

## War Song 351

### Chapter 351

Kylie was truly at her wit's end.

As Dakota's son, Kendrick, had married someone from the Quinton family, Helen was also keen on marrying Kiera to the same family.

Victoria had tacitly agreed. Salvador, being devoted to his mother, would certainly heed her advice.

However, among the Quinton family men, only Logan was uninterested in scholarly pursuits. He spent his days idly walking dogs and playing with cats, while the rest dedicated themselves to rigorous study, striving for a place in the court.

Particularly, Kylie's fifth brother, Marcus, had devoted himself to intense study from a young age, aiming for top honors.

If he were to marry Kiera and become a mere idle nobleman like Henry, what would be the point of his efforts?

Kylie knew she couldn't interfere directly in Kiera's marriage arrangements, so she sought Carissa's help. She had expected Carissa to be reluctant, but Carissa's final words had shown her intentions clearly. Kylie felt a deep sense of gratitude.

"If Kiera's marriage with my sixth brother succeeds, I will certainly give you a grand gift and will owe you a favor," she said.

Carissa smiled, saying nothing.

She had no need for grand gifts or favors from the queen, but adhering to the principle that having more friends than enemies was better, she knew how to proceed. She understood Logan and knew Kiera's feelings, but her opposition came from her scheming mother-in-law, Helen.

Carissa was willing to assist in making a good match because she saw Kiera as her own sister.

Once the conversation was concluded, they left the palace.

Rafael returned to the estate first, while Carissa and Helen shared a carriage to Eleanor's palace. Helen found it stifling to be alone with Carissa, so she had Gillian join them in the carriage.

For some reason, just seeing Carissa's face made Helen feel that Carissa might lecture her, which was something she particularly disliked, especially from someone younger.

Despite this, the journey was relatively calm.

As they approached Harmony Palace, Carissa finally asked, "Mother, have you considered that Grand Princess Eleanor might not return those Mystic Pearls to you? And she might not give you the three thousand silver coins, either?"

Helen shot Carissa a sideways glance. "What are you insinuating? How can you doubt Grand Princess Eleanor like that? She's made a bet-if she loses, she must acknowledge it. She values her reputation highly. She wouldn't deceive me."

Carissa found Helen naive.

What kind of person would encourage a mother in law to steal her daughter in law's dowry and give it to them?

She glanced at Gillian, and noticed the latter's uneasy expression,

"Gillian, what do you think?" Carissa asked.

Gillian forced a smile. "Your Highness, I it shouldn't be possible for her not to return them. Lady Helen's reasoning is sound. Besides, why would Grand Princess Eleanor covet your Mystic Pearls?" Gillian's last few words were barely audible.

The older woman understood everything but chose not to disclose it to Helen, perhaps having tried in the past with no effect. Now, she preferred to turn a blind eye and avoid trouble. Carissa nearly laughed, struggling to suppress her disdain.

Looking at Helen's smug face, Carissa couldn't help but retort, "She won't return them, so I'm going to take them by force. Mother, keep silent, don't speak up for them, and definitely don't make excuses. Most importantly, don't use my dowry to smooth things over

Helen was incensed. "What nonsense are you speaking? Does Grand Princess Eleanor really covet a few of your Mystic Pearls? Though valuable, they are not scarce in Grand Princess Eleanor's household. Besides, what does she lack? Everyone in the capital knows that!"

Carissa responded with a scoff. "Alright, we'll see about that!"

Helen seized the opportunity to reprimand Carissa. "You show such disrespect and suspicion toward Grand Princess Eleanor. Once we return to the estate, I'll have to punish you properly!" Carissa rolled her eyes dismissively, uninterested in Helen's threats. She thought to herself that soon enough, they would see who would be proven wrong and look foolish.

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The carriage pulled up to Harmony Palace.

The doorman went inside to report, and soon emerged with a look of apology.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Helen and Lady Carissa. I forgot for a moment, but it turns out Grand Princess Eleanor has gone out today."

Upon hearing this, Helen turned to Carissa and said, "In that case, we should return for now. We can leave a message and come back tomorrow." Carissa asked the doorman, "Do you know where Grand Princess Eleanor has gone? What time will she return?"

The doorman replied, "I'm not sure. She might not be back until very late."

Carissa responded, "That's fine. We'll wait."

She then took Helen's hand, and moved to enter the residence.

Seeing this, the doorman hurried over. "Lady Helen, Lady Carissa, this is Grand Princess Eleanor's residence. You cannot just barge in."

Carissa smiled. "How is it barging in? We're here for a visit and will wait for Grand Princess Eleanor to return. Can't this place accommodate guests?" The doorman, who had experienced Carissa's assertiveness before, didn't believe she was someone easily dealt with, despite her smiling demeanor. While he hesitated, Carissa had already pulled Helen inside.

Along the way, Helen protested, "Have you no sense of propriety? He already said that she's not here. How long will you wait? Until evening?"

"I'll wait until tomorrow if necessary," Carissa said with a steely glare. "Mother, Gillian, if we can't meet her today, I won't leave."

Helen was exasperated, and retorted, "Didn't you say you could give the Mystic Pearls to me? If so, I'll decide when I get them back."

"Very well," Carissa said with equal determination. "Then, you should return for now. If you won't wait, I will."

She released Helen's wrist, but Helen was unwilling to let her stay alone.

Carissa seemed anything but accommodating. Her attitude made Helen worry that offending Eleanor, especially on her account, could lead to trouble.

Eleanor was not someone to be trifled with.

"Fine, I'll wait. Are you satisfied now?" Helen said tersely as she walked further inside, muttering about how Eleanor was not the sort to be offended, and how it would be troublesome if they did. Carissa could hardly understand what was going on in her mother-in-law's head. Was there nothing but air in there?

Over the years, Helen had lived so recklessly, causing endless worry for Victoria. Carissa felt deeply for Victoria, who had undoubtedly been exhausted by Helen's antics.

Once inside the main hall, the servants did their best to attend to their guests. Everyone in Harmony Palace knew that while Helen could be managed, this new princess consort of the Hell Monarch was not to be trifled with.

Carissa was the kind who would seek revenge if offended.

Refreshments were soon served, and there were people waiting on Helen and Carissa in the hall.

Carissa took in the surroundings of the main hall. The floor was paved with white marble, and the intricately carved wooden beams were adorned with exquisite paintings. Two rows of delicate mahogany chairs lined the hall, their intricate carvings gleaming softly in the light.

On the wall directly opposite the entrance hung a grand landscape painting, majestic and imposing. To the right of the hall was a pearl curtain door, leading to the side hall.

Using pearls as curtains indeed looked very luxurious.

Everything in sight showcased just how incredibly wealthy and prestigious Eleanor was. It was clear that such opulence required a significant amount of money.

The staff alone, with their numerous numbers, cost a considerable sum each month.

While a prince could have five hundred household soldiers, Eleanor's residence maintained the same standard. It was generally not permitted, but since the late king had not objected and the current king also turned a blind eye, she continued to keep the standard.

These five hundred household soldiers had expenses in clothing, food, housing, and travel—all of which cost money.

Furthermore, Eleanor was known for her love of hosting grand banquets to solidify her connections in the capital.

Her guests were either wealthy or noble, and whether for a tea party or a full-on banquet, everything had to be exquisite.

If guests brought their children, Eleanor, given her status, had to give gifts. Over the years, maintaining such grandeur would be unsustainable.

If she were truly so wealthy, she wouldn't be so fixated on Carissa's naive mother-in-law.

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Carissa sat for a while, but did not touch the coffee or snacks. Instead, she rose and announced her intention to walk around.

In Harmony Palace, guests were generally allowed to explore and enjoy the surroundings, provided that such arrangements had been made in advance.

However, uninvited intrusions or requests to wander about were not permitted. There were certain areas within the residence that were off-limits, hiding secrets Eleanor would rather keep concealed.

As the princess consort of the Hell Monarch, Carissa was not to be stopped by the household guards. If they dared to interfere or make a remark, they would face severe consequences.

Ordinary servants could not halt her advance toward the inner courtyard. Despite several attempts to block her, she skillfully maneuvered past them and made her way with purpose toward the inner courtyard. Just as she approached one of the courtyards, someone shouted loudly, "Grand Princess Eleanor has returned!"

Carissa's lips curled into a smile.

Ah, so Eleanor was finally willing to come out.

Carissa adjusted her hair, and cast a cursory glance at the courtyard. "Since the grand princess has returned, I'll just wait in the main hall."

The servants were visibly nervous, and responded, "Yes, Your Highness. Please wait in the main hall. The grand princess will change and join you shortly."

Carissa returned to the main hall to find Helen had finished all the snacks and was now requesting a new cup of coffee, as the previous one had gone cold.

Helen was usually commanding and imperious, but she had adopted a notably subdued demeanor within Harmony Palace, showing considerable courtesy to the servants.

Upon seeing Carissa return, Helen grumbled, "Grand Princess Eleanor has returned. You've managed to wait long enough."

Carissa took a seat, and replied calmly, "Is she truly back or just emerging? We're sitting here in the main hall. Unless she enters through a side or back door, we should see her come in."

"She is the mistress of the residence. How could she possibly use the side or back door? Don't you understand the rules?" Helen retorted.

"In that case, we'll simply watch her come in," Carissa said, taking a sip of her now-cold coffee.

As expected, Helen sent Gillian outside to wait. After a long while, with no sign of anyone coming in, Gillian was left shivering from the cold.

Determined to confirm for Helen that Eleanor had returned from outside, Gillian braved the chill. She sneezed continuously, but refused to go back.

She waited for almost half an hour. Finally, unable to endure the cold any longer, she decided to head back inside. Then, she saw Eleanor, surrounded by servants, emerging from the inner courtyard and making her way into the main corridor.

No matter how stupid Gillian was, even she could tell Eleanor had not actually gone out.

"Oh, I heard you were waiting for me as soon as I returned," Eleanor remarked with a hint of irritation. "Given how much you both have on your plates today, what brings you here?"

Carissa stood and offered a graceful bow, smiling as she replied, "Since I have entered the royal family, it is only right that I come to pay my respects to my aunt-in-law. Aunt, I hope you are well." Eleanor smiled back, but did not immediately address Carissa. Instead, she exchanged formal greetings with Helen.

After they were seated, Eleanor finally turned her attention to Carissa and said, "Please, let us all sit down. There's no need to stand on ceremony among family."

Carissa took her seat and said, "Indeed, there is no need for formality. Today, in addition to paying my respects, I came to discuss a matter my mother-in-law mentioned. She said that during last

night's wedding banquet, she made a wager with you involving a few pearls from my dowry. If I chose not to pursue it, she would win and you would owe her three thousand silver coins."

With a smile, Carissa looked at Helen.

"Mother, we are here to claim our prize today. Since you have won, you may take as many of those pearls as you wish. What belongs to me is now yours."

Eleanor's expression darkened noticeably.

Such a lack of tact-Carissa came straight to the point without giving her any room to maneuver. Despite her noble status, Eleanor thought of Carissa as nothing more than a rude, unsophisticated martial artist.

Forget the three thousand silver coins-Eleanor wouldn't even consider parting with those pearls.

But how could that fool Helen let Carissa know about this matter?

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Eleanor turned to Helen with a look of confusion.

"What is this about? Pearls and bets? Wasn't last night just a feast? When did you take any of her dowry? This simply won't do! Dowries are the private property of the daughter-in-law. You cannot take them, even in jest."

Helen was taken aback.

Over her years of interacting with Eleanor, Helen had suspected that Eleanor might not give up the three thousand silver coins. Even so, Helen had held onto a sliver of hope and thought that Eleanor, being a person of pride, would honor the bet simply to preserve her dignity.

Eleanor's complete denial of both the pearls and the bet was beyond Helen's expectations.

Dumbfounded, Helen instinctively glanced at Gillian, who was shivering with a reddened face, trying to shield herself with her sleeve and desperately stifling her runny nose.



Helen turned back to Carissa, who remained calm and composed, as if she had anticipated this outcome all along.

Helen was unwilling to be belittled by Carissa, but was even more enraged by Eleanor's shamelessness.

Frustrated, she snapped, "How can you say such things? Last night, I clearly gave you the pearls! You said that if she didn't pursue it, you would return the pearls to me and also give me three thousand silver coins. How can you go back on your word?"

"How absurd! Why would I instruct you to take your daughter-in-law's dowry?" Eleanor's expression darkened as she retorted, "Go ask around-does anyone believe I would do such a thing?" Eleanor's sharp tone left Helen bewildered.

Helen, already intimidated by Eleanor, was even more frightened by the latter's anger. Now panicking, she instinctively blurted out, "Then... then, we should go back and verify this first."

Carissa rolled her eyes in exasperation. Returning meant they would never recover the pearls.

However, as a dutiful daughter-in-law, Carissa decided to play along with her mother-in-law's charade.

Smiling, she said, "Alright, then, we shall return for now."

Eleanor sipped her coffee, and shot a sidelong glance at Carissa.

Oh? Was she so easily pacified? It certainly saved Eleanor some trouble.

Indeed, as long as Eleanor stubbornly refused to admit to taking the pearls, no one could force her to comply.

As for Helen, a few words to placate her would be enough. Helen was the easiest to handle.

Helen felt a strange sense of unease when she heard Carissa also agreeing to leave.

Was Carissa really that obedient? If the pearls were gone and the three thousand silver coins were lost, then what?

But it was better than having a quarrel, which would cause a significant embarrassment.

Yet, how could Eleanor deny it? Helen was unwilling to accept it.

As Helen stood there, lost in her thoughts, Carissa smiled and said, "Tomorrow happens to be the day I'll be returning to the Northwatch Estate to visit my family. I'll mention this matter to my master. After all, the people from the various guilds are still around. I need to explain how my mother-in-law took the pearls and the bet she made with Grand Princess Eleanor, just in case the numbers don't match up later and they try to deceive me."

Eleanor's anger flared. "Stop your nonsense! I've said I didn't take them. Are you trying to slander me?"

"Alright," Carissa said soothingly. "You say you didn't take them, so be it. Even so, I must report the facts to my master. After all, you have your side of the story, and I have witnesses to mine, don't I?" "Helen, are you just going to let her accuse me like this?" Eleanor's voice grew harsh.

Helen didn't know how to respond immediately, but was genuinely upset. How could Eleanor be so shameless?

Helen lifted her head and said, "There was indeed a bet. How can that be considered an accusation?"

Eleanor was taken aback by Helen's defiance. The grand princess was used to being in control of the situation, and her expression darkened at the events unfolding before her.

Carissa gently grasped the slightly bewildered Helen's wrist, and continued with a serene smile, "Mother, Aunt Eleanor is just joking with you. How could she possibly deny the bet? She was only trying to see if I, your daughter-in-law, am truly devoted.

"She took the risk of her own reputation to help you test me. After all, if word got out that she encouraged you to steal your daughter-in-law's dowry, it wouldn't take long for the whole kingdom to know. Wandering minstrels might not be very skilled, but they're quick to spread news."

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Once Carissa finished speaking, she gave Eleanor a respectful bow.

"Aunt Eleanor, you've treated my mother-in-law with such sincerity, which moves me greatly. Though my past reputation is not the best, it is understandable that you have concerns.

"However, I promise to be respectful and always prioritize my mother-in-law's wishes. As for the pearls, I had always planned to give some to my mother-in-law. After I visit my family and guild members, I will send a jar of them over. If she wishes to gift them to someone, that is her own decision. As her daughter-in-law, I wouldn't dare interfere."

Eleanor understood that Carissa was providing a way out-and she had no choice but to take it.

Her carefully maintained reputation for half her life could not be ruined by a few pearls. The way those martial artists favored Carissa was clear to Eleanor from yesterday.

Moreover, it was better not to offend Helen too much. Since Helen was now learning to resist, it would be difficult to extract more money in the future. It was better to return the pearls without protest and keep her complacent. Later, Eleanor could still extract plenty of wealth and treasures from her.

Despite her seething anger, Eleanor's face suddenly broke into a forced smile. "Since you understand how to respect and be devoted to your mother-in-law, I can rest easy. Why would I covet a few pearls? As you said, I just wanted to test you."

She waved to her servants. "Bring those pearls here."

Carissa nodded, and smiled. "Thank you, Aunt Eleanor. And let's not forget the three thousand silver coins you owe my mother-in-law."

Eleanor paused before gruffly ordering, "Fetch the three thousand silver coins in banknotes as well, and bring them here."

Helen's eyes lit up with excitement. "Grand Princess Eleanor is so kind to me! Carissa, did you see? I told you she's a good person." "Yes, you were right, Mother," Carissa replied, lowering her gaze.

A good person indeed-Helen was still deceived.

Seeing Helen's enthusiastic reaction, Eleanor felt both relieved and disdainful.

How truly naive!

But as long as Helen continued to believe in her, that was enough. A few pearls were not a problem-Eleanor could always retrieve them later.

When the Mystic Pearls were finally brought out, there were indeed five of them. Helen and Gillian were unsure if it was exactly five-they hadn't dared to scrutinize them closely at the time, and had only grasped a handful. The pearls were large, and it was already a wonder they had managed to hold onto five.

Three thousand silver coins in banknotes were handed over, and Helen grasped them tightly in her hands. She shot a cold snort at Carissa.

"Hmph, did you see that? You can't measure a noble person's intentions with a petty mind."

Eleanor gave Carissa a haughty smile. "Oh? So you suspected me all along?"

With the items retrieved, Carissa didn't indulge in pleasantries.

"Farewell, Aunt Eleanor," she said curtly.

Carissa was the first to leave, ignoring Helen and Gillian. Her anger was palpable-despite all this, Helen still praised Eleanor. If it hadn't been for it being only the second day after her wedding, she might have truly acted in a disrespectful manner.

Behind her, she heard Helen bidding farewell to Eleanor, suggesting a visit again in a few days.

With a smile, Eleanor instructed someone to see them out.

Carissa marched out, and boarded the carriage by herself. She was fuming, planning to have a few words with Helen once she was on the carriage.

However, as Gillian helped Helen into the carriage, the latter trembled with rage and cursed loudly.

"That old hag, how dare she deceive me? She must have truly wanted to covet my pearls! That vile woman! That old hag!"

Carissa raised an eyebrow.

Oh? So it was all an act?

Impressive-Carissa didn't even realize it, and it turned out to be Helen's counter-strategy against Eleanor.

Gillian climbed into the carriage, sneezing repeatedly. She had been standing in the cold earlier, and now, the chilly wind was too much for her old bones to handle.

Helen shoved the pearls back to Carissa.

"Here, take them. Also, you can keep two thousand of the three thousand silver coins. If you hadn't gone to see her, she definitely wouldn't have returned the pearls or given us the money."

As she spoke, she counted out the banknotes and handed them to Carissa.

"Take them. Why are you just looking at them?" she snapped.

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Carissa blinked, unable to believe her ears.

She looked at the two thousand silver coins in banknotes that had been handed to her, feeling a mix of astonishment and disbelief.

Wow, Helen really was generous with her money. It seemed so easy for her to give it out.

Carissa could see Helen was truly becoming a gullible fool.

No, she already was a fool.

"Have you finally seen Eleanor's true colors, Mother?" Carissa asked with a smile, her tone considerably softer.

Helen's face darkened. "Do you think I'm blind? Even after all this, how can I not have figured her out?"

"I saw you speaking to her so politely, and thought maybe you were still deceived by her," Carissa replied.

Helen snapped, "How can I not speak politely? One of us has to be strict and tough, while the other has to be soft and accommodating. We can't really tear down all the pretenses we have with her. She's on good terms with most of the noblewomen. If she twists things around and tarnishes my reputation, won't I be humiliated? You're different-you're fearless and lack awareness!"

Carissa remained silent, counting the banknotes. Each banknote was worth one hundred silver coins. She casually handed one to Gillian.

"This is your share of the winnings."

Gillian's eyes widened, and she seemed to have trouble catching her breath. "Your Highness, this is one hundred silver coins!"

"That's right. You've served Mother for many years. Since she won the money, you naturally deserve a portion of it," Carissa said with a smile.

Helen shot Carissa a sidelong glance.

"Why are you giving her this? She has no worries about food and clothing. As long as she's by my side, I'll provide for her in her old age. It's dangerous for her to have so much money on her at her age. She could easily be swindled."

But Gillian quickly thanked Carissa, and took the banknote.

Carissa observed the old attendant's reactions. She guessed that Gillian's daily needs were likely covered, but beyond the regular stipend from the palace, Helen probably didn't offer much additional reward. It wasn't that Helen was harsh, but rather, she treated Gillian as one of her own.

Some people were like that-kind to outsiders but indifferent to their own, sometimes even pinching pennies from their own to benefit outsiders.

Carissa pocketed the rest of the banknotes, thinking that, for now, it would be fine if Helen continued to see her as an outsider.

Better to remain an outsider than to be treated like one of her own, especially if it was like this.

When Gillian received the banknote worth a hundred silver coins, she stared at it with wide-eyed amazement as if she had never seen such a sum before. Helen couldn't help but scoff at the older woman's reaction.

"Look at you! Have you ever lacked anything in these years?"

"My lady, you have always treated me generously and never been lacking," Gillian said with a broad smile.

However, who wouldn't want a little extra money on hand at this age?

Gillian cast a grateful glance at Carissa. She resolved that if there were ever a time when Helen was displeased with Carissa, she would certainly speak up on Carissa's behalf.

Helen leaned her elbow on the carriage window, turning her eyes away from Carissa and maintaining her usual disdainful demeanor.

Yet, internally, Helen's feelings toward Carissa had changed significantly.

Despite knowing the true story of the stolen dowry, Carissa had never complained or blamed Helen in person. Instead, Carissa took action and went to Eleanor's residence to retrieve the pearls and the three thousand silver coins.

Helen's decision to give Carissa the two thousand silver coins was driven by her guilt. After all, asking Gillian to steal pearls for Eleanor was wrong.

Eleanor had put Helen in a difficult position. If she hadn't done it, then she wasn't brave enough. In that case, she would face public criticism. Fortunately, the matter was resolved.

Upon reflection, Helen realized two dangerous aspects she hadn't considered at the time. Now, thinking back on them sent a shiver down her spine.

The first was Eleanor's refusal to return the pearls and her leverage over Helen regarding the dowry.

The second was the potential chaos if Carissa made a public fuss about it. If that happened, Helen would lose all her dignity and standing, leaving her in a dire situation.

Thinking about these things made Helen realize how vicious Eleanor could be.

However, after this incident, Helen could no longer harbor any dislike toward Carissa. In fact, she even regretted some of the harsh words she had spoken when Carissa first arrived.

Helen also realized that it wasn't that Carissa couldn't handle her. Just seeing how easily Carissa had managed to anger Eleanor and retrieve the pearls showed the younger woman's capability. If Carissa were to contend with Helen, the former would undoubtedly win.

## Chapter 357

Helen cast a covert glance at Carissa, who appeared relaxed. A faint smile graced her lips.

It was undeniable that Carissa's face was exceptionally beautiful, radiating a clear and refreshing charm.

Helen's curiosity was piqued. "Aren't you afraid of Grand Princess Eleanor?"

Carissa responded with a question of her own, "Why should I be afraid of her?"



"She's the grand princess, the current king's aunt. Even the late king was lenient with her. She controls at least half of the political connections in the capital. Her words alone can tarnish your reputation overnight," said Helen.

Carissa remained indifferent. "Didn't you say I'm fearless and lack awareness? Why should I fear a tarnished reputation? If she spreads rumors about me, the hero who reclaimed the Southern Frontier, even her status as the grand princess won't save her from the scorn of scholars everywhere."

Helen thought that while speaking about these matters might seem easy, offending Eleanor could lead to retaliation that was hard to handle.

However, she recalled today's events: retrieving the Mystic Pearls and three thousand silver coins had been challenging, yet Carissa had managed it with just a few words.

Carissa was unaware of Helen's current thoughts. If she knew, she would have said that it wasn't just a matter of a few words. It was also due to the many martial artists and figures from the martial world who had come to witness her wedding with Rafael.

Eleanor might have control over the noble families of the capital, but she was deeply intimidated by these martial artists. She was even more concerned about her reputation being damaged and being criticized publicly.

After all, inciting someone to steal a bride's dowry was a disgraceful act.

Suddenly, Carissa lifted the curtain and instructed the coachman, "To The Gilded Tower."

Helen had long wanted to visit The Gilded Tower, but she didn't want to go with Carissa, fearing that Carissa might see how poorly the shop was doing.

Naturally, Carissa was already aware of The Gilded Tower's poor business from previous conversations. However, knowing about it and seeing it firsthand were two different things.

Helen was about to decline when Carissa said, "I need to buy some gifts for tomorrow's visit. My master and everyone else are waiting for me at Northwatch Estate. I plan to buy some jewelry for

my guild seniors. Since I have to spend money, it might as well be at The Gilded Tower. After all, you have a significant share in it, Mother."

With Carissa's explanation, Helen couldn't argue further. If she was going to spend money anyway, it was better to support her own family's shop and boost its revenue. That way, there would be less frequent talk about issues with paying wages and rent.

As the year drew to a close, families who had earned money would often buy jewelry for their wives. The business at The Gilded Tower, during favorable marriage dates and year-end, was usually at its peak. The carriage stopped outside The Gilded Tower. As soon as Helen lifted the curtain, she saw a crowd inside the shop.

At the end of the year, discounted jewelry on the first floor made business quite brisk.

Helen was astonished. Didn't they tell her that business was slow? How could it be so lively?

Just as she was about to disembark to see for herself, Carissa said, "Gillian, get down and ask if they have any filigree gold bangles with embedded gems. If they do, I'd like to buy several." "Why don't you go down and take a look yourself?" Helen asked.

Carissa simply wanted to see if The Gilded Tower's business was truly as poor as Eleanor had claimed. She wouldn't enter the premises dressed in her princess consort's court robes.

"There are too many people. I'm afraid my new clothes might get ruined," Carissa said calmly, her tone as composed as her demeanor.

Helen took another look, and agreed that the crowd was indeed overwhelming. There were both men and women, and if she were to be jostled, it could tarnish her dignity.

"Go ahead and see if you can find out," Helen instructed Gillian.

Gillian complied, and got out of the carriage. Helen watched as the old woman struggled to get through the crowd to reach the counter. She couldn't help but feel relieved that she had stayed in the carriage. Otherwise, her expensive shoes might have been trampled.

Gillian squeezed through the crowd with great difficulty, and finally managed to ask a young shop assistant, "Do you have any filigree gold bangles with embedded gems?"

The young shop assistant looked up at her, and answered loudly, "Those are sold on the second floor, but we're out of stock. We've sold out of all the batches we made this year. If you want to buy them, you'll need to place an order on the second floor. They'll be available in February next year."

An order? And not available until next February?

Gillian slowly backed out, and then made her way up the stairs to the second floor. The second floor was elegantly decorated, featuring eight or nine counters, each with cushioned chairs in front for customers. Each display case served one guest at a time.

On the other side, more than ten people were waiting. They were seated on chairs, enjoying snacks and coffee, with premium charcoal burning warmly in the stoves to keep the room warm. These patrons, though wealthy, wore no luxurious silks or satins. They appeared to be affluent merchants rather than nobility.

Gillian glanced around, and saw that one of the customers had several gold bangles on their wrist. They were examining them to see if they fit and then asking for them to be wrapped up. The designs were fashionable, but clearly inferior to those at The Golden Tower.

A shop assistant approached her, and she asked, "Do you have any filigree gold bangles with embedded gems?"

The shop assistant exclaimed, "What a coincidence! We've just sold out of those. Would you like to place an order?"

"Is your business doing so well?" Gillian, ever perceptive even when away from Helen, remarked. "The last time I was here, it was also quite crowded. It seems that any trendy designs are likely out of stock too."

"Indeed! Our shop's business is unmatched in the capital, except by The Golden Tower," the shop assistant said proudly.

After sizing Gillian up and noting her distinguished attire and dignified manner, he added, "Besides the filigree gold bangles, do you have any other designs in mind? We have many other gold bangles with various styles, though many are out of stock. We'll be restocking them next year."

Gillian glanced at the items in the display case with a look of disapproval, and said, "It's fine. I'll have my mistress come by tomorrow to choose for herself."

With that, Gillian left.

Back in the carriage, she reported to Carissa, "Your Highness, the filigree gold bangles with embedded gems are sold out."

Carissa responded with a simple hum.

"That style is from The Golden Tower. The Gilded Tower copied their design, but still sold them quite well."

"Well, if they're selling well, the year-end accounts should look promising," Helen said with evident pleasure.

Gillian, however, was troubled. The shop assistant mentioned that their business was excellent and claimed that, apart from The Golden Tower, no other shop in the capital had better business. Seeing how pleased Helen was, Gillian decided to withhold her concerns for now and wait to see the accounts when Jessica brought them.

They should be arriving in the next few days.

After witnessing Eleanor's despicable behavior, Gillian couldn't help but worry if Eleanor and her daughter Jessica had been deceiving Helen all along. Could they really be so deceitful?

Gillian looked at Carissa, who seemed to be aware of something.

Could it be that Carissa already knew more than she let on? Was it possible that Carissa had deliberately brought Helen to see The Gilded Tower's business? Helen had indeed mentioned visiting The Gilded Tower before. However, her entourage usually consisted of a large number of servants and guards.

If Jessica had intended to deceive her, she would have likely briefed the shopkeeper in advance, instructing them on what to say if someone like Helen came by.

After all, the patrons seen at The Gilded Tower earlier were ordinary citizens on the first floor, while the second floor was frequented by wealthy merchants or minor officials' wives.

Since Carissa pointed out that The Gilded Tower's designs had been copied from The Golden Tower, true nobles and prominent families were less likely to frequent The Gilded Tower. Helen's presence was quite noticeable, so it would be easy for her to be recognized if she went out.

## Chapter 359

As luck would have it, on the day Rafael and Carissa were preparing for their visit to Northwatch Estate, Jessica had someone deliver the accounts. And it was none other than the shopkeeper himself, Eric, who brought them.

Since Helen was staying at Hell Monarch Estate, Eric made the trip personally. Had Helen been at the palace, Jessica would have handled the delivery. Gillian suspected that Eric's visit was also to recognize the people involved, so they could identify them if they came by in the future.

Helen eagerly opened the account book, only to find that the few sparse pages contained sales of only mundane items, with no expensive jewelry at all. The final summary showed a loss.

In one quarter, there was a loss of over ten thousand silver coins. Over ten thousand-this was even more than before.

Helen trembled with anger, and threw the account book to the floor.

"How could there be such a loss? You'd better give me an explanation!" she hollered.

Eric knelt on the floor with a sorrowful expression, and said, "Lady Helen, you don't know how tough business is these days. We hoped to make some profit before the New Year, so we stockpiled a large quantity of goods. Little did we know that many of these goods were flawed and unsellable. While other shops are thriving, our shop is deserted, which is truly heart-wrenching."

He crawled forward, picked up the account book, and opened a page. "This loss was mitigated somewhat because you and Lady Jessica had previously injected some money. Otherwise, the loss would have been at least twenty thousand silver coins."

"Nonsense!" Helen slammed her hand on the table, her face turning pale with rage. "The Gilded Tower, deserted? Why did I see it full of customers when I passed by? And many of them were leaving with their hands full!"

Eric was startled. Had Helen visited The Gilded Tower? When did that happen? What day specifically?

He suddenly recalled that a day ago, a shop assistant had mentioned that a woman, who appeared to be from a high-ranking family, had come to buy the popular filigree gold bangles from The Gilded Tower. Could that have been yesterday?

Eric's eyes darted around as he decided to take a gamble.

"Lady Helen, you must be referring to yesterday. Recently, the only day we had good business was yesterday. We had accumulated too much stock, so Lady Jessica instructed us to sell it off, even at a loss, rather than have too much inventory on hand. If we didn't do that, we wouldn't be able to give you a good justification. We sold a lot yesterday, but it was all at a loss. We're still having a discount sale today. If you don't believe me, you can go and see for yourself."

His earnest tone moved Helen, and she began to believe him.

Observing from outside the door, Carissa realized that Helen had been deceived. She immediately stepped inside.

"Really? If so, why did your shop assistant say that you sold batch after batch of the filigree gold bangles, which were copied from The Golden Tower's design? You wouldn't be selling them at a loss, would you? Let me see if this transaction is recorded in your accounts."

With that, Carissa grabbed the account book from Eric. He instinctively tried to hide it, but she was quicker, and the account book was soon in her hands.

She flipped through the few pages with a cold smile.

"What a surprise! There isn't any record of this transaction. Not even the large gold bracelet my guild senior bought for me is listed here. So, what exactly does this account book record? Eric, embezzlement is a grave crime."

When Eric saw Carissa, he was instantly terrified.

It was the young lady who came to collect the large gold bangle the other day! She was the Hell Monarch's princess consort?!

"Guards, take the account book and this man to the Royal Citadel. Have my nephew's uncle, Lord Klein, thoroughly investigate to see how much money The Gilded Tower really defrauded from Lady Helen and Lady Jessica," Carissa said calmly.

Chapter 360

Luke immediately ordered two guards to take Eric to the local authorities.

Terrified, Eric cried out, "Your Highness, please spare me! It wasn't my idea. Lady Jessica instructed me to make these false accounts to deceive Lady Helen!" "What?" Helen was enraged, and smashed a cup. "Jessica used fake accounts to deceive me?"

Carissa pressed Helen's hand to calm her. "If the previous account books were false, then there must be genuine ones."

With the guards holding him, Eric's arms ached as if they might break. Fearing further punishment, he nodded vigorously. "Yes, of course! There are real ones."

Since Carissa was preparing to visit Northwatch Estate, she didn't want to waste more time arguing.

She called Luke in, and instructed, "Please take two people with you and return to The Gilded Tower. Retrieve all the account books from these years and have them verified one by one by the accountants. Confirm on-site whether they are genuine accounts. If they continue to falsify records, there is no need to report back. Send them directly to the Royal Citadel."

Luke responded, "Understood, Your Highness!"

He signaled for the guards to act swiftly. The carriage outside was already prepared, and they departed for The Gilded Tower immediately.

Eric had never faced such a situation before, and trembled in fear. He silently cursed Jessica.

Hadn't she claimed that dealing with Helen would be easy? It had always been manageable in the past. Why was it different now? And facing the Hell Monarch's princess consort was even more terrifying! Carissa was known for her decisive and ruthless nature. Plus, the governor of the Royal Citadel was her late sister-in-law's brother.

If Eric ended up at the Royal Citadel, he would be lucky to escape with his life if he didn't face severe punishment.

Helen was fuming. "Jessica deceived me? How dare she?!"

Carissa had someone come in to clean up the broken pieces of the cup, and sighed inwardly.

How dare Jessica? How could she not? Usually, Helen was terribly intimidated by them. If not her, then who would be deceived? Besides, Helen always stayed in the inner palace and never went out. So, it was easy to deceive her without her ever seeing the truth.

"Mother, please calm down. We can handle this. You had contracts in place, didn't you? When I return from my visit, we can go over them together. Getting angry won't solve anything," Carissa said. Helen felt tears welling up in her eyes, and was almost unable to hold them back. Jessica and Dakota had been in business together for years. Dakota always received profits, while Helen found herself pouring money in to cover losses.

She felt inadequate in comparison to the other concubine.

Helen never expected Jessica to deceive her. Jessica hadn't cheated Dakota, but had tricked her instead.

The injustice and hurt surged within her, and it took all her strength to keep from crying.



Upon hearing Carissa's words, she remembered how her daughter-in-law had stood up for her yesterday and retrieved the pearls. Now, Carissa wasn't distancing herself from this situation either. A small sense of reliance began to grow in Helen's heart.

However, Helen knew this wouldn't be easy. To be cheated out of so much money-how could they possibly recover it without a fight? There was a good chance they wouldn't even get their hands on the real account books. Going to The Gilded Tower might end up being a wasted effort.

After that brief comfort of words, Carissa nodded respectfully before taking her leave.

Rafael didn't involve himself in this matter. Today, he had something even more important-visiting his in-laws' home.

While it was the servants' job to prepare the gifts, Rafael insisted on handling them himself, loading the gifts onto the carriage piece by piece.

How could he not take this seriously?

One of Adrian's apprentices was Winona, a true expert in stealth. For all he knew, she could be hiding somewhere near Hell Monarch Estate and was watching his every move.

It wasn't that he lacked confidence in himself, but he understood all too well how doting the Pathfinders Guild members were toward Carissa. In fact, if not for the strict discipline enforced by Everett, Carissa would never have been punished for any of her mistakes within the guild.

There were times when Carissa would return after a misdeed, and before Everett could even reprimand her, Adrian would already be punishing her.

But was it real punishment?

No, it was just for show, meant to appease Everett, so that Carissa wouldn't receive a harsher punishment from him.

As soon as Adrian started punishing Carissa, her guild seniors would rush in to plead for mercy, each taking a portion of the punishment, leaving her with only a few superficial strikes.

But if Everett got involved, that was when Carissa truly suffered. She had indeed endured several severe punishments, which was why she kept her distance from Everett whenever possible.