

War Song 571

Chapter 571

The light rain had been falling for several days. As Viola stepped down from the carriage, her thoughts seemed distant, and she accidentally stepped into a puddle, soaking her shoes. "Madam Viola!"

-

Viola's new maid was named Poppy. She was clumsy, and lacked manners. "I'm so sorry I didn't help you properly."

Viola shook off her hand and snapped, "Just follow me."

Poppy followed meekly behind her. She was curious about everything since she had only recently been bought, and had yet to learn proper manners. Upon entering Silverstone Estate, she was amazed at its grandeur compared to the Valor Estate, and she couldn't help but glance around.

Viola was disdainful of Poppy's ignorance. "Just stay close to me and stop looking around."

An old maid who was always by Evelyn's side came out to greet them. The old maid smiled as she said, "Ms. Viola, why get upset with a maid who doesn't know any better? It's better to teach her slowly and not lose your temper over it."

Viola adjusted her hairpin, knowing that the old servant was reminding her to keep her composure and not appear ill-mannered.

However, in the Warren family household, maintaining composure was not a luxury one could afford.

Viola wasn't even sure how she ended up in such a mess. She always lost her composure without realizing it, and she was constantly on the edge of madness.

"Rosie, where is my mother?" Viola asked.

"She is in Kindred Hall. Please follow me, Ms. Viola," Rosie replied.

"Kindred Hall?"

Viola furrowed her brow. That was Zoey's usual spot for quiet reflection. Ever since the last time Viola had taken money from her family, she had avoided speaking with Zoey, especially in private. "Isn't Mom supposed to meet me?"

"Yes, Madam Evelyn is in Kindred Hall," Rosie confirmed.

"Mom is there too?"

"Yes. Madam Evelyn, Madam Zoey, and Madam Luna are all there."

Viola's frown deepened. "Luna is there too? What on earth is going on?"

"It seems the earl has sent a letter home, so Madam Evelyn specifically asked for you to come," Rosie explained.

Upon hearing the news, Viola's mood brightened immediately. "My elder brother's letter has arrived? No wonder everyone has gathered. Alright, I'll head to Kindred Hall." Having said that, Viola hurried to Kindred Hall.

After a long while, Viola collapsed into a chair, her eyes wide with disbelief. Her chest felt as if a heavy stone was pressing down on her, making it hard for her to breathe. "Impossible! How could this be? How can a dead person come back to life? I don't believe it."

Evelyn said, "Whether you believe it or not, that's what your brother's letter says. He's seen them himself. It's pitiful, really. He says they've changed so much, and who knows what suffering they've endured over the years?" "Impossible. It's impossible," Viola muttered, but she couldn't help asking, "When will they return?"

Evelyn replied, "They won't be

coming back to the capital anytime soon. The Marquis of Elderglen's second son is in poor condition. He's said to have suffered greatly after being captured. It's so tragic, and they don't know if he'll make it through."

"Kayla's husband?" Viola gasped. "He's still alive?"

"Yes, all eleven of them are alive. They've achieved great merit, and the king will certainly reward them upon their return," Evelyn said with a sigh. "The Farrell family must be overjoyed, though it's a pity we no longer have any ties with them. Otherwise, I would have gone to celebrate with them. And don't forget, Mr. Cooper's two sons are also alive. You know the Larkin family's son, right? He's also alive. And there's the third son of the Jensen family..."

Viola's eyes widened. "Tobias Jensen? His wife also returned to her family and has remarried now, hasn't she?"

Since Tobias had not made any

significant achievements in the military, he was less discussed compared to Viola and Kayla. Viola and Kayla had no children, whereas others did. Having children meant having hope for the future, and it allowed one to wait for brighter days.

That was why people compared Kayla and Viola.

"Tobias' wife also remarried, just like me," Viola said with a trembling voice, but her eyes were filled with joy and excitement.

She had once looked down on Tobias' wife, considering their different statuses-she was a noble daughter of an earl's family, while Tobias' wife was of a lower status.

But now, Viola eagerly mentioned Tobias' wife with enthusiasm.

Chapter 572

Zoey listened to Evelyn and Viola for a while before speaking up.

"The reason we called you back isn't to discuss those matters. When Thomas died, the Farrell family gave you a divorce letter. It's understandable that you returned to our family, especially since you had no children and the Farrell family didn't want to tie you to them for life.

"Do you remember how you cried before returning to our family, vowing never to remarry? That's why the Farrell family gave you Thomas' pension and the two shops. Now that you've remarried, I think it's only fair to return the pension to them. As for the two shops, we should convert their value into silver coins and return them. What do you think?"

Viola's mind was still numb from shock. Upon hearing Zoey's words, she instinctively shook her head.

"No! Why should I return them? I haven't done anything wrong. If he didn't die, why didn't he tell me? Even though I returned to my family, I remained loyal for several years before remarrying."

"You won't have to provide the money. Mother and I will cover it for you," Zoey said, raising her voice. "But you need to show some effort. This can't just be on me and Mother."

"How am I supposed to? I'm already a part of the Warren family. Besides, I've waited for him all these years..."

Zoey's expression hardened. "Enough with that. What do you mean, you've waited for him? You returned to our family less than a month after he died! Is that what you mean by you were waiting for him all this time? You didn't settle down because you didn't find someone suitable. You were just as eager to remarry as anyone, and after meeting several prospects, you knew exactly why it didn't happen. Others might not know the truth, but we do."

Viola retorted sharply, "So I should have stayed single for life? Have you ever seen a man who doesn't remarry after losing his wife? And don't men also take their wives' dowries when they're no longer together? Why the double standard?"

Zoey remained patient. "I didn't ask you to stay single for life, and you didn't. But you shouldn't have made that vow saying you'd never remarry. That made the Farrell family pity you and give you the pension and the shops."

"At that time, I was Thomas' wife! Wasn't it right for me to receive his pension?"

Zoey looked at Viola. "We're the only ones here now, and there are no servants present. There are some things I don't want to spell out too clearly, but all of us understand the situation. Do I need to repeat myself? Fine. You have no right to keep the pension." Her words made Viola feel guilty.

Luna said softly, "Viola, you don't

need to provide the money yourself, but you should at least show some effort. After all, the Farrell family allowed you to return home. Also, Madam Alice treated you as her own daughter. So I believe..."

"What gives you the right to judge my decisions?" Viola snapped.

She looked down on Luna. The girl was just a merchant's daughter, but didn't know her place.

"Be quiet! If I decide to return it, it will be because of what Mom says," Viola went on.

Luna had grown used to Viola's tone and didn't bother to argue. Engaging with Viola only led to shouting matches, and Luna was tired of it. So, she chose to stay silent.

However, Zoey didn't indulge Viola.

"When will you curb that attitude of yours? Even though Luna's from a

merchant family, she has a more et

noble character than you. Do I need to remind you of the disgraceful things you've done? Apologize to Luna!"

Zoey had managed the household for many years, and her demeanor commanded respect.

Viola reluctantly said, "I apologize for my harsh words. Please don't take it to heart, Luna."

Luna replied, "We're family, so there's no need for that. Just handle the matter properly so that no one can speak ill of us in the future."

Luna knew Viola's apology was insincere, but it didn't matter. What she wanted was to resolve the situation quickly.

Both she and Zoey were concerned

about the same issue-Viola was unpredictable. They feared she would play on Thomas' guilt to manipulate him. Then, she would divorce Barrett and worm her way back into the Farrell family

Such a situation couldn't be allowed to happen.

The only way to cut off Viola's options was to return the pension and money so that the ties between the two families would be clearly cut.

That way, they wouldn't have to worry about Viola embarrassing the Earl of Silverstone's family again.

Chapter 573

Evelyn, Zoey, and Luna completely agreed on that matter.

Seeing that she didn't need to use her own money since her family would cover it, Viola reluctantly agreed after a brief hesitation.

Zoey didn't require Viola to appear in person, given that she was now a member of the Warren family. Instead, she only asked Viola to write a letter to Alice, signing it as "Mrs. Warren". The name indicated her status as a member of the Warren family, which was why she returned the pension and value of the two shops in money.

After writing the letter, Viola handed it to Zoey and said grudgingly, "Was it really necessary to go through all this? It makes it seem like my remarriage was inappropriate."

Zoey replied, "When you married Barrett, you did so as the third lady of the Earl of Silverstone's family. No one criticized your remarriage. I'll be straightforward with you this is to cut off any other thoughts you might have."

Viola laughed, though her anger was palpable. "What do you think I want? Do you really believe I'd want to divorce Barrett and run back to Thomas? You think you know me?"

"It's good if you haven't thought of it. Trust me, I know exactly how you are," Zoey said.

Viola was fuming. "Zoey, everyone makes mistakes! I don't know if you've ever made a mistake, but I haven't caught you in one. So, stop throwing my past in my face. Although life in the Warren family isn't ideal, at least my husband respects and loves me. I haven't considered a divorce.

"Also, let's not forget that this marriage was arranged with my brother's best interests in mind, and Mrs. Murray acted as the matchmaker. Instead of being grateful, you continue to blame me. Aren't you being a bit ungrateful?"

Zoey folded the letter calmly, her expression unchanged. "Don't flatter yourself. I don't owe you any gratitude. When Mrs. Murray came to arrange the marriage, it was a negotiation. If things were different, the king would have simply issued a marriage edict. Why would the king grant a marriage to someone like Barrett more than once?"

"You had the chance to understand what kind of person Barrett was before agreeing to the marriage. Since that was the case, the marriage wasn't forced on you, and you could have refused it."

"Mom!" Viola turned to Evelyn, her face full of grievance. "Be fair-wasn't the reason for not offending Mrs. Murray because of my brother? I wasn't that keen on the marriage in the beginning." Evelyn sighed. "What's the point of discussing this now?"

Viola choked up, and wiped her eyes. "I just want some fairness! Ever since that incident happened, Zoey has always targeted me. Do you even see me as family anymore?"

"Of course, we consider you part of

gel

the family. Aren't we doing this for your own good? If you return the pension and the money from the shops, you'll have nothing left hanging over your head. You can live your life as a proud member of the Warren family without worry."

Viola wanted to argue that once she paid everything back, she wouldn't owe the Farrell family anything. But what about Thomas? Didn't he owe her? The thought hung in the air, but she didn't dare voice it, fearing Zoey would bring up that painful topic again.

Both her in-laws and her family were a constant source of stress, and Viola was fed up. "Do whatever you want. I've written the letter you asked for, and I'm done with this." With that, she stood up and left.

Evelyn was reluctant to see her daughter distressed, and wanted to call her back to offer some comfort.

However, Zoey said, "Mother, let her go."

Evelyn frowned. "Honestly, I don't think she would have clung to Thomas. There was really no need to push her too hard."

Zoey responded calmly, "Mother, my

husband commands troops. With

his limited abilities, he naturally attracts jealousy and discontent from many people. So, we have to be cautious and ensure everything is handled properly to avoid any criticism. You can't only sympathize with Viola's feelings and ignore the interests of everyone in our family."

"How can you speak of your husband like that?" Evelyn said with a frown, clearly displeased.

"I'm only being honest, Mother. You know better than I do what my husband is capable of. Right now, the Southern Frontier is at peace. Do you really think the king would appoint him as the marshal if there were any real conflict?" Evelyn was momentarily at a loss for words.

Chapter 574

Zoey wasn't concerned about Evelyn's thoughts. Her concern was to resolve the matter promptly.

Since Thomas hadn't died, the Farrell family would naturally return the pension to the court. The king might grant it again under a different reason, but that was another matter. It was improper and unseemly to keep a death pension for someone who was still alive, and it wouldn't reflect well on anyone.

Without wasting any more time, Zoey took Luna with her to visit the Farrell family.

Upon arriving, they found Alice in a state of delirious joy. The news of Thomas' survival had overwhelmed her so much that she fainted from excitement. Now, she was lying in bed, recovering.

When Zoey explained that they were there to return the pension and the money from the shops, the Farrell family was momentarily stunned. After all, they hadn't expected to reclaim them from Viola.

Zoey smiled and said, "We're all very pleased to hear that Thomas is still alive. Since he didn't die, the pension naturally needs to be returned to the court. The Farrell family has shown great kindness by giving them to Viola. Since she has remarried, it's inappropriate for her to keep them. That is also her own wish. She even wrote a letter to inquire about your health, Alice."

Zoey handed the letter to Opal, who was now managing the Farrell family's internal affairs and was thus responsible for reading the letter.

The letter offered congratulations and wished Alice a speedy recovery. It was signed "Mrs. Warren".

Opal nodded slightly as she read the letter, then folded it with a smile. "Viola is very thoughtful. Thank you for your consideration, Zoey."

Zoey replied with a smile, "Please take good care of yourselves. Once Thomas returns, life will be better."

"Yes," Alice said, her face showing a serene joy. "It will be better once he returns, but I wonder when that will be. I can hardly wait."

"It should be soon. Don't worry. Take good care of your health. There will be many things to manage once he's back," Zoey said with a reassuring smile.

Alice sighed softly, "You're right, but I can't help but wonder if he'll resent me for letting them slip away from each other like this."

She knew her son and Viola shared a deep bond, yet she had still taken it upon herself to grant Viola a letter of divorce.

Zoey understood what Alice meant, and replied, "If it's meant to be, it'll happen. Alice, don't dwell on it. What matters is that everyone is well."

"It's just that she has wasted years of her life," Alice said.

Even though she had seen a different side of Viola that day, she still felt the bond between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

"We'll accept the pension, but there's really no need to return those two shops. I willingly gave them to her."

"Alice, you treated Viola like your

own daughter while she was with your family. She hasn't been wronged. We'll also return her dowry in full, and we've added more gold and jewelry to it. Since the shops have officially been transferred to her name, we can only convert their value into silver coins for you. This way, Thomas' new wife won't feel any jealousy when he marries."

Zoey genuinely wanted what was best for Thomas. If his future wife knew that his shops had been given to his ex-wife, it would always be a sore spot that could affect their relationship. After some back and forth, Alice finally accepted. Once Zoey left, Alice asked Opal, "What do you think of Zoey's actions? Is she worried that Thomas will cling to Viola after he comes back?"

Opal thought for a moment and shook her head. "It doesn't seem that way. If anything, she's worried Viola might cling to Thomas again." "How could that be? She's already married."

Opal knew that Alice didn't pay much attention to outside matters, and wasn't familiar with the situation in the Warren family.

She didn't want to say too much to

avoid causing her any worries, so she replied, "Regardless of what Zoey meant with her actions, the Prince family has returned the pension and money in exchange for the two shops. This makes it clear that there's nothing more between Thomas and Viola. This way, it will be easier for Thomas to court someone new."

"True, that makes sense. Zoey is a sensible woman. She genuinely wants the best for us." Opal nodded. "Yes, she does."

But in her heart, Opal felt a bit

confused. It seemed like Zoey didn't like her sister-in-law much. While conflicts between sisters-in-law weren't uncommon, they usually protected each other in public. Plus, Zoey didn't strike her as a petty person.

Why was she acting this way?

Oh well, that was a matter for the Prince family.

Chapter 575

The news that Thomas was still alive had reached Barrett, including the fact that Viola had returned Thomas' pension and the income from the shops. However, he didn't know that it was Viola's family who had helped Viola repay everything.

Since the assassination attempt and Viola's questioning of his feelings for her, there had been very little conversation between them. After hearing about Thomas' survival, Barrett hesitated for a long time before finally stepping into Grace Mansion. Viola was sitting on the couch, lost in thought. When she saw him enter with the light behind him, she froze for a moment. She almost called out the name of the person who had been on her mind constantly. When she realized it was Barrett, her face darkened.

"I thought you'd forgotten where the entrance to Grace Mansion was. It's rare to see you here," she said coldly.

Barrett dismissed the maids before sitting down. "I heard about Thomas."

Viola's voice remained icy. "And what of it?"

Barrett continued, "I know you're disappointed in me and unhappy with my family. Now that Thomas is back, if he doesn't mind that you were married before and you want to get back together, I can help make that happen."

In a fit of anger, Viola hurled a teacup at him. "Barrett, you jerk! What do you take me for? Do you think I'm the kind of woman who switches loyalties at a whim?"

Barrett didn't move, letting the cup hit him. His expression turned uncertain, as if lost.

"That's not what I meant. I just feel my family has treated you unfairly. If there's still a bond between you and Thomas, I'm willing to step aside."

Viola laughed bitterly, her anger flaring. "Step aside for me? It seems you've never seen me as your wife! If you had any sincerity at all, you wouldn't be able to say such a thing."

Her fury wasn't directed entirely at Barrett. If this conversation had taken place before Zoey had made her return the pension and the shops, she might have been pleased to hear Barrett say he would let her go.

Lately, she had been recalling her time with Thomas. Comparing it to her current life with Barrett, there was no contest.

Moreover, Valor Estate was nothing more than a facade. The Warren family was destitute, barely surviving while supporting two entire branches of the family. All of their savings, shops, and estates had been sold off. If not for the fact that King Augustus had bestowed the estate to the Warren family, they likely would have sold that too.

Barrett's prospects were bleak. And with Aurora still living in the estate, there was always the looming threat of more assassins, keeping everyone on edge.

But Thomas was different. He was originally a military commander. Now that he had returned victorious, it was likely that he would be promoted and granted further honors.

Yet, Zoey had completely crushed any hope Viola had. Now, she was stuck in the Warren family for the rest of her life.

Covering her face, she began to cry. Who could understand the depth of her misery? Marrying Barrett had never been her choice. It was Natalie who had arranged the match, hinting that it was the king's wish.

How could Viola have refused?

Seeing her cry so bitterly, Barrett let out a nearly imperceptible sigh of relief. Slowly, he walked over to her side and gently pulled her into an embrace.

His eyes reflected a growing

helplessness as he murmured,

"Don't cry. It's my fault. I shouldn't have asked you like that. It's just When heard that Thomas was still alive, was afraid that you still had feelings for him. I... I guess was jealous."

As he spoke, he awkwardly turned his head away, clearly uncomfortable with his own admission. "Jealous?" Viola was momentarily stunned.

She pushed Barrett away, staring at the unnatural flush on his handsome face. Her heart tightened. "You're lying! You don't even like me. How could you be jealous?"

Barrett looked down at her hand, then slowly took it in his. His gaze dropped as he let out a soft sigh.

"I don't know why, either. But when I heard that Thomas was alive, I felt scared that you'd leave me. I didn't want to hear you say the words to end our marriage, so I acted casually and came in to ask you." "Really?"

Viola's tearful eyes gradually

brightened. Despite her disdain for

the Warren family, she had once felt something for Barrett. If he could return her affection sincerely, she was willing to continue her life with him.

Barrett avoided her gaze, and pulled her back into his arms. He softly asked, "Am I selfish? I hope you don't think of me that way."

Viola's tears fell as she replied, "I'd rather you be a little selfish than treat me like a stranger."

That night, Barrett did not leave Grace Mansion. For several nights in a row, he stayed at Viola's place.

-

Aurora began decorating her courtyard, using her own money since the family's public funds were unavailable to her.

She chose the sturdiest wood for the doors and windows. Ironwood was hard to come by, and she asked the lumber merchants to find it, promising to pay a high price if they succeeded. She renamed the courtyard "Blessed Haven".

Having left the army and without any battle armor, she secretly commissioned a protective heart shield. She wore it day and night to guard against any potential assassins.

As for Barrett and Viola's affection towards each other, she couldn't care less. She held no respect for a man who had changed his heart.

She had once said she wouldn't be caught up in domestic squabbles, and she would never become the kind of person she most despised.

Moreover, did Barrett truly have feelings for Viola? She didn't believe it—not even a little.

Barrett's gaze towards Viola was devoid of love. He wasn't even good at hiding it, and it was easy for others to see. Only Viola seemed oblivious.

Maybe Viola wasn't actually foolish, but she had no other choice at this point. Even if it was false affection, it was better than the cold indifference she had endured.

Aurora had no desire to interfere with their matters. She had everything she needed in the household—food and clothes for every season.

Since she didn't have any other options for her future right now, she could afford to wait.

She wanted to investigate who was targeting her. Deep down, she knew it was certainly not Carissa. However, blaming Carissa would also put a stop to Barrett's feelings for her. Ultimately, Aurora was still troubled by it all.

Despite this, she had no intention of meddling in the apparent romance between Barrett and Viola. After all, Barrett still needed the support of the Prince family to protect the Warren family.

In Westglade, Lawrence's condition improved rapidly under the care and treatment of Sebastian and Kayla.

Most of his injuries had healed, but one of his knees was still a problem because the kneecap was shattered. Sebastian kept applying ointment and wrapping it up, but there hadn't been any improvement yet.

But Sebastian insisted that he would be the one to decide if Lawrence's leg was truly ruined, and that they would know for sure after they returned to the capital.

In mid-July, the group set out for the capital. Kiera's wedding was on the eighth of August. Even though Luke and the Ministry of Protocol were handling the arrangements, Rafael and Carissa needed to return before Kiera's wedding date. As her brother and sister-in-law, they had to be there for Kiera during the days leading up to the event.

During their time in Westglade, Violet had grown familiar with the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team members.

After all, they had all fought on the Southern Frontier battlefield before, and they quickly found common ground. Violet shared stories about the last two cities recaptured from the enemy, talking about the dangers of capturing Ilyrian City and

the details of taking Simonton City.

Violet had a remarkable gift for storytelling, vividly recreating the battlefield scenes and making them feel as though they had participated in the grand conflict.

Violet also gained a brother in Thomas. Because of her previous interest in Septimus, she mistakenly thought that Thomas was Septimus.

During their stay in Westglade, Thomas often appeared lost in thought. Violet comforted him, feeling a mix of admiration and sympathy. Thomas' genuine sense of responsibility as an elder brother led Violet to propose a sworn brotherhood. Sworn brotherhoods were more common in the martial world, and Thomas genuinely appreciated Violet's straightforward and affable nature.

Thomas smiled and said, "There's no need for a formal brotherhood. If you wish, have my mother accept you as a goddaughter. That way, we'll be like siblings in a proper way."

"Great, let's have a little ceremony!" Violet said happily.

On the return journey, they stopped at an inn. Carissa then mentioned, "You're making such a big decision about getting a godmother. Shouldn't you inform your family? It uld be better to let them know this new connection in the

capital."

"No need," Violet replied with a light laugh. "Besides my marriage, I can make my own decisions about everything else. Besides, I'm quite favored in my family. Just look at your marriage-I easily influenced them to do what they did."

Chapter 577

Carissa knew Violet was favored, but she also felt there was more to it.

The Spencer family was a prominent and powerful clan in Ebonflow, known as royal merchants with many other businesses.

In Starhaven, everyone knew about the Spencer family. They were the wealthiest merchants in the kingdom, and their riches were said to rival a country's wealth.

Yet, with great wealth came great risks, particularly since they supplied the court with warhorses, armor, and weapons. The Ministry of Defense had its eyes on them, and at least half of the king's attention was also focused on the Spencer family. Currently, the head of the Spencer family was Violet's grandfather. However, the real power lay with her father, given her grandfather's advanced age and inability to handle so many affairs.

"What about your marriage? Have you given it any thought?" Carissa asked.

Violet replied lazily, "No, I haven't thought about it. The people they suggest are either too high or too low in status for me. Why bother getting married? It's more carefree not to. I can go wherever I want and do whatever I wish without being tied down." Carissa reflected on Violet's personality. The latter had always been accustomed to freedom and the vastness of the world. To confine her to domestic chores would be cruel.

The Spencer family was a major clan, and Violet couldn't marry someone from a small or simple family. But if she joined a larger family, all the people and responsibilities would be really overwhelming for her.

Violet continued, "There are several women in my family who remain unmarried. There's no pressure. With my family's wealth, they can afford to support me. Also, once my master retires, I'll manage the Inferno Guild. Isn't running a guild better than getting married?" Carissa looked at Violet's carefree and calm demeanor, recalling that she had once shared the same attitude. They had both talked about not getting married in the past.

Now, Violet was resolute in her decision not to marry, while Carissa had been married twice.

Thinking of this, Violet couldn't help but sneer, "Also, those things you said were just empty words. You said we'd both avoid marriage, but you've married twice."

Carissa replied, "You should take that up with Rafael."

Violet shivered at the thought. Having once been under Rafael's command, she had always felt a subtle but undeniable pressure from him, no matter how approachable he appeared.

Violet admired Carissa. Carissa was able to stand before Rafael without feeling the pressure of his orders during battle.

The return journey to the capital was relatively swift, at least faster than their initial journey.

Lawrence leaned against the carriage, while Kayla rested against him inside. It seemed they were giving each other strength-one no longer felt nauseous, and the other was no longer in pain. Meanwhile, the others could only think of one thing-they were eager to get home.

Before setting off, Rafael had arranged for the relay station staff to send a message ahead to the capital, informing them of their approximate return date. He

anticipated a welcoming cerepel

and a grand affair from the Ministry of Protocol, especially with the two sons of the Minister of Protocol returning.

Naturally, every relay station they passed sent a message to the capital.

The group of tanned-faced men had spent some time recuperating at the relay station at Westglade and had become somewhat fairer. As they traveled under the glaring sun, their faces were coated with a

reddish-black tint.

Rafael was no exception.

Despite their sunburned appearance, they no longer lived in fear. They didn't have to hide or painstakingly send messages. They had gained some weight, and their lean bodies now looked stronger. Their once-skinny faces had filled out a little, and with happiness in their hearts and no more worries, they truly looked different from before.

As Violet put it, their features were well-defined now, and their overall look was much improved.

Though Violet and Carissa weren't in the carriage, they wore veiled hats to shield their faces from the sun. So, only their hands gripping the reins were tanned, while their faces remained largely unaffected. Standing together now, with Carissa's fair complexion beside him, Rafael's face looked like a somewhat handsome blackened egg.

Carissa teased him, "Your name certainly wasn't chosen in vain. I know it means 'black as ink', and your skin tone has really become as black as ink."

Rafael shrugged off concerns about his appearance. "I'm already spoken for, so a little ugliness doesn't matter."

His gaze became more intense because of Carissa's words that she missed him. Now, he no longer hid his feelings and always looked for ways to spend time alone with her.

Chapter 578

However, there were so many people who wanted Rafael's attention. Whenever something happened, they would seek him out, leaving him with little time alone with Carissa.

Even the nights were no better, because Carissa was sharing a room with Violet while he was stuck with Dylan. Rafael had grown weary of it. Dylan's snoring was impossible to muffle. In the middle of the night, Rafael would kick his bed. However, Dylan would only turn

over and continue snoring loudly.

Rafael was eager to return to the capital as soon as possible.

When the group was approaching Eastridge, they saw a carriage on the main road. It was overturned, and blocking most of the path.

While riders could pass, Lawrence's carriage couldn't get through.

Dylan rode forward and saw two people trying to lift the overturned carriage. The horse lay nearby, seemingly having suffered from heatstroke.

The woman wore a hood that covered her face, so it was hard to see what she looked like. She was dressed in a pink dress and had an extremely narrow waist. It looked like she had fallen from the carriage, and her clothes were dirty from mud. Although she seemed a bit messy, she was more pitiful than anything else. Dylan approached and asked, "What's the matter?"

A tall man replied, "Sorry for obstructing the road. The horse suffered from heatstroke and fainted, causing the carriage to overturn."

Dylan dismounted to inspect the scene. As someone who had been on the battlefield, he was particularly considerate of horses. He reached out and checked-both horses were dead.

"The horses are dead," Dylan informed the man.

The man sighed. "We're in a rush to get back to the capital. What should we do now?"

He was evidently a guard as he was leading the way with one remaining horse, while the other person appeared to be the carriage driver.

"Who are you people, and why are you going to the capital?" Dylan asked.

The man replied, "We're from the capital, and we were escorting our mistress to Lanshire to visit her family. Due to the extreme heat and the urgency to return, we pushed the horses too hard." He wiped his sweat and added, "Do you have any water? My mistress is very thirsty."

No one from the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team stepped forward to speak. Having worked as scouts for so long, they were quick to analyze situations.

Although the young lady was

wearing a veil hat that obscured her face, her clothing, shoes, and jewelry suggested she was either wealthy or noble. Given such a background, it was unlikely she would travel with only a maid, a guard, and a driver for a trip from the capital to Lanshire, and choose such a scorching day to return to the capital at that. And to have both horses die at this exact moment seemed suspicious.

Dylan also sensed something was off, but was curious to see how it would unfold. Hearing the man ask for water, Violet took a leather water bag and dismounted from the carriage. Then, she walked toward the young lady.

The maid reached out to take the water bag, but the young lady quickly intervened, pushing the maid behind her. She took the water bag

and thanked Violet. "Thank you so

much. I am incredibly ve

Violet nodded and held one hand behind her, waiting for the young lady to finish drinking and return the water bag.

The young woman turned away, took several swallows, and handed the water bag back to Violet, thanking her again, "Thank you for the water."

Violet glanced at her and then at the maid before asking, "Would you like some too?"

The maid bowed and replied, "Thank you for your kindness, but I must decline. I'll manage with some water from the nearby stream."

"Very well," Violet said, turning back to rejoin Carissa. She handed the water bag to her and said, "There's still some left. Do you want to drink?"

Carissa looked unsure, but took it. She noticed that a note was hidden inside the water pouch.

She rode her horse to Rafael's side, with Violet riding alongside to block the view. Only then did Carissa open the note concealed within the water bag.

The note read, [I am Carmen Kingsley, a concubine's daughter from Grand Princess Eleanor's family. I request you to join us on our journey, Lady Carissa. I have a request.]

Chapter 579

Carmen Kingsley?

Carissa recalled Ruby, who was also Eleanor's illegitimate daughter, and her real name was Celeste.

Carissa glanced quickly and noticed that the maid seemed to show little respect, instead giving off a practiced martial air. The guard and driver frequently glanced at Carmen, giving the impression that they were keeping a close watch on her. Looking at Carmen again, Carissa saw her looking nervous and clutching a handkerchief tightly. Sweat dripped from beneath her veil, and she used the handkerchief to wipe it away.

Suddenly, Carmen's body stiffened, and she seemed to be in pain. Carissa then noticed that the maid's hand appeared to be moving at her lower back.

But since it was concealed from her sight, it was difficult to see clearly.

Both Carissa and Violet wore veiled hats, which obscured their faces from view but allowed them to see outside. Although it seemed like they were looking at the carriage, they were actually observing Carmen and her maid.

From their reactions, it was clear that the maid was pressuring Carmen to speak up.

As expected, Carmen stepped forward slowly. She nodded to Rafael and said in a sweet voice that was tinged with shyness, "Greetings, gentlemen. My horse has died, and we are in a hurry to return to the capital. I was wondering if we might borrow your horses to tow our carriage. I'm willing to offer compensation."

Just as Rafael was about to respond, Carissa interjected, "What a coincidence! Violet and I would prefer not to ride, but to use a carriage. Our horses could be used to pull your carriage."

Upon hearing Carissa's words, everyone grew anxious.

How could they randomly take in strangers on their journey? What if it was a trap?

Thomas was standing a bit closer to Carissa. He noticed something, and raised his hand to signal his companions to remain silent.

He said, "Let's follow Lady Carissa's suggestion."

The tall guard and maid exchanged a glance, apparently surprised at how smoothly things were going.

Moreover, it wasn't the Hell Monarch

himself who had spoken, but the Hell Monarch's princess consort. It~ was clear that the young lady was addressing the Hell Monarch, and her charming behavior naturally attracted men but could annoy women.

So, Violet and Carissa got into the carriage.

The maid expressed countless thanks as she helped her young mistress into the carriage. When she attempted to board as well, Violet said coolly, "A maid doesn't ride in the same carriage as her mistress. You will sit outside with the driver."

The maid hesitated.

What kind of rule was that? In high society, if a young lady traveled alone, her maid was typically allowed to accompany her in the carriage. How could she attend to the young lady otherwise?

The maid protested, "My mistress is frail. I need to be inside to care for her."

"There's no room," Violet said matter-of-factly. "If you're needed, we'll call for you. For now, just sit outside."

The carriage was spacious enough for four people, but Violet's decision was final.

"But-"

Carissa furrowed her brow. "Why are you arguing so much? If you don't agree, unhitch the horses, and we'll go on our way."

The maid didn't dare say anything more, and quietly replied, "I understand. Then, please take care of my mistress, my ladies."

As the carriage set off, Rafael's horse trailed on the right side of the carriage. Although he knew both Carissa and Violet had sufficient self-defense skills, he was still uneasy. Thomas was traveling in close proximity to the carriage. He focused on observing the maid, the guard, and the driver.

Even though a single woman might not warrant such vigilance, they were dealing with a prince and the general who had reclaimed the Southern Frontier.

It was better to be cautious.

As with the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team's past years of experience, it was preferable to take extra precautions than to risk making a mistake.

Chapter 580

As the carriage rolled along, the strong wind and intense sun made the heat almost unbearable. Despite the sweltering conditions, the maid showed no sign of discomfort. She seemed quite resilient. Typically, a maid attending closely to her mistress would be delicate and avoid heavy labor.

However, this one was different.

Wasn't this little act of hers a bit disrespectful?

Thomas sighed and chose not to dwell on it further. They were accustomed to living on the edge, and such tricks were beneath their notice.

-

Inside the carriage, Carmen had removed her veil, revealing a face strikingly similar to Celeste's—beautiful yet distinctly cool.

With the maid outside, she spoke softly, "Lady Carissa, please save my mother."

Carissa responded gently, "But clearly, that wasn't your only reason for stopping us."

"You're right." Carmen shook her head, a hint of shame on her otherwise composed face. "My mother ordered me to ruin your relationship with the Hell Monarch."

She half-knelt and bowed, her eyes filling with tears. "Please have mercy, Lady Carissa."

"Why should I help you?" Carissa asked, her gaze steady.

She noted Carmen's tears, but understood that they could be as much a tool for manipulation as a sign of genuine sorrow.

Carmen lowered her voice and said, "I can offer you a trade. What I know—"

Suddenly, Carissa pulled her to sit beside her. Carmen froze for a moment before quickly putting her veil back on.

At that moment, the maid lifted the curtain and peered inside. Then, she asked, "My lady, are you feeling better?"

Carmen replied, "I'm much better now."

The maid glanced briefly, and then let the curtain fall back into place.

Carissa exchanged a look with Violet, trying to gauge the truthfulness of Carmen's claims.

With little conversation to go on, they couldn't yet make a judgment. Regardless of whether Carmen's story was true or false, Carissa and Violet needed to discuss it further and find an opportunity. That evening, they stayed at an inn. After dinner, Carissa deliberately instructed Dylan, "Go and find out where we can buy more horses."

Dylan nodded and left.

The maid and the guard exchanged a glance before asking, "Do you not wish to travel with us, madam?"

Carissa replied, "For your mistress' sake, it wouldn't be appropriate. Our group is mostly men, and traveling together might harm her reputation since she's still unmarried."

The maid became anxious, and said, "It doesn't matter. You are all good people, and with so many of you, it would be safer for her to travel with you. There's safety in numbers." "You have your own guard, don't you?" Carissa countered. "Moreover, we'll be traveling not too far apart even if we separate. We can still keep an eye on each other if needed."

The maid couldn't refute this point. However, she seemed increasingly distressed and repeatedly glanced at Carmen.

Carmen gracefully nodded, and said, "Lady Sinclair understand it's an inconvenience. However, with the long journey ahead, having you with us would ease my mind. Besides, the cost of horses is quite high, and my funds are running low. might not be able to afford them."

Carissa frowned and asked, "I see. Which family do you come from? If we know them, we might be able to lend you the money for the horses. You can repay us when we reach the capital." Before Carmen could respond, the maid had already bowed and answered, "My mistress is from the Lester family. We live at the eighth house on Petal Alley, and the family runs a business.

"My mistress was visiting some

relatives, and she initially had a male

relative accompanying her.

Unfortunately, he was injured in a fall from his horse and had to stay behind to recover, so we had no choice but to hire a guard for this journey. However, we have

encountered many difficulties along the way and are afraid of facing more troubles. That's why we earnestly request your kindness to allow us to travel together."

Carissa noted how the maid's movement was smooth and decisive, with no hint of fear. She didn't seem like a typical maid from a wealthy family. She was more like a seasoned attendant from a noble household.

Carmen had already revealed her identity, but the maid claimed she was from the Lester family and was the daughter of a merchant in the capital.

If this wasn't a deliberate slip-up, it seemed Carmen truly intended to betray Eleanor.