indiscretion against you this time, but should there be another, I will ensure you are severely punished."

"How imposing you are, Lady Fiona!" Violet retorted sarcastically, "Cursing a prince is a grave sin, but persecuting a princess consort to death-does that not count as a major grime? Even when Lady Avis was gravely ill, you sent her a divorce agreement. Was that really for a divorce? It was a death

warrant. You seemed to want her to

die sooner."

"What divorce agreement?" Randall looked at Yuvan in disbelief. "Dad, you sent a letter of divorce to Mom? What did she do to deserve that?"

Yuvan frowned. "Sit down. Do not speak nonsense. There was no divorce agreement. It must be a

baseless rumor."

He had ordered that the agreement be burned after it was shown to Avis. Therefore, even if Rafael and Carissa had gone to Verdant Monastery, they wouldn't have found it. At most, they would have heard a verbal account from Sebastian's two apprentices.

However, Carissa reached into her sleeve and pulled out the divorce agreement. She threw it at Randall with a cold expression.

"Look for yourself and see if it's in your father's handwriting."

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Yuvan's face went ashen.

The divorce agreement was still in existence? Every one of those responsible was unreliable!

Randall took the letter with trembling hands.

How could he not recognize was his father's handwriting, written by his own hand.

the handwriting?

He lifted his gaze to Yuvan, clenching his fists. "Dad, how do you explain this?"

Yuvan pursed his lips, his displeasure evident. The once gentle and unassuming expression on his face had been replaced by a cloud of gloom.

Fiona quickly intervened, "How could your father have written that? It's clearly an imitation of your father's handwriting. Why would your father divorce your mother?"

She looked around, but did not dare directly address Carissa. Instead, she turned to Violet.

"You must have produced this document, right? Do you have some deep-seated grudge against Yuvan and his family? Why use a fake divorce agreement to provoke Lady Avis and cause her to fall ill?"

Violet replied coldly, "Don't you know who I am? If you don't, why did you ask for my hand in marriage? I've never even met Prince Yuvan. How could I imitate his handwriting? If anyone were to imitate, it would be you, the secondary concubine who's with him day and night. Perhaps it's you who used his handwriting. to send this letter to Lady Avis, hoping she would die sooner."

Both Yuvan and Fiona's gazes fell sharply on Violet.

Yuvan's eyes suddenly brightened. So, this was Violet?

Fiona's eyes narrowed, a flicker of dark light appearing. So, she was Violet?

Carissa looked at the people from Yuvan's family. Except for Randall, no one else showed any sign of

sorrow.

It was as if, from the moment Avis was sent to Verdant Monastery, they had already considered her dead. in their hearts.

Randall, whether genuine or not, at least shed tears.

Carissa's heart was cold. Her aunt, such a kind person, had met such a tragic end. For a woman to end up with an ungrateful husband was truly heartbreaking.

Carissa cast a cold gaze at the two young women. "She was your mother. She's dead, and not a single tear from either of you?"

Stephanie's face showed sorrow as she gracefully stood and lowered her head. "Today is New Year's Eve. Even though I am deeply saddened, I can't shed tears on this day, or it would bring ridicule."

"That's truly laughable. Losing one's parents is the greatest sorrow of all. Even court officials, when they lose their parents, must observe three years of mourning. Does being devoted to one's parents mean less.

than celebrating the New Year?" Carissa snapped.

*Even if you criticize, I can't cry in someone else's home. Besides, not shedding tears doesn't mean I'm

not grieving. How could you understand the sorrow in my heart?" Stephanie retorted.

"Such eloquence, but what an

ungrateful daughter you are." Carissa was deeply disappointed and furious. "You've just returned to the capital. You should be paying respects to the queen dowager, not coming to Hell Monarch Estate. I won't entertain you. Please leave."

Carissa's direct dismissal of her elders, especially a royal relative, was quite impudent and disrespectful in the capital.

But while Yuvan was livid at Carissa's dismissal, he didn't show it. Instead, he turned to Rafael. "Rafael, are you going to drive your uncle away?"

Rafael replied, "My wife is right. You

should have first gone to pay

respects to the queen dowager and the king before coming to my estate. Furthermore, there is mourning in your family. Regardless of circumstances, respect for the deceased takes precedence. You should have informed the queen

dowager and the king, and rushed back to Valken."

Yuvan's face turned an ashen green with anger. Standing up, he looked at Rafael coldly.

"Rafael, now that you've accomplished much, are you so bold as to disregard even your uncle? Aren't you

afraid people will say you've become arrogant because of your achievements?"

Rafael raised his chin proudly, and his gaze was cold. "I speak the truth and reason, I don't care what others say." "Fine!" Yuvan's lips quivered with rage as he shouted, "Let's go!"

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Randall wiped his tears and approached Rafael, wanting to ask something. However, Yuvan cut him off with a loud command.

"Didn't you hear them? They think we bring bad luck because we're in mourning! Hurry up and leave!"

Tears streamed down Randall's face again. He gave Rafael and Carissa a salute, his tall, thin figure swaying as he staggered away.

Yuvan's other children all made a noise of discontent and left. Only Fiona managed to maintain her composure.

She bowed to Helen, and said, "Take care, Lady Helen. I'll be taking my leave."

As Fiona left, she cast a few significant glances at Violet, who responded with a dismissive roll of her eyes.

Helen remained in a state of bewilderment throughout the encounter. She had just been conversing pleasantly with them. They had appeared polite and well-spoken. How could they turn out to be so heartless?

Avis was dead, and only Randall had shown any sign of grief. The others wore faces devoid of any visible sorrow. Especially the two young women, who were Avis' own daughters, had allowed their mother to die alone at Verdant Monastery.

Helen shivered at the thought. Now that she had left the palace, she relied on her son and daughter-in-law for support when she was old. She knew they would have to remain respectful to her according to the kingdom's culture and law, and wouldn't dare to treat her this way.

But what if they did dare? Rafael was her only hope.

With this in mind, she quickly stood up and joined Carissa in condemning Yuvan's family, calling them heartless and wishing them ill.

Afterward, she gently patted Carissa's back and said, "Don't let those despicable people upset you. Lady Avis will have her revenge from beyond the grave. They will get what they deserve. Don't be too troubled."

Carissa was initially consumed by anger and distress, but she found herself somewhat comforted by her mother-in-law's attempt to placate her. She had been trying to cry but could not shed tears, and her face revealed her complex emotions.

Despite everything, she felt a little better and less angry

"There you go. Go take a bath. We need to go to the palace later," Helen coaxed, treating Carissa like a child.

Helen turned to see Rafael standing idly, and took on the demeanor of a stern mother.

"Why are you just standing there? Take your wife back to your room. Look at her hands-they're ice-cold. Show a little care for Carissa!"

Rafael was momentarily taken aback. His mother had never spoken to him in such a manner before.

She used to scold him when he was younger, but since he took up the martial arts and military duties,

Helen had found herself increasingly... intimidated?

Regardless, the relationship between mother and son had grown more distant. Aside from formal greetings and pleasantries, they had little else to say.

After Rafael received his title and established his own residence, their interactions became even more distant. They were either excessively polite, or marked by an underlying desire for him to leave quickly. Reprimanding him like this was something that hadn't happened in years.

He gave his mother a brief glance before taking Carissa's hand and leading her back to their room. Helen resumed her seat, pondering over her actions. Had she really been so stern with her son? Rafael hadn't shown any of the fearsome demeanor she might have expected. Clearly, marriage had mellowed him. He seemed much gentler now.

Noticing Violet sitting there, visibly

upset, Helen's heart ached. She wasn't closely acquainted with Avis, but they had met many times over the years. Avis always appeared gentle and dignified, treating the

palace staff with kindness.

To have died so tragically in a monastery, without even a tear shed by her own daughters-how miserable must her life have been?

Helen felt tears welling up. She choked out, "Was Lady Avis' passing peaceful?"

Violet replied, "With Sebastian's apprentices present, she wasn't in great pain. But if you call that peaceful, then it falls short."

Helen murmured, "Yes, to die with neither children nor husband around-how terrifying that must have been."

Helén found the thought of death to

be the most frightening thing in life. To face death alone was the ultimate dread. She wished for someone to hold her hand, to offer comfort, and to whisper reassurances in her ear.

Thus, she felt a deep empathy for Avis, because she herself feared the loneliness of dying alone.

Sighing, Helen tried to push these distressing thoughts away. After all, it was New Year's Eve, and she didn't want to dwell on such sorrowful matters.

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After bathing and donning her formal attire, Carissa exuded an air of unrivaled elegance and majesty. She touched up her makeup lightly, trying to conceal her pallor and the dark circles under her eyes, to hide her weariness from view.

The royal family banquet was clearly a time for family reunion, but it came with its own set of rituals and decorum that had to be observed.

She took a deep breath before the mirror, striving to suppress the grief of losing a loved one. She told herself that she had become accustomed to it, that familiarity would make it less painful.

In the mirror, she saw a figure dressed in splendid attire, with an elaborate hairstyle and adorned with pearls and jewels. A necklace made of Mystic Pearls shimmered with a lustrous sheen, cascading gracefully down her chest.

This was part of the dowry given by Adrian. The jars of pearls alone were worth a fortune, and they were stored separately in another box.

Her earrings, also made of Mystic Pearls, covered her entire earlobe, adding an air of exquisite grandeur.

The beauty mark beneath her eyes was red, and it now seemed to carry a hint of bloodlust, revealing undertone of coldness and severity. She lowered her eyes, concealing the fierce light of anger that lurked beneath.

Rafael came over and took her hand gently.

"Let's go," he said softly.

Dressed in his formal attire, Rafael looked tall and upright, his features strikingly handsome. Carissa glanced at him and managed a strained smile. "Alright, let's not keep Mother waiting.

Helen was rarely one for understated elegance, but she had styled her hair in a simple coil and wore a modest emerald hairpin. She had originally planned to wear a red coral necklace, but thinking of Avis, she removed it along with her favorite gold bangle set with red rubies and emeralds.

Kiera held Ryan's hand and walked toward the exit. With her hair done up in two buns, she looked adorable.

The begonia red dress complemented her delicate and lovely appearance. Her eyes sparkled with joy as she adjusted the silk ribbon on Ryan's hair before leading him by the hand. "Mom, Rafael, Carissa."

"Grandma Helen, Aunt Carissa, Uncle Rafael."

Kiera and Ryan chimed in almost simultaneously, then skipped happily over to join them.

Seeing the innocent smile on Ryan's face, which had replaced the sadness from when he had come back, Carissa felt a small measure of comfort in her heart. "Take it slow now that your leg is better," Helen said.

Over the past few days, she had grown fond of Ryan. He was well-behaved and sensible, a child who didn't cause trouble, which pleased Helen immensely. "Yes, Grandma Helen," Ryan replied, stopping in his tracks.

He wanted to explain that hopping along was easier on one foot so that the other was less stressed, but he wouldn't contradict Helen's kind intentions.

When Carissa married, Frederick

had told him to be obedient in Hell

Monarch Estate. He was advised to study

and practice martial arts,

to be too mischievous or

upset Helen, as her anger might

affect Carissa.

So, Ryan intended to be very good, hoping to win Helen's favor, which in turn would make her like his aunt

even more.

Rafael mounted his horse, and the

rest of the family got into the

carriage. The carriages were

spacious, with cushioned seats and

decorated copper stoves in the

corners. The stoves, filled with

glowing iron blocks, kept the chill at

bay.

Carissa didn't speak a word throughout the ride. She felt no festive cheer of New Year's Eve, only the biting cold wind that seeped through the curtains, which chilled her heart.

A hand took hers.

Carissa looked down at it and then up to see Helen giving her a look of encouragement and comfort. Carissa, you still have us."

"What's wrong?" Kiera asked, puzzled.

When Yuvan and his family arrived, Kiera and Ryan had been playing in the backyard and were unaware of the situation. They didn't know about Avis' passing.

Helen wasn't particularly adept at offering comfort, and she didn't want to dwell on the painful subject.

Instead, she said, "During festive times, we miss our loved ones even more. Your sister-in-law is thinking of her family during this New Year's Eve."

At these words, Ryan's eyes dimmed.

Carissa gathered herself. At the

palace banquet, she knew she couldn't allow herself to be downcast. She resolved to keep her pain hidden, just as she had before. If she could conceal it well, it wouldn't hurt so much.

Chapter 399

Carissa knew she couldn't let Helen comfort her any longer. The latter's attempts at consolation were heartbreaking.

Carissa squeezed Ryan's hand. "It's alright. I was just feeling a bit down, but my spirits are already lifting after I think about tonight's palace banquet and all the delicious food."

Her tone was light, managing to deceive both Kiera and Ryan, as well as Helen.

Though Helen was distressed by Avis' passing, the palace banquet was a lively affair. Such excitement was rare-who wouldn't enjoy it?

The palace was indeed bustling with festive cheer. The atmosphere was thick with New Year's spirit, with lights and decorations adorning every corner. Star-shaped lanterns lined the corridors, casting a bright light that made the palace appear as if it were bathed in daylight.

Yuvan was currently taking his family to pay their respects to the queen dowager and the queen,

Victoria wasn't fond of Yuvan, who was the late king's younger brother. Naturally, it was due to his reckless behavior and the bad reputation he had for favoring his concubine and abandoning his rightful wife. Seeing that Avis wasn't accompanying them, Victoria suspected her illness had likely worsened. Avis' condition had been unstable for the past two years, and it was Sebastian's apprentices who had been attending to her.

If they had relied on Yuvan and Fiona, Avis might have already died.

Still, Victoria inquired about Avis' health.

It was intended as a casual inquiry, and Victoria didn't expect a truthful answer. It was understood that Avis was still unwell and not suited for travel.

However, Yuvan struggled to answer the question.

Before Carissa announced Avis' death, Yuvan could have used the old excuse that she was not well enough to be out in the cold. But now, the people of Rafael's household knew the truth. Also, Carissa might well bring it up at the banquet-if not tonight, then certainly in the coming days.

Yet, Yuvan couldn't muster a single tear for his late wife.

With a mournful expression, he said, "Your Majesty, I regret to report that upon arriving in the capital, I received the tragic news that Avis has passed away."

Victoria's cup clattered to the floor. "What?"

Salvador and Kylie both turned to look, their faces filled with astonishment.

How could this happen during the New Year festivities?

Moreover, if Avis had passed away, why was Yuvan still in the capital with his entire family? Was the palace banquet truly more important than his wife's funeral? "Shouldn't you hurry back to Valken, Uncle Yuvan?" Salvador said quickly, recalling how his aunt had taken care of him in his youth.

The sorrow he felt was palpable.

Yuvan looked distressed, and

replied, "She seemed to be in good health before we left for the capital don't know why the bad news came just as we arrived. I planned to first pay my respects to the queen dowager and Your Majesty, and immediately return after the banquet."

"Yes, indeed. Since we are here, there will be just one more day of delay. We will set off first thing tomorrow," Fiona added.

While this reasoning was understandable, the situation felt awkward. How could Yuvan be in the mood for a palace banquet when his wife had passed away? The festivity must have been a painful reminder.

Upon reflection, Salvador realized that Yuvan had long favored his concubine, Fiona, and had neglected his wife for a long time. Avis' death probably meant little to him.

Though displeased, Salvador

recognized that Yuvan and his

family had already arrived. And with

it being New Year's Eve,

them away immediately wasn't appropriate. The city gates would

close soon, and a late-night journey

wouldn't be suitable.

Not wanting to dwell on the matter further on such a joyous occasion, Salvador said, "Uncle Yuvan, you -haven't seen your mother for two or three years. You should go and greet her."

Yuvan's mother was Ruth. She was one of the concubines of the previous king. Augustus, who ruled Starhaven before Salvador's father, Sigmund.

Augustus' concubines were all living in the same residence now, and there weren't many of them left. They were now each other's companions. After years of rivalry and the death of Augustus, there was nothing left to compete for.

Ruth was also Eleanor's adoptive

mother. Eleanor's biological mother

had been the noble concubine,

Chloe. When Chloe fell ill, she sent Eleanor to be raised by Ruth. After Chloe's death, Eleanor stayed with Ruth, who cared for her since.

Chapter 400

In the past, Augustus had been very fond of Chloe. By extension, he had also cared deeply for Eleanor.

While Ruth was raising Eleanor, Augustus showered them with continuous gifts and rewards.

Now, Ruth had become the grand concubine of Augustus' concubines. Compared to Sigmund's concubines, they were nearly inconsequential. Their primary concern was merely to continue living.

Those of lower status who had not borne children were either consigned to be buried with the deceased or sent to nunneries.

In terms of seniority, Augustus' concubines were indeed among the oldest in the palace. Unfortunately, seniority did not hold much weight in the harem.

Sigmund had sent Yuwan to his fief, but he had kept Ruth in the palace as a way to restrain Yuwan.

Over the years, Yuwan seemed to lack ability. He was foolish and infatuated with beautiful women, leading to him abandoning his wife for a concubine.

So, Salvador had considered granting Yuwan a favor by allowing him to bring Ruth to Horizon Estate. He planned to issue the edict after New Year's Eve.

However, upon hearing about Avis passing, Salvador was displeased and decided to postpone this matter. After all, Eleanor was also considered Ruth's daughter, and it would be appropriate for Eleanor to fulfill her duties as a daughter.

Yuwan, accompanied by his family, took their leave and went to visit Ruth in her residence. Coincidentally, Eleanor was there as well.

Ruth's hair was streaked with gray, and she was overjoyed to see her son return. After they had all exchanged formalities, she eagerly summoned her family to her side and inquired about their wellbeing. Yuwan then approached Eleanor. "Eleanor, it has been a long time."

The step-siblings were born just two days apart, in the same year and month.

Eleanor replied, "It has been two or three years since you last returned to the capital, hasn't it?"

"Yes. The last time I returned was because my late wife was handling the marriage of that Sinclair girl," Yuwan said, his gaze growing cold and distant, no longer as pleasant as before.

Upon hearing about Carissa, Eleanor grabbed her cloak and slowly walked out. Yuwan followed closely behind.

"What's wrong? Are you also displeased with that girl, Eleanor?"

"Not just dislike. I practically wish I could peel off her skin and pull out her tendons," Eleanor said coldly.

Yuvan seemed thoughtful. "She is Hector's daughter."

At the mention of Hector, Eleanor's eyes flashed with intense hatred. The rage surged through her, causing a sharp, dull ache to spread through her limbs and body.

Her voice was cold and merciless, "I will never forget how Hector rejected me."

"That's in the past. Remembering is enough. There's no need to dwell on it too deeply, lest you hurt yourself," Yuvan said softly

He still cared for his step-sister.

"Hurt?" Eleanor sneered. "For him? Not at all! Everyone from the Sinclair family should have died, but they've resurfaced. Carissa even married Rafael and is enjoying such glory. It's truly irritating" Yuvan stood beside her, the ambition in his eyes unmistakable. "Glory is fleeting. Once the grand plan is achieved, whether to kill or spare her-won't that be entirely up to you, dear sister?"

Eleanor suppressed her emotions and asked, "What is the situation in Stonebridge County?"

Yuvan curtly responded, "We lack people, weapons, and armor."

Eleanor frowned. The court had stringent controls over weapons and armor. It wasn't something that could be bought with money alone.

Yuvan added, "Let's see what the Spencer family decides."

The Spencer family in Ebonflow took on the part of the Ministry of Defense's business of manufacturing weapons and armor. Naturally, there were Ministry of Defense officials overseeing the Spencer family's factory.

"If there's a shortage of people,

continue recruiting soldiers. Have

Fiona contribute more money. Carissa tricked me into one of her schemes, so I lost over two hundred thousand silver coins. Currently, I don't have much money left to mobilize."

Eleanor explained the situation to Yuvan, who was infuriated upon hearing it.

"Her again! When I arrived in the capital today, I first visited Hell Monarch Estate and found out that she had gone to Verdant Monastery. That was when I learned of that foolish woman's death. I had no choice. but to inform the queen dowager and the king. Because of that, I must return to Valken early tomorrow morning."

Eleanor was not surprised by Avis' death.

She remarked coldly, "When she was alive, she was of no help to you. Now, she chose to die at such an inconvenient time. It's unlucky. I had even planned a banquet on the third day of the New Year and invited many civil and military officials. I was hoping you could make an appearance. Now, that's all ruined."