

War Song 341

Chapter 341

Lulu nodded in understanding and hurried off to fetch hot water, to be used to freshen up Rafael's hands and face.

Carissa had just settled her husband onto the divan when Lulu returned and said, "Sage Adrian and Mr. Spencer, along with the other guild members, forced His Highness to drink. Deputy Ziegler said His Highness couldn't refuse, so they poured a lot for him. They drank rose wine with people from other guilds."

Carissa frowned. "My master had someone force His Highness to drink?"

Wasn't that just bullying? With so many guild members around, each one having a cup, they could have made Rafael drink until he vomited blood.

"Yes, he drank a lot. But isn't the rose wine from the Lunar Guild supposed to be mild? Why was it so strong?" asked Lulu.

"It's likely that my master brewed the wine, so it's not the kind the Lunar Guild usually provides," Carissa replied.

She glanced at Rafael, whose cheeks and ears were flushed red from the alcohol. It seemed unlikely they would be able to drink the ceremonial wine tonight, and she would probably be the only one eating all the food on the table.

She had a lot of questions for him, especially about what Lily had mentioned to her earlier that evening. She had hoped to ask him for more details. But now, not only could she not ask, he was completely unconscious.

Pearl brought over the hot water.

"You should all go and rest. You've had a long day too. I'll take care of him," Carissa said.

"But tonight..." Pearl hesitated.

Lily had initially arranged for Pearl to stay outside the newlywed suite, ready to assist at any time, given that it was Carissa's wedding night. However, seeing Rafael so thoroughly drunk, it seemed unlikely they would even get to the ceremonial wine.

"Ms. Lily, they haven't had the ceremonial wine yet," Pearl said, turning to the older woman.

Lily sighed. "How could they get His Highness so drunk? They poured wine into him before he had a chance to eat. Didn't they think about how important this night is for the groom?"

Lily blamed Adrian for this.

It was a significant night for Carissa, and Rafael was a good match.

How could they be so heartless as to get him drunk like this? He had been injured many times on the battlefield and had been working hard since returning to the capital. How could things proceed now that Rafael was in this state?

Carissa was not the only one feeling pained-Lily was deeply upset as well.

Carissa used a hot towel to pat Rafael's face and wipe his hands. She then pressed a few acupoints to help him regain some awareness.

Rafael opened his eyes, feeling the world spinning around him. He couldn't tell where he was and could only see countless blurry images of Carissa.

He raised a hand and mumbled hoarsely, his voice raspy from the strong liquor, "Wait, don't move. Let me look closely. Am I dreaming, or am I really drunk? Why does it feel like I'm actually marrying Carissa?" Rafael was feeling intensely dizzy. He reached out to touch the face in front of him, but even with his eyes open, the spinning sensation persisted. Closing his eyes only made it worse.

"Oh, it's a dream. How could Carissa's skin be so rough? And there are wrinkles. It must be a dream."

Lily pushed his hand away. "My face is naturally rough and wrinkled. How old do you think I am? Quickly, drink some hangover remedy."

The cup was brought to his lips. Without hesitation, Rafael gulped it down.

Carissa soaked a fresh hot towel and came over to wipe his face. She couldn't help but chuckle.

"Look at how drunk you are. You're mistaking my attendant for me."

Hearing his drunken ramblings just now had surprisingly pleased her.

Let him be drunk for now-once he was sober, he wouldn't say such things.

After drinking the hangover remedy, Rafael suddenly felt his stomach churn violently. He leapt up and staggered out, collapsing in the corridor and starting to heave uncontrollably. The violent retching cleared most of the alcohol from his stomach.

He felt much better afterward, no longer experiencing the spinning sensation. Although he was still unsteady, he could at least lean on the wall to walk.

Lily called for someone to clean up the mess while Carissa helped Rafael back inside. She took a clean towel and scrubbed his face vigorously. Inside, she was fuming.

Didn't he know how to refuse? Just because they poured it, he had to drink it?

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Lily watched from the side, deciding to leave the couple to sort things out themselves. Whether it ended in a fight or a scolding, Carissa and Rafael would handle it on their own.

Carissa was upset, and if Lily stayed to offer advice, she might only fuel her anger. Carissa wasn't angry with Rafael but with Adrian. Lily left the room, understanding that it was better to leave the couple alone, so that Carissa would feel sorry for her husband, given the state he was in.

After wiping Rafael's face and cleaning his hands, Carissa gave him some water to rinse his mouth. It helped him feel more awake.

He was indeed clearer-headed now, even able to notice that Carissa was still upset. He understood it wasn't directed at him, but found her all the more beautiful when her delicate face was clouded with displeasure.

The candles cast a warm glow throughout the room, and the intertwined knots hung around the lanterns seemed to warm his heart.

Rafael cleared his throat softly and asked, "I made most of these Eternal Knots myself. Do they look good?"

Carissa, who was in the middle of portioning some food for him, glanced around. She wouldn't have noticed the knots around the room if he hadn't said anything. It wasn't that there weren't enough of them in sight, but she was anxious enough to not be paying attention to them.

Surprised, she looked at his long, slender hands and asked, "You made these? You know how to do such detailed work?"

Rafael's hair was slightly disheveled, but his face remained strikingly handsome, his smile lighting up his eyes.

"I didn't, but I learned how to do it."

Carissa's eyes shimmered with unspoken emotions. She feigned ignorance as she asked, "Why?"

"I'm not sure why. I just wanted to make them with my own hands. I wanted to be more involved with our wedding." Rafael paused thoughtfully. "There's something I haven't told you."

He raised a hand to his forehead, trying to shake off the lingering dizziness, hoping to be as clear-headed as possible so she wouldn't think he was speaking under the influence.

Carissa slowly walked to the table, already guessing what he was about to say.

"Well, would you like to tell me now? Also, can you manage another small cup? We still haven't had the ceremonial wine."

"Yes, the ceremonial wine. We must drink it. I can handle it."

Rafael stood up, his steps slightly unsteady but managing to walk in a straight line. He took a seat next to Carissa. Their eyes met, revealing emotions they no longer tried to hide. Carissa blushed and lowered her gaze as she poured the wine.

The small, intricately carved gold cups were tied with delicate white ribbons, adding a touch of elegance. As the wine was poured, a rich rose aroma filled the air. It was indeed the perfect rose wine to drink. "This wine smells wonderful," Rafael remarked, reaching for the two cups.

He handed one to his wife, feeling his heart suddenly race.

Their hands intertwined as their faces drew close, nearly touching. They could almost hear each other's breath. Perhaps it was the glow of the candles, but their eyes sparkled with shared emotions.

"My dear, drinking this ceremonial wine means we will grow old together," he said softly.

Rafael's mind was clear, though his heart was still under the spell of emotion.

Carissa's face flushed a deep red. She nodded, watching Rafael lift his cup and drink, and she followed suit.

The wine, carrying a hint of cool fragrance, had a barely perceptible taste of alcohol. It was smooth and well-crafted, with just the right kick. After finishing the drink, she looked into his dark eyes and felt a slight drunkenness herself.

They set down their cups and gazed at each other.

"I wanted to tell you something..." he began.

Carissa interrupted him, "I'll start. Before you went to the Southern Frontier, did you seek out my mother to ask for my hand?"

He was taken aback. "You know?"

"Lily just told me," she said, biting her red lips. She looked up, her eyelashes fluttering. "So, the person you mentioned who was your beloved, the one who was already married, was me?"

Rafael nodded slightly. "Yes, it's you. It's always been you. From the start, you were the only one."

Everything became clear to Carissa. Her eyes filled with tears, and her nose grew a bit stuffy.

"You gave up your military power to marry me. The king knew your intentions, which is why he gave me that edict with a three-month deadline. If I didn't marry, I would have to enter the palace as a concubine. He was forcing you to give up your military command. You're such a fool."

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Rafael took out a handkerchief and gently wiped the tears from the corners of Carissa's eyes.

"I'm not foolish at all. What use is military power? How can it compare to you? With the country at peace, holding onto military power would only provoke jealousy and lead to future troubles. Even if the king hadn't forced me, I would have given it up."

Rafael even smiled with a hint of pride. "If he hadn't pressured me, I'd still be worrying about how to propose to you. With the edict given, I believed you would choose me over becoming a concubine. He actually helped me."

Carissa shot him a teasing glance. "You're actually pleased about it? Really, you're the type who gets scammed and would still thank the scammer for it."

Her playful reproach seemed to touch his heart deeply, making him feel like he was on cloud nine.

"It doesn't matter. I've achieved what I wished for," said Rafael.

Carissa lowered her gaze, feeling a sweet satisfaction in her heart.

Achieving what one wished for—wasn't that exactly how she felt too? It was delightful to realize how well their hearts were aligned.

He served her some food, adding a bit of everything to her plate. "You must be starving."

"I had some chicken noodle soup earlier. Lily was worried I'd be hungry and had someone prepare it for me. I heard you haven't eaten at all," Carissa replied.

"After toasting at table after table, there was indeed no time to eat. I had hoped to return earlier, but then my master pulled me aside to toast with the leaders of other guilds. I ended up drinking too much," said Rafael.

"My master was the one who dragged you off, wasn't he?" asked Carissa, taking a bite of the roasted meat.

It was cooked to a perfect tenderness and tasted delicious. The traditional dish combining various meat and vegetables represented the unity of a couple's hearts. So, she gave a piece to Rafael as well. The food served by his wife tasted even more delicious to him.

Though each had many things they wished to say, they ate in silence. This was their first meal after marriage. Without a suitable way to express their feelings, it was better to say less to avoid mistakes. Carissa ate gracefully, her manners reminiscent of a refined lady.

Rafael couldn't help but smile as he recalled the time when they conquered Ilyrian City. He had given her a bowl of chicken noodle soup, which she devoured with such enthusiasm that she finished the entire bowl in moments, leaving not a drop of broth behind.

Who could link the Carissa in front of him now with the one from the battlefield? They seemed like entirely different people.

Carissa ate slowly, unaware of the smile in her husband's eyes. Her mind was occupied with other thoughts.

The night before she married Barrett, her mother had invited her aunt to teach Carissa how to serve a husband and what the wedding night would be like. But over time, she had pretty much forgotten her aunt's advice.

Now, there was no one to guide her. Lily had likely assumed that advice had already been given, so she hadn't brought it up again.

Carissa struggled to recall her aunt's words.

Was she supposed to help her husband undress, or was it the other way around? Should she be the one to take initiative, or should she be more passive? Was the concern that her husband might think her too frivolous, or was it that he might find her lacking in interest?

Oh dear, Carissa had forgotten.

Wait, she remembered something. It seemed she shouldn't be too forward, nor too passive. She shouldn't make her husband think she was too frivolous, but she also shouldn't seem too unresponsive. She needed to find the right balance.

After they finished their meal, Rafael stood up first, taking her hand with a tender gaze. "We've had a long day. Let's turn in early tonight."

"Okay, then..." Her cheeks flushed suddenly. "Do you want to take a bath?"

"Yes, with the alcohol stench on me, I'd rather not have it bother you."

"Shall I call someone to assist?" Carissa offered.

He smiled. "No need for anyone tonight. The bathing chamber is right next to our bedroom. You... you should change into your nightwear first."

"Okay!" Carissa lowered her gaze, withdrew her hand, and said softly, "Then, you go ahead. You've had too much to drink. Just a quick wash will do." "Got it!"

Rafael's heart warmed at her consideration.

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In the bathing chamber, Rafael's nightwear had already been laid out. It was blue, made from a comfortable fabric with only subtle cloud patterns, matching the nightwear Carissa was about to change into in both color and style.

It wasn't entirely without embroidery, though. The cuffs featured some stitching: one sleeve bore the words "eternal harmony," while the other sleeve had "blessing of a child," symbolizing good

wishes. Rafael had bathed and groomed himself the previous night, knowing that this evening might extend late into the night.

When he emerged from the bathing chamber, dressed in the blue nightwear, he looked both clean and handsome. After spending some time in the capital, his complexion had become notably fairer. Carissa remembered meeting him on the battlefield. Back then, his face had been covered in a rugged beard, and he looked as unkempt as one could possibly be. It was hard to imagine that the man before her now was the same person.

The candles cast a warm glow on the white wedding quilt, and the draped curtains added to the cozy atmosphere.

As Rafael gently led Carissa by the hand toward the big bed, her heart raced and her palms grew sweaty. She had never been so nervous around anyone in her life.

What she didn't know was that Rafael was even more anxious.

He felt an overwhelming urge to grab everyone by the collar and shout, "Have you ever waited years to marry the girl of your dreams, only to have her marry someone else? And just when you're about to give up hope, she gets a divorce and comes back to you, and tonight, you finally get to marry her?"

Was there anyone who could truly understand his excitement and joy?

Anyone at all?!

In his overwhelming emotion, he accidentally stepped on the long hem of her gown. Carissa stumbled forward, but he quickly caught her.

"I'm sorry!"

Holding her soft, fragrant form in his arms, Rafael felt his mind go blank.

The sensation of dizziness struck him again, as if lightning was crashing through his chest again and again. Everything around him seemed to fade into nothingness. He was barely aware of what was happening.

When Rafael's awareness slowly returned, he found himself already on the bed, with Carissa's trembling, awkward hands trying to undress him.

She was half-propped on the bed, her face flushed bright red. The front of his nightwear was partially open, exposing his chest. Her nervousness was clear as her hands fumbled, unsure where to place them. Carissa's heart raced uncontrollably when Rafael suddenly pulled her onto the bed.

Was he taking the lead?

If he made the first move, shouldn't she at least show some interest and take a bit of initiative herself? So, the usual sequence would be for him to initiate the embrace, then for her to undress him, rather than waiting for him to undress her.

Right?

Now that she had removed his clothing, what should she do next?

She felt a flush spread over her entire body, and her ears burned. She even imagined that her hair was turning red.

Carissa's delicate eyelashes fluttered as she slowly moved her gaze to his face, tilting her head slightly as if to ask, "What comes next?"

That adorable, innocent expression...

Rafael couldn't tell if it was the effect of the alcohol or his emotions, but he could barely think straight.

As their lips touched, any remaining shred of rationality dissolved, and the spinning sensation returned, overtaking him once again.

Carissa found herself pressed against his chest, his strong arms encircling her with such force that his solid, iron-like chest made it almost impossible for her to catch her breath. But perhaps the real reason she was gasping for air was because his lips were firmly pressed against hers.

Was he acting like a puppy, just nuzzling indiscriminately?

If he knew his wife's thoughts, Rafael would swear he wasn't just clumsily nuzzling her. He had spent considerable time studying the "sacred texts" on this subject before their wedding, thoroughly analyzing everything from written guides and illustrations to Jacob's advice.

He knew exactly how to handle this moment skillfully. But he was currently feeling overwhelmingly dizzy and his head was somewhat blank. He needed a moment to recover.

Tonight was their first night together, a moment of deep connection between him and Carissa. He wanted to make sure it was perfect.

Long ago, as a young man, he had cherished thoughts of her, waiting for the day he could finally marry her. He had never been with another woman, as he believed the act to be sacred and only wanted to share those intimate experiences with Carissa.

Because he hadn't accumulated any experience, Rafael was clumsy and disorganized, struggling to perform as he hoped. But fortunately, the night was long, wasn't it?

Both of them stumbled through the experience, clumsy and inexperienced.

The candles were meant to burn all night long. And they had a whole lifetime ahead of them, with countless opportunities to connect and explore together.

Before falling into a deep sleep, Carissa had only one thought flashing through her mind.

Was this what sex was supposed to be like? It seemed that she was better at it than Rafael. Her guild junior didn't seem very skilled at this!

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At around seven in the morning, Lily knocked on the door from outside. The inner and outer rooms were separated by a curtain, with the door to the bedroom in the outer area. Hearing the knock, Rafael and Carissa both opened their eyes and sat up almost simultaneously. Both were naturally alert.

Carissa glanced at Rafael, noting he was without clothing, and suddenly realized she was in the same state. She quickly grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around herself. Her face flushed hotly and she assumed she was blushing.

Recalling the previous night's events, Rafael felt he had not performed very well. He wasn't quite comfortable meeting his wife's gaze directly, and was still getting used to the intimacy they shared. So, he quickly grabbed his nightclothes and hid under the covers to put them on.

Once dressed, he cleared his throat and said, "I'll get up first. You... you should put on your nightclothes, then call someone in to help you change."

Why did this feel so awkward? He didn't even dare to look at her directly!

But he couldn't resist sneaking a glance. This was how Carissa looked upon waking-dazed and somewhat bewildered, yet still beautiful and fresh.

They had to perform the post-wedding rituals this morning and offer Helen a toast. Knowing her nature, she would likely give Carissa a hard time, so it was best not to delay and risk giving her an excuse to cause trouble.

Rafael opened the door, revealing Lily, along with Carissa's attendants, waiting outside. Gillian was also there.

Upon seeing him, Gillian immediately bowed. "Greetings, Your Highness."

Rafael nodded. "Go in and assist the princess consort with her clothing."

However, Gillian wasn't there just to assist with dressing. She was acting on Helen's orders to check whether Carissa was still pure. So, after the formalities, Gillian entered the bedroom. Seeing Carissa dressed in her nightclothes and rising from the bed, she hurriedly bowed.

"Greetings, Your Highness."

"Please, no need for formalities," Carissa said, meeting Lily's gaze.

She felt a wave of shyness as she thought about the marks on her neck, which the nightclothes could barely cover. Despite her embarrassment, she maintained a composed demeanor. "Is everyone here? Let's begin with washing up and changing."

Rafael originally had an attendant to attend to him. However, he hadn't allowed servants into the new residence yet since he wanted Carissa's opinion on them. After years on the battlefield in the Southern Frontier, his previous attendant had now become a minor official in the household, making it difficult to recall him just for his service.

The current attendant assigned to Rafael was a temporary replacement from Jacob. They hadn't established much rapport, but he could be changed if needed. Rafael had never required a maid to attend to him, especially not for intimate matters-such duties were strictly off-limits for female servants.

So, Rafael took a set of clothes and went behind the partition screen to change.

As he was about to enter, he saw Gillian rummaging through their bed and quickly called out, "Gillian, what are you doing?"

Gillian had already uncovered the bed and seen the telltale signs of the couple's intimacy. She smiled, her face creasing with wrinkles.

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm just tidying up the bedding and will send it out to be cleaned."

Carissa's face flushed crimson upon realizing what was on the bed. When Lulu came in with water, she began her morning routine of washing and changing. As for Gillian's actions, she chose to ignore them. Gillian summoned two maids to remove the bedding and prepare the bed anew. Lily glanced at the scene, feeling a mix of sadness and relief.

The sadness came from seeing Carissa, who had spent a year at Valor Estate as more of a figurehead than a true presence, yet having to give so much in return. On the other hand, there was relief in knowing that Barrett had not gained any advantage.

The union with Rafael-Carissa's first genuine, heartfelt connection-had been solidified. With the evidence of their intimacy now present, no one in the mansion would dare question her virtue. Carissa was dressed for court today, as she was to attend an audience with the queen dowager and the king. As Rafael's princess consort, she was required to wear court attire.

Her dark green dress featured long, large sleeves and was embroidered with gold and silver threads depicting phoenixes and peonies. The deep cyan sash around her waist had two parallel bands flowing down, adorned with gold cloud and phoenix patterns, as well as gold tassels.

The lighter green outer layer had gold embroidery of cloud phoenixes on the front and back, secured with an emerald pendant.

She wore a crown and gold phoenix hairpins, her hair in an elaborate updo. The base of the crown was decorated with green trim and gold jewelry. The ensemble reflected the dignified and solemn demeanor appropriate for a princess consort.

Given the cold weather, Lily also provided Carissa with a green hooded cloak. Although the hood couldn't be worn due to the crown, it hung naturally down her back. The cloak was edged with white, and the hood had white fur trim, giving it a regal yet charmingly playful appearance.

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Rafael needed to wear formal court attire, but he couldn't manage it on his own-it was simply too complicated.

In the end, he took the attire out to the outer room and called for Luke and a servant to help him dress.

He wore a crown and a green outfit with griffin patterns embroidered on the shoulders. His waist was bound with a blue sash, and on either side of his waist hung emerald pendants decorated with gold-etched cloud and griffin patterns, threaded with emerald beads. The pendants were fastened with golden hooks and secured with four-colored ribbons.

The grand sash was woven in red, white, azure, and green. Rafael's tall, slender frame made him appear even more imposing and dignified in this luxurious attire.

Carissa still needed to lightly brush her eyebrows and apply a touch of powder. Even with her naturally stunning beauty, it wouldn't do to face the day without any makeup. Once she was fully dressed and groomed, Carissa was escorted out by Lily, Lulu, and her other attendants,

Carissa asked about Ryan first. Upon learning that he hadn't risen yet and that Joy was attending to him, she felt at ease

As she walked out of the room, she met Rafael's gaze, who had just finished dressing.

Perhaps it was because they were both dressed so solemnly today that they forgot about the intimacy they shared the previous night, and the awkwardness melted away.

Almost instinctively, Rafael extended his hand. Without hesitation, Carissa placed her hand in his. They exchanged a smile, and walked out together.

From where she was following behind, Lily wiped away her tears. She had promised herself not to cry, but seeing how loving Rafael and Carissa were, Lily couldn't help but shed tears of joy.

Helen was already seated in the ceremonial chair in the main hall. The chair had been custom-made at her special request. Though she didn't often sit in the outer courtyard's main hall, as Carissa would typically have to visit her chambers to greet her in the future, today, she felt the need to exert her authority.

However, on their way out, Rafael and Carissa were stopped by Jacob.

Since the dowry was to be moved into the storeroom today, an inventory check would be conducted. The missing pearls would definitely need to be reported.

Jacob knew the dowry items had been registered at the local government office, with both a ledger and a gift list. If anything was missing, it would be immediately noticed during the inventory check.

When the Mystic Pearls were delivered, they were sent in a jar. Jacob had seen the gift list, and while it didn't specify the exact number of pearls in each jar, there were some details written down. Even if it hadn't been explicitly noted, this matter needed to be reported to Rafael and Carissa—they couldn't let Eleanor get away with this.

As Jacob spoke, Rafael's expression darkened immediately. "Are you sure she took them?"

"Yes, I'm sure. They were indeed given to her, and when Gillian took them, the guards saw it with their

own eyes. It's just that exposing her on the spot wasn't appropriate."

Rafael believed Jacob. This was exactly the kind of thing his mother would do.

It wasn't that Helen had any designs on Carissa's dowry-she wouldn't go that far. But she was obsessed with her reputation and showing off.

Despite consistently being outmaneuvered by Eleanor and Jessica, she kept trying to curry favor with them, always rushing to subject herself to their scorn.

"I'll go myself after we return from the palace," Rafael said.

Carissa was utterly speechless after hearing this.

Was there something seriously wrong with her new mother-in-law?

How could Helen give Carissa's dowry to Eleanor? For what reason? To preserve her dignity, or to make Eleanor think Helen could control her new daughter-in-law?

Carissa despised people who couldn't see things clearly. She knew exactly what kind of attitude Helen had toward Eleanor and Jessica, and how the mother-daughter duo treated Helen.

What Carissa couldn't understand was why Helen, who usually strutted around the palace with confidence, was so afraid of Eleanor and her daughter.

Did they really have the power to cause harm?

Hearing Rafael's plan, Carissa said, "You don't need to go. This is a matter between women. I can handle it."

"What?"

But then, Rafael thought for a moment.

It might be appropriate, but Eleanor wasn't someone easy to deal with. If she decided to deny everything, that would make things very difficult.

"I'll be fine on my own. If we can't even recover a few pearls, we'll never be able to hold our own in these circles again. But first, I'll speak to my mother-in-law and find out what's going on. Why did she give the pearls to Grand Princess Eleanor?" Carissa said.

Helen, who had prepared meticulously for this moment, finally saw her son enter, hand in hand with Carissa.

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The scene before Helen was truly pleasing to the eye.

Her son was handsome, and Carissa was beautiful. Both of them exuded a cold, imposing match as husband and wife.

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Just a moment ago, Gillian had rushed in to report that it had been confirmed Carissa was indeed chaste, and that she had only consummated her marriage with Rafael the previous night. Helen was quite satisfied with this news, though her satisfaction was limited to the fact that Carissa pure. As for this being Carissa's second marriage, she hadn't fully come to terms with it yet. Helen sat upright, her demeanor proud, and her gaze carried an air of authority.

Suppressing his anger, Rafael led Carissa forward by the hand. They knelt down, and bowed their heads in greeting

Gillian, holding a tray, stood to the side and spoke. "The new bride offers a toast to Lady Helen!"

Carissa took the cup, respectfully offering it to Helen with both hands. "Mother, please have some wine."

Helen waited for a moment. It was only when she saw the anger brewing in Rafael's eyes that she slowly extended her hand to accept the drink. She took a small sip and then set the cup aside.

"Hand her the gift," Helen said slowly, her voice laced with a natural haughtiness.

Gillian set down the tray and took out a pair of stag and dove motive bangles, smiling as she placed them on Carissa's wrists.

"These are a gift from Lady Helen to the new bride. The new bride should bow and thank her for this honor."

Since her mother-in-law had given her a gift, Carissa was obliged to bow and express her gratitude. It was customary, and she complied.

After thanking Helen, Carissa stood up, and Helen began rubbing her neck. "I didn't sleep well last night. The noise kept me up all night, and now I have a bit of a headache. Come over and massage my head." "No need to rush, Rafael said coldly. "There's something I need to ask you first, Mom. Did you, by any chance, take a few Mystic Pearls from Carissa's dowry and give them to Aunt Eleanor last night?" Helen froze, her eyes immediately darting away-an obvious sign of guilt.

Realizing she had been caught, she quickly blustered, "Who's been spreading such nonsense? I'll have their tongue cut out!"

Rafael pressed on, "Mom, just tell me-did you or did you not? If you did, say yes. If you didn't, say no." Helen feared nothing more than the sight of her son with that stern expression-it was exactly the same as when the late king was angry.

When the late king was enraged, Helen could still rely on her charms to appease him. But trying to do the same with her son was utterly useless. Not only would it fail, but his gaze would also cut through her like

knives

Under the intense pressure of her son's gaze, Helen shot a glance at Gillian. Taking the cue, Gillian dropped to her knees.

"Please, Your Highnesses, don't be angry. It's all my fault."

Gillian then confessed everything about the bet between Eleanor and Helen, sparing no detail.

Helen glared at Gillian-how could she not keep even a small matter like this hidden?

After hearing the whole story, Carissa gave Rafael a reassuring look, signaling him not to lose his temper.

She then said, "It's just a few Mystic Pearls. If Mother wants them, I can offer them as a token of respect. Since Grand Princess Eleanor said that if I don't ask you for them, she would return the pearls and even pay you three thousand silver coins, then that's easily settled.

"Today, you can accompany me to Grand Princess Eleanor's palace. I'll explain the situation to her in person. Grand Princess Eleanor is reasonable. Since she made the bet, she'll honor it, return the pearls to you,

and give you the three thousand silver coins."

Helen's eyes lit up. "You're not upset? You're not angry? I took your dowry, and you're not angry?"

Was Carissa really this generous?

Carissa smiled. "It's just a few pearls. I'd be happy to give them all to you, Mother. There's nothing to be upset about. But those pearls are valuable, and it would be a shame if they ended up in someone else's hands, don't you think? We can't let her have them for nothing"

Helen clapped her hands in delight. "Excellent! I've won! I'll go with you to Grand Princess Eleanor's palace right now, demand the pearls back, and get those three thousand silver coins.

"The Gilded Tower cost me quite a bit of money, and I've never earned a single coin from it. Now, getting three thousand silver coins from them would just make up for what I gave them last time."

"The Gilded Tower?" Carissa asked, her tone laced with intrigue. "Was that jewelry shop something and Grand Princess Eleanor started together?"

"Of course! It's been running for years, and I haven't earned a single coin. I even have to fork over money from time to time to keep it afloat."

Helen trailed off, realizing that this line of talk wasn't exactly appropriate

Didn't it make her sound like a poor investor? That would be embarrassing!

Helen quickly changed her tune.

"But that's how business works-sometimes you lose, sometimes you gain. You wouldn't understand. Starting a business is hard, and keeping it going is even harder. Eventually, it will turn a profit"

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Carissa smiled, though she was nearly grinding her teeth.

Still, she maintained a gentle tone as she agreed with her mother-in-law.

"You're right, Mother. Business does have its ups and downs. Oh, by the way.... Do you and Grand Princess Eleanor split the profits of the jewelry shop evenly? Did you sign a contract? And since it opened, have you reviewed the account books?"

Helen puffed up with pride, like a peacock. "Of course we signed a contract! Do you take me for a fool? It's not an even split-I've taken seventy percent. Naturally, I've looked at the account books. They send them every season, and I've checked them thoroughly. We've indeed been running at a loss."

"Oh? So, you hold the majority share? That means when there's a loss, you have to contribute more money to cover it. How much money have you put in over the years? Have you been keeping track?" Carissa pressed.

"Of course I've kept track. Every time I put in money, I note it down," Helen said.

Good, that was a start.

Then, do you remember how much money you've given in total?"

"Who remembers that in their head? You'd have to check the account books. It's probably in the tens of thousands of silver coins," Helen replied, slightly annoyed.

"I see." Carissa glanced at Rafael, whose face had turned as dark as a storm cloud, and continued, "Mother, have you ever actually visited The Gilded Tower?" Helen responded coldly, "How could I? I live deep in the palace.

Do you think I can just go out as I please? When I did leave the palace, it was to help prepare for your wedding, so I haven't had the time. Besides, what difference does it make whether I go or not? The shop is managed by Eric. G

rand Princess Eleanor and I hold esteemed positions-how could we show our faces in public? Anyway, I review the account books every season. I'm not worried about Eric deceiving us."

Carissa knew that many noble families in the capital owned businesses, but they didn't manage them personally. They left that to their managers. The managers would report back, and trusted servants or confidants would occasionally inspect the shops. The nobles themselves might also drop by from time

It was unheard of for them to personally manage the shops.

Helen wasn't wrong in her reasoning-except for her use of the word "we.

She and Eleanor could hardly be considered a "we."

Rafael was furious. Tens of thousands of silver coins invested, and nothing to show for it!

While organizing the wedding, he had personally visited the well-known gold jewelry shops in the capital with Jacob and Luke. The most successful was The Golden Tower, and while The Gilded Tower- Helen's -shop-wasn't doing badly, it was notorious for copying designs from The Golden Tower, which hurt its reputation.

But reputation was one thing, and business success was another.

Despite its reputation issues, The Gilded Tower managed to attract customers who were looking for cheaper alternatives to the Golden Tower's designs. As a result, the shop did decent business-enough to avoid losses, let alone require any financial assistance.

Carissa was aware of this, though it was clear Helen wasn't. Now wasn't the time to inform her, though. The priority was to retrieve the Mystic Pearls.

Rafael ordered the carriages to be prepared. He and Carissa would head to the palace first. To prevent his mother from rushing off to Eleanor's palace to brag, he decided to bring her along as well.

Three carriages were prepared. Rafael and Carissa shared one, Helen and Gillian another, and Lily, Lulu, and Pearl occupied the third.

As a married woman, Carissa's status had changed. She needed attendants by her side at all times, even if it was just for appearances.

Upon arriving at the palace, they first paid their respects to the queen dowager.

Victoria was delighted to see Carissa. After the customary toast and bestowal of gifts, she held Carissa's hand, asking the latter all sorts of questions. She even sternly warned Rafael to treat Carissa well. Rafael had no choice but to reassure Victoria, promising to take good care of his wife, which seemed to put the older woman at ease.

However, Helen was less than pleased..

Was her elder sister serious?

Shouldn't Victoria be reminding Carissa to serve her husband well? Did Victoria think that as a wife, Carissa held a higher position than her husband?

Chapter 349

The queen dowager had sharp eyes-she immediately noticed her younger sister's discontent.

After Rafael and Carissa went to greet the king and queen, Victoria held back Helen and Gillian for a private conversation.

She first addressed Gillian.

"Now that you've left the palace and entered the household, things are different. Social interactions are Inevitable, and any misstep in words or deeds could bring trouble to Rafael's reputation. So, you must be even more careful in your conduct, with no room for error.

"Your mistress was raised by you and has been spoiled by you, but if you notice anything amiss in the future, you must speak up immediately. If she intends to do something inappropriate, you must persuade her otherwise. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, I understand," Gillian replied respectfully.

However, Helen pouted. "Victoria, what could I possibly do wrong? Besides, I'll be managing the household affairs from now on, with Gillian and Luke assisting me, and Jacob offering advice. What could go wrong?"

"You? Manage the household?" Victoria waved her hand, shaking her head firmly. "No, you should just enjoy your life in Rafael's residence. You're not to interfere with the household matters. If you want to manage something, stick to overseeing your own courtyard and the people within it. Didn't you bring enough people with you? That should be plenty to keep you occupied."

"Victoria, what are you saying? I'm Rafael's mother! If I don't help him manage the household, who will? Surely not Carissa? What does that little girl know?" Helen protested. However, Victoria didn't mince words in her retort.

"She knows more than you, even if she knows little. When our mother tried to teach you how to understand the numbers in the account books while you were still unmarried, you refused to learn. After entering the palace, you couldn't even outmaneuver a mere concubine.

"If it weren't for me watching over you, do you think they would have let you live so comfortably all these years? When Rafael was six months old, I was unwell and had to rest for a few days, and during that time, he was nearly poisoned and died. Have you forgotten?"

Helen immediately felt embarrassed. "Why bring up something that happened so long ago? That incident was an accident. Libby had slipped something into the wet nurse's food, which caused Rafael to vomit and have diarrhea after feeding. That wicked woman-didn't you deal with her?"

"If it weren't for me investigating thoroughly, how would we have discovered that Libby had drugged the wet nurse? And why did she do it? Wasn't it because you kept punishing her and venting your anger on her? She was beautiful, and you couldn't stand the fact that the late king

favored her slightly. With that kind of temperament, you think you can manage Rafael's household? You'd better drop that idea before you create more trouble for Rafael and Carissa."

Helen was deeply displeased at being reprimanded by her sister for something that happened so many years ago. She couldn't help but think it was all because her sister now favored Carissa

"You used to care for me the most, but now you only care about Carissa," Helen said, feeling aggrieved. "Don't forget who your real sister is."

Victoria looked at Helen's pitiful expression, and regretted having spoiled her all these years. Especially after the late king passed, she had been lenient with Helen, sympathizing with her loneliness. Victoria had hoped that once Rafael married, Helen would assume the role of a proper mother-in-law. Little did she expect that Helen would now be competing with her daughter-in-law for attention.

Victoria was determined not to indulge Helen any further. Her eyes sharpened as she rebuked Helen.

"Put away your pettiness. You're a mother-in-law now, and yet you're jealous of your daughter-in-law? From now on, she's part of your family. As her mother-in-law, you should be protecting her, not competing with her. What kind of behavior is that? Aren't you afraid of becoming a laughingstock?"

Although Helen was still somewhat dissatisfied, she knew her sister rarely spoke to her with such severity, unless truly furious. While Helen wasn't the brightest, she wasn't entirely foolish either. Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, Helen quickly put on a pitiful expression and nodded. "Yes, I understand."

Inwardly, Helen was relieved that her sister hadn't found out about the pearls she had taken from Carissa's dowry to give to Eleanor.

Otherwise, she would have been in for a much harsher reprimand!

Chapter 350

The king and queen received Rafael and Carissa in the Great Hall.

After the formalities and greetings. Salvador granted them seats. Kylie glanced at Carissa, who was adorned with simple, elegant makeup and let out a slight sigh of relief. At least everything was settled."

Had Canssa truly entered the palace, the harem might have become her domain. Her stunning and ethereal beauty was unmatched by any of the palace concubines.

Instinctively, Kyle looked toward Salvador, she saw that he, too, was gazing at Carissa. A tightness gripped her heart-she was all too familiar with that look. Whenever Salvador was drawn to a woman, there was always a trace of lingering fascination in his gaze.

Once again, Kylie felt a sense of relief that Carissa had married Rafael.

embered how Salvador's edict had kept her awake for nights on end. Any other woman might have been fine, but Carissa was different-her fallen brothers and father held significant weight Salvador's heart, and her beauty was truly breathtaking.

Kyle's fears hadn't come to pass. Instead, Carissa had become her sister-in-law.

Thus. Kyle's smile toward Carissa today was genuine. No matter what Salvador might be thinking, he would not take his brother's wife

Kyle was not naive. Reflecting on Salvador's maneuvers, it seemed clear that he had forced Rafael into

marrying Carissa so that Rafael would sacrifice his military power in the process.

Salvador had never truly intended to bring Carissa into the palace.

Whether Salvador regretted his decision or not was beyond Kylie's concern. What mattered was that it was no longer possible

Kylie understood that even if Carissa had entered the palace, her position would not be shaken. However, the harem's peace would have been disrupted, and scheming for favor would be inevitable. If the harem became riddled with schemes, even a virtuous and capable queen would struggle to maintain control.

As a wife, Kyle worried about Salvador's genuine affection being directed at another woman.

The king could favor concubines, but not truly love them.

Kylie's greater concern was the potential damage to her own reputation as a virtuous queen.

Salvador glanced at Carissa for a few moments, but soon turned his attention away. He understood his own feelings—there might be a trace of romantic interest in Carissa, but maintaining stability in the kingdom and ensuring peace between brothers were far more important.

As the saying went, one couldn't have it both ways.

Salvador understood this well.

Seated on the throne, he was bound to sacrifice some things and engage in schemes, even against his own younger brother.

The two brothers began discussing family matters, which soon turned to official business, specifically questions about cases in the Supreme Court.

With the New Year approaching and the need to finalize many decisions, some cases required early resolution. Since some of these matters were related to the previous generation, it was inappropriate for Kylie and Carissa to remain present.

Kylie thus invited Carissa to view the orchids. As they walked outside, a group of attendants followed at a

distance.

Kylie smiled, and said, "I know you grew up in Meadow Ridge, and they say the most beautiful orchids in the kingdom are from Meadow Ridge. I hope you'll still enjoy the ones here, even if they're not as impressive."

Carissa replied with a smile, "That's a misunderstanding. In reality, every place's orchids are unique, each with its own beauty."

Wrapped in her warm coat, Kyle chuckled. "Indeed, each has its own beauty. Life is truly remarkable. I initially thought we would be sisters, but unexpectedly, we became sisters-in-law. Regardless, there is a real connection between us."

"There certainly is," Carissa said, untroubled by the topic.

Everyone understood the situation, and there was no need to feign ignorance. After all, everything was settled, and avoiding honest conversations would only lead to misunderstandings and cause unhappiness.

As they reached the flowers, Kylie suddenly remarked. "Next year, Kiera will also be married. I've heard that she has some mutual understanding with my sixth brother, Logan, but Helen has her sights set on my fifth brother, Marcus. Carissa, I believe mutual affection is best. If there are too many schemes involved in the marriage, everyone will end up unhappy. Don't you think?"

Carissa pondered for a moment, and understood Kylie's implication.

She smiled, and said, "Your Majesty speaks the truth. However, I am merely Kiera's sister-in-law. Her marriage is not something I can decide. I can, however, understand and support her feelings." Kylie felt a renewed admiration for Carissa. Speaking with her was effortless.