

War Song 361

Chapter 361

As Rafael packed the gifts, his mind wandered to the matters concerning the Pathfinders Guild.

He was naturally pleased that so many people were looking out for Carissa. Still, he also wanted Adrian and the others to know that he would protect Carissa from now on, and they no longer needed to worry. Most importantly, he had to tell Adrian one crucial thing today-from now on, he would ensure that Carissa sent at least two letters back to the guild each month. No matter what happened, whether it was something good or bad, the guild members would be informed, so they wouldn't have to trouble themselves by sending people down to investigate.

After filling three carts to the brim with gifts, he saw Carissa leading Ryan and Lulu out.

Carissa's face was serene and composed, her calm demeanor only enhancing her beauty. She was dressed in a deep purple dress that accentuated her fair, translucent skin. Two peonies were pinned in her hair, but even the flowers seemed less radiant than she was.

As Rafael recalled the previous night's events, he felt his blood rush uncontrollably to one place, his deep gaze filled with a turbulent, unreadable emotion.

When Carissa looked up and saw that expression in his eyes, she immediately recognized it.

It had been the same for the past two nights.

These past two nights, he seemed to have entered a state of insatiable desire, like someone discovering

a new passion for the first time, constantly craving more and more without end.

Carissa's cheeks flushed as she avoided his gaze. That look always made her heart race.

Rafael approached her, and took her hand. "The gifts for the visit are all prepared. Shall we go?"

"Okay." Carissa lowered her gaze, her earlier composure instantly replaced by shyness,

Even though they were already married and had shared such intimate moments, the way he interlaced his fingers with hers still brought an inexplicable joy and bashfulness to her heart.

Ryan looked up and asked Lulu, "Lulu, why does Aunt Carissa blush whenever Uncle Rafael holds her hand?"

Hearing this, Lulu couldn't help but glance at her young mistress, whose face was indeed redder than rose.

Lulu laughed, and replied playfully, "That's because when a man holds a woman's hand, the woman will always blush."

Ryan then asked, "But I'm holding your hand, so why aren't you blushing?"

Lulu chuckled. "Because I have thick skin. Even if I blush, you wouldn't be able to see it."

"Oh, I see," Ryan said, his eyes suddenly gleaming with wisdom beyond his years.

They boarded the carriage, the three carts of gifts trailing behind them, returning to Northwatch Estate with great pomp and ceremony.

As fate would have it, they happened to run into Barrett and Viola, who were also returning to visit Viola's home.

Barrett was riding his steed when Rafael lifted the carriage curtain, just in time to see him. Barrett's face was so swollen and bruised that he was almost unrecognizable. Rafael instantly knew that Dylan and his men had given Barrett quite the beating.

That was what he deserved for his loose tongue.

Barrett glanced over as well, narrowing his eyes in anger when he spotted Rafael peeking out.

Rafael let the curtain fall, a faint smile curling his lips.

Good. It was better if Barrett held a grudge-served him right for getting what he deserved.

Carissa, who had followed Rafael's gaze, caught sight of Barrett as well, She was puzzled.

"Did he get beaten up by his two wives at home?"

Rafael shook his head. "Not sure, but maybe. After all, those two women aren't exactly pushovers." Aurora was still Barrett's rightful wife, and naturally held the title of madam as well. However, she would be referred to as a secondary wife or concubine, depending on the situation.

Carissa casually remarked, "They really did a number on him. His face is so swollen, I can barely recognize him."

Rafael nodded in agreement. "It was a bit excessive. Since we all came back from the Southern Frontier battlefield together, I'll have Dylan send him some cream for the bruises tomorrow."

Carissa gave him a surprised look. "Is that really necessary...?"

Rafael's tone was full of camaraderie, "We were comrades-in-arms!"

After a brief silence, Carissa said softly, "You were the one who ordered the beating."

There was no need to ask-she was certain of it.

Rafael turned to look at her, but neither confirmed nor denied it.

Frowning, she added, "That was reckless!"

He immediately assumed she was defending Barrett, and his tone turned sour, "He deserved it! You don't know what he said to me on our wedding day."

Carissa continued to frown. It was clear to her that her guild junior had never been properly disciplined. Such innocence and naivety could only mean one thing-he needed a good thrashing.

"Sage Everett is still in the capital. If you're going to beat someone up, at least wait until after he leaves. Do you want to be punished?"

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"Huh?" Rafael was momentarily stunned, then his face lit up with joy.

punished by my master? You're worried about me?"

you worried about me getting

Of course, I'm worried about you. Haven't you ever felt the sting of Sage Everett's iron fists?" asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Not really," Rafael replied, thinking back to his days at the guild.

Carissa

Strictly speaking, he wasn't there for even a full month each year. It wasn't that he never got beaten, but that was a matter of pride. Even if he had been, he would never admit it. "Were you always that well-behaved?" Carissa asked curiously.

Even Kyle had been punished at the Pathfinders Guild. Was Rafael really more obedient than him? Rafael tilted his head, thinking for a moment. "Mainly, when I was at the Pathfinders Guild, none of you ever came to find me. So, I had nothing to do but train hard. My master was very pleased with r Carissa couldn't help but look at him with admiration. All of them, as junior apprentices, had been punished by Everett before. Yet, Everett's direct apprentice had never been punished?

No wonder Rafael's martial arts were so exceptional. He was simply outstanding.

me."

In her eyes, anyone who managed to avoid being beaten by Everett at the Pathfinders Guild was truly remarkable.

Seeing the admiration in her eyes, Rafael lifted his chin slightly, pride evident on his face. He didn't feel even the slightest bit guilty. Those rare occasions when he did get a beating were hardly worth mentioning -definitely not worth bringing up.

As they talked, they arrived at the entrance of Northwatch Estate.

Frederick stood at the gate with Holly and the household staff to welcome them, while Violet came running out with Bun, Cynthia, and Travis in tow.

Violet gleefully linked arms with Carissa. "We've been waiting for your return for so long! You need to have a word with Rod. He had the nerve to sneak back with us the night of your wedding, even though he was supposed to be part of your dowry!"

she was hel

Travis shot Violet a glare, annoyed that up a sore topic.

Carissa laughed and glanced at Travis. "That was just a joke. How could Rod possibly be part of my dowry?"

"Why not? His master doesn't want him anymore."

After saying that, Violet then leaned in to whisper in Carissa's ear, "He's hoping to secure a position in Hell Monarch Estate so he can send his monthly stipend back to Meadow Ridge." Carissa had already guessed as much. The Lunar Guild had been struggling in recent years, with only female apprentices and Travis, the sole boy.

Travis' master was an old-fashioned person who refused to let the female apprentices leave themountain fo make a living. They only grew some fruit and vegetables, but the yearly earnings were meager at best.

There were times when they didn't even have enough to eat and had to rely on donations from various guilds for food and other necessities. When things got really tough and they needed to buy something, they would borrow-and it continued for many years.

Carissa had heard from Adrian that when the Lunar Guild was first established, he was the one who called upon others to help build their home. Even the materials used to construct the buildings were borrowed.

Travis overheard Violet's words and cast a furtive glance at Carissa, too embarrassed to ask directly if he could stay.

Carissa asked, "What about your reward money?"

Travis awkwardly poked his fingers together. "Well, back when we were in the capital, I joined you all in shopping sprees. The leftover money was taken by my master to pay off debts, and we also bought a lot of grain and supplies for the New Year. There's not much left now."

In short, most of the money he got from his achievements on the battlefield had gone towards paying off

debts.

Carissa smiled. "Then, stay in the capital for now. I'll see if there's any suitable work for you later,"

Travis let out a sigh of relief, his face breaking into a cheerful grin. "Got it!"

Rafael, who was following behind, asked, "So, why didn't you stay in the army?"

"Marshal, if I joined the army, I'd be bound by military rules and regulations, which wouldn't give me the freedom I need. I have to return to Meadow Ridge a few times a year."

Travis still addressed Rafael as "Marshal".

Rafael had seen Travis' martial skills. He looked at the young man before him now, and a plan began to form in his mind, though he didn't rush to speak.

When they entered the main hall, Adrian and Everett were already waiting. The other guilds had departed the day after the wedding, so only the members of the Pathfinders Guild and a few others like Violet remained.

Carissa hadn't been bluffing when she warned Eleanor. Even if those people had already left the capital, she could still ruin Eleanor's reputation if she wanted to.

Ever since that miniature chastity belt sculpture incident, she and Eleanor had become sworn enemies.

There would be many more confrontations to come.

Carissa instructed Lulu to take Ryan to play for a while, telling them to come back later to pay respects to the elders.

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Rafael and Carissa paid their respects to Adrian, Everett, and the various senior apprentices of the guild in accordance with etiquette.

Everett's eyes were half-squinted and half-open, making it difficult to tell whether he was merely squinting or actually looking. But Carissa knew that this was when the man was the most intimidating, as he was scrutinizing for any mistakes.

Thus, Carissa performed her traditional salute with the utmost seriousness. Her posture was straight, and her spine was upright as she bowed at the perfect angle.

Everett had trained Carissa on the proper way to perform a salute after she had initially been too hasty in paying respects to Adrian.

That night, her head had become so dizzy from the repeated salutes she performed that she almost passed out. It was only at that point that Everett slightly opened his eyes and gestured for her to leave. She had been so dizzy she could barely walk, and Winona had to carry her back to her room? Reflecting on those past experiences, she couldn't help but feel a pang of sorrow.

As she bowed, she noticed that Rafael only nodded respectfully to Adrian and the senior apprentices of the guild, and gave only a shallow bow to Everett.

It was utterly inadequate.

This was a disaster...!

Carissa glanced anxiously at Everett.

What? Everett wasn't angry?

To Carissa's surprise, not only was Everett not angry, but he even smiled at Rafael with a look of satisfaction in his eyes.

"You have established yourself and married. I can rest easy now."

Wait, Everett could smile?

"Thank you for your concern, Sage Everett." Rafael stood before the master, looking attentive and obedient, ready to listen to any further instructions. Everett was even more pleased, and said with a smile, "Please, sit."

Winona immediately went to help Carissa. She rubbed her shoulders gently, and asked in a low voice, "Does your back hurt? Are you feeling dizzy or nauseous?"

"It doesn't hurt, I'm not dizzy, and I don't feel nauseous." Carissa shook her head.

Winona finally relaxed. She had a bit of a phobia because, previously, when Carissa had been reprimanded for her salute, she had started vomiting and feeling dizzy once she was carried back to her room. Only after calling Adrian for acupuncture treatment and several days of medication did Carissa

start to recover.

"Just be cautious with this one. Given her headstrong nature, life may not be smooth sailing ahead: You'll need to keep a close watch on her to avoid any trouble." Everett's voice rang out as he spoke to Rafael. In his mind, Carissa would always be the most mischievous apprentice of the Pathfinders Guild.

"Carissa won't cause trouble. You can rest assured, Sage Everett," Rafael replied respectfully, but his defense of his wife was firm.

Everett's eyes narrowed, showing his displeasure.

Carissa's senior guild members exchanged glances of resentment. Was Everett trying to shift the blame onto Carissa again?

However, Everett's frown soon gave way to a smile as Rafael approached with wine. He first served Adrian, then handed a cup to Everett.

To see Everett smile twice in one day was quite an unusual sight.

So, the man could smile after all.

How strange!

After taking a sip of the wine, Rafael said, "Sage Everett, I have something to discuss with you privately. Could you please come to the side hall with me?" "Alright." Everett stood up, and exited with Rafael.

Rafael glanced back, and gave Carissa a playful smile.

Everyone then realized that Rafael had intentionally brought Everett away so they could spend some time with Carissa.

Winona gently massaged Carissa's shoulders, then embraced her. Back when Carissa had first arrived at the Pathfinders Guild, Winona had often carried her around.

Carissa had missed home terribly at that time, and it was Winona who had soothed her to sleep.

"Alright, don't spoil her too much," Adrian spoke up, though his gaze towards Carissa was more Indulgent than anyone else's.

"Now that you're married, you need to stand firm in everything. If you feel wronged, don't endure it alone. Send a pigeon post to Meadow Ridge-there will always be someone to speak up for you."

Carissa snuggled into Winona's embrace, and

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Upon hearing Carissa's obedient response, Adrian extended his hand and beckoned her over. "Come here."

Carissa obediently walked over, and Adrian reached out to flick the tip of her nose.

"Ouch!" Carissa exclaimed. "Sage Adrian, that hurt."

"Punishment!" Adrian said sternly. "This is a mild punishment for not speaking up when needed."

A flicker of pain crossed Carissa's eyes, but she quickly masked it. "Understood. It won't happen again." Adrian noticed her fleeting expression of distress, and sighed inwardly. The hardships that his youngest apprentice had endured were too painful. He couldn't start thinking about them, or it would be too taxing on his heart.

He took her hand, guiding her to sit beside him.

"Rafael's character and virtue far surpass Barrett's. I believe he won't let you down or treat you poorly. But remember, the world is ever-changing, and so are people. In the past, he might have cherished you more because he couldn't have you. Now that he's married you, there's no guarantee he won't grow tired and look elsewhere. Men are unreliable. Even if you like him, don't trust him entirely. Understand?" Carissa's fifth guild senior, Isaac Prince, nodded vigorously in agreement. "Yes, men are all untrustworthy. They're disgusting. We can't trust them completely, or you might end up with a scoundrel..." "Be quiet!" Kyle tapped Isaac on the forehead.

Kyle thought Adrian's words were enough to unsettle Carissa, and didn't think it was wise to scare her further. But since Adrian was present, he dared not contradict him. He was surprised to see Isaac echoing Adrian's sentiments.

Violet, who was listening nearby, couldn't help but laugh. "Five, you're a man yourself. How can you be so disgusted by men?"

Isaac was skilled in both music and using musical instruments as weapons. Known as Five due to his position in the Pathfinders Guild, his face turned cold as he responded, "How could I not be disgusted? That's why I avoid associating with men and prefer the company of women."

"You've only made excuses for yourself," Violet scoffed. "Everyone knows you love to linger in brothels. You play the harp and flute, and you've seen courtesans dance to your music."

Isaac glanced outside with a hint of nervousness. "Stop talking nonsense. If Sage Everett hears you, I won't let you off."

Violet shrugged. "No risk, no rewards, right?"

Isaac turned away with a blank expression

"After seeing you, I find that I don't even like women anymore."

"Alright, let's all stop bickering," Adrian cut in. "We'll be heading back to the Pathfinders Guild tomorrow. If you have anything to say to Carissa, say it quickly. No more idle chatter. She still needs to go to the sanctuary hall to pay respects to her parents and siblings."

Kyle was nudged aside. Since he had been staying at Northwatch Estate for a few days before Carissa's marriage, it was inappropriate for him to monopolize the time meant for her and the other guild members.

Carissa was surrounded by her senior guild members. They spoke one at a time, offering advice rather than speaking in unison. Ultimately, their words served to remind her that no matter what happened, she still had her guild behind her.

Winona was still holding Carissa in her arms, and the older woman was moved to tears. This strong, independent woman couldn't hold back her emotions.

Carissa had arrived at the Pathfinders Guild as a seven-year-old girl, her hair styled in two pigtails, dressed in a little blue dress. She had been beautiful and adorable, with a face so fresh and round that everyone couldn't help but want to pinch or kiss her.

The little girl had mostly stayed close to Winona. When Carissa first began her martial arts training and struggled with basic movements, Winona had carried her back to their room from the training yard and rubbed her sore muscles.

Carissa would act spoiled and say, "Winona, I want to eat wild mountain cherries."

Despite how sour those cherries were, the little girl would eat them with gusto, her face scrunching up from the tartness, but she never minded.

Later, Winona learned to make candied fruit skewers from those sour cherries. The sweet treats made Carissa smile brightly.

Seeing her smile made it seem like all troubles vanished.

Carissa's eyes, at that time, were as dark and shiny as mercury, full of brilliance and unrestrained joy.

And now, that little girl had grown up and gotten married.

Winona's heart was torn between sorrow and joy as she reflected on the years she had witnessed, and she couldn't stop crying.

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Winona wiped away her tears.

"I won't leave. I'll stay in the capital with you. I'll stay in Northwatch Estate. Whenever you miss me, just come back to visit."

"We'll stay too!" Hearing Winona's words, everyone echoed the sentiment.

Carissa hid in Winona's embrace, feeling a sense of security she hadn't experienced in a long time.

She wanted to cry. She was reluctant to see them go.

However, Adrian spoke up with a stern expression, "Can you stay with her forever? Everyone has their own. life to live. Besides, the capital is no easy place to live. Even if it were, it's not somewhere people from the Pathfinders Guild can reside for long."

Adrian had no fondness for the capital or the royal family, but Rafael's character was impeccable. He had recovered the Southern Frontier and restored the kingdom's territory, so Adrian reluctantly accepted him. However, whether people's hearts would change remained to be seen.

Rafael initially had wanted to become his apprentice, but Adrian was reluctant to take in anyone from the royal family.

However, his junior guild member, Everett, had taken a liking to Rafael and accepted him as an apprentice.

Adrian had underestimated the delicate royal, believing Rafael couldn't withstand the rigors of martial training. Yet, Rafael's dedication, despite only spending one month a year in the mountains, had led to remarkable martial prowess.

Adrian sighed, letting the guild members converse while he went to find Everett and Rafael. After all, Rafael was now married to his youngest apprentice, making Adrian a sort of father-in-law. Balancing authority and leniency as a father-in-law was no easy task.

Adrian couldn't keep acting like a strict fellow apprentice of Rafael's master anymore.

After a long conversation, Carissa took Rafael and Ryan to the sanctuary hall. After lighting candles and offering a prayer, Carissa knelt on the ground, and Rafael immediately followed suit.

Seeing his resolute and straightforward attitude, Carissa's eyes reddened. She looked at the memorial plaques of her parents and siblings, and softly choked with emotion, "Dad, Mom, my brothers, and sisters- in-law, I have found a good husband. From now on, I will live well with Ryan. I seek not to bring glory to our family but to live in peace and happiness, and not tamish the honor of my family." Ryan's-eyes were also red. He said, "Grandpa, Grandma, Dad, Mom. I'll certainly listen to Aunt Carissa and won't cause trouble.

After saying this, Ryan bowed his head in a silent prayer

Rafael kept his words brief and simple, "Please rest assured, Father, Mother. I will treat Carissa well and ensure she suffers no grievances. I also promise that I will never take a concubine. Carissa will be my only wife for life."

Carissa's tears fell. She understood why Rafael made this promise. Her mother had once favored Barrett

for this very assurance.

Melanie likely thought that the royal harem wouldn't consist of just one woman. Hence, she might have admired Rafael but hesitated to entrust her daughter to him.

Little did she know, she had failed to recognize the true value of the two men.

Fortunately, the order was restored. Though the future might not be smooth, having a caring companion was far better than facing struggles alone as she had done in the Warren family.

After the prayers, lunch was served. Carissa first introduced Ryan to Adrian and the others before they all dined together.

In the Pathfinders Guild, it was customary to observe silence during meals, especially with the stern Everett present. The dining etiquette was comparable to that of prestigious families. Carissa cherished these moments of dining together. She occasionally looked up at Adrian and her senior guild members, feeling a deep sense of happiness.

However, the thought of their impending departure from the capital brought a pang of sadness to her heart.

After the meal, the servants cleared away the leftovers, and the group continued their conversation in the main hall.

Adrian glanced at Ryan, and suddenly called him over, "Ryan, come here."

Ryan took a small, eager step forward. "Hello, Sage Adrian!"

Ryan knew how he was supposed to address Adrian.

"Do you want to be as skilled in martial arts as your aunt?" Adrian asked.

While Carissa's martial skills weren't the best in the world, they were certainly impressive within the Pathfinders Guild. Ryan nodded vigorously. "Yes, I do!"

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Carissa's eyes reddened slightly.

Was Adrian intending to take Ryan back to Meadow Ridge?

Adrian looked at Ryan with a meaningful expression. "Why do you want to improve your martial skills?"

"To protect my aunt," Ryan replied loudly.

Then, he paused, feeling that this ambition was too small. "Like my grandfather and my father, to go to the battlefield, protect my home, defend my country, and safeguard the territory."

Adrian smiled. "Good. You're young, but have such grand ambitions. However, being a hero means enduring hardships and exhaustion. Can you handle that?"

"I can!" Ryan said, puffing out his chest.

Although he didn't understand why Adrian asked this, answering loudly could never be wrong. Besides, he had endured all kinds of hardship before.

"What if you were told to part from your aunt? Could you handle that too?" Adrian asked.

"I can... Ah!" Ryan immediately took two steps back, and shook his head instinctively. "No, I can't leave my

aunt."

Carissa felt reluctant to part with Ryan as well. He was now the only male of the Duke of Northwatch's family.

"Sage Adrian, if he wants to learn, I will teach him martial arts," she said.

Adrian replied, "Naturally, you should be the one to teach him first. He knows nothing at present, and it's not necessary for me to personally teach him the basics. Once his legs are healed, he can practice for two years in your residence. You can teach him the basics, and then he can go to Meadow Ridge to learn other things from your senior guild members."

Ryan would one day inherit a title, and with him being the only one in the estate, it would undoubtedly be very challenging. It would be reassuring if he were well-prepared and capable of defending himself. Carissa understood Adrian's thoughtful intention. With tears in her eyes, she said, "Yes, I understand what to do."

Joining the Pathfinders Guild was a dream many people yearned for. Not only was it about martial arts, but there were also other skills to be learned. For example, someone like Kyle, who was young but a great scholar, was rare in this world.

Kyle wasn't just skilled in painting-his expertise in various arts such as music, chess, calligraphy, and painting was impressive, but his true greatness lay in his profound knowledge. He was well-read in both ancient and modern texts, capable of offering true insights and writing books.

Salvador was his number one admirer. When Kyle visited Northwatch Estate, the king came in person to seek him, further solidifying Kyle's status.

Salvador didn't even dare to consider recruiting Kyle into the court, because someone like him should be revered and admired from afar.

Scholars and literati of the kingdom, as well as the current stream of civil officials, held Kyle in the highest regard. Even someone as esteemed as Trevor, a scholar of the present age, held him in high regard. "When will all of you be leaving?" Carissa asked through her tears, her voice filled with reluctance.

"It's uncertain. We will let you know when we depart," Adrian replied.

'You must tell me. You can't leave without saying goodbye," Carissa insisted, her eyes brimming with

tears.

She worried they might sneak away without informing her. Adrian hated farewells-every time she returned home from Meadow Ridge, he would always hide and claim to be busy.

Adrian assured her, "We definitely won't leave secretly

Carissa found little comfort in Adrian's words. Given how he had previously said he would attend her wedding and then changed his mind, only to plan such a grand surprise, it was evident he had a knack for unexpected departures.

After lunch, the male senior guild members took Rafael aside into a side hall for a private conversation.

Their words were meticulous, devoid of any veiled threats. They expressed various pleas for him to take good care of their youngest guild member, yet an unspoken pressure was palpable in their tone. Rafael responded appropriately, his demeanor serious and respectful. The men patted him on the shoulder, showing their approval.

Though they were part of the martial world, they were also aware of the rules of the aristocratic circles in the capital.

For Carissa to remarry was seen as a loss of virtue in the eyes of outsiders. For Rafael, a prince, to be willing to marry her as his rightful wife and swear loyalty to her alone was indeed commendable. Before they left, Winona said privately to Rafael, "If one day, you also find yourself no longer fond of her, please don't harm her. Return her to us.

The single word "also" made Rafael stiffen his resolve,

"No, that day will never come."

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In the carriage, Rafael relayed Winona's words to Carissa.

Carissa rested her head on his shoulder. Despite holding back her tears for a long time, they eventually began to fall.

Rafael held her close, resting his chin on her forehead. "Winona truly regards you as her own sister."

"Yes," Carissa said, her voice muffled. "When I went to the Pathfinders Guild, Winona took care of me a lot. She dotes on me quite intensely."

Rafael wondered-who didn't dote on Carissa at the Pathfinders Guild? Even Everett, when speaking to him in the side hall, had reminded him to take good care of Carissa and had fondly referred to her as a mischievous little monkey.

Everett had shown a hint of sorrow when talking about Rafael's in-laws, his eyes filled with melancholy and regret.

Everyone was moved by the sacrifices made by the men of the Duke of Northwatch's family for their kingdom.

Wiping away her tears, Carissa asked, "Rod is going to stay in the capital. Do you have any arrangements for him? He doesn't want to return to the military."

Rafael replied, "That's simple. As a prince, I'm allowed to have five hundred household soldiers. I haven't assembled them yet, so let him lead and find some people to recruit."

Previously, when he commanded the Hell Monarch Army, there were only guards in his residence. He had never established a unit of household soldiers.

Carissa wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes, and said earnestly, "That's fine. Besides, Rod's martial skills are good, and he's capable of leading people. He showed considerable authority when leading troops on the southern battlefield."

She glanced at Rafael and asked softly, "So, how much monthly salary will he receive?"

The soldiers were part of the outer courtyard's management, so she had no say in their salary, it wasn't up to her to decide.

"We'll give him a bit more. He's had a tough time, supporting an entire guild on his own," Rafael said generously.

"Okay, that's great!" Carissa thought to herself that she would also provide some private support.

She had known about the hardships of the Lunar Guild while at the Pathfinders Guild. But at that time, she hadn't fully grasped the severity of the difficulties.

He will come after Sage Adrian and the others have returned, right?"

"Yes, Violet will come along too. Cynthia and Bun will be returning with the others."

Compared to Violet,

Cynthia and Bun had less freedom.

As long as Violet wanted to stay, the Inferno Guild would not object. She was a major patron of the guild,

so even the guild's leader had to cater to her.

Without Violet, the Inferno Guild's situation wouldn't be much better.

Carissa straightened up. "When we return to the residence, the accounts for The Gilded Tower should be almost settled."

It was time to confront Jessica.

"This should be considered a lesson for my mother to make sure she doesn't blindly trust others in the future," Rafael said.

Carissa's expression turned icy. "Yes, a lesson is one thing, but Grand Princess Eleanor and Jessica shouldn't get away with anything. We must reclaim what's rightfully ours."

Rafael took her hand in his. "Alright, I'll support whatever you decide. If anything goes wrong, I'll take responsibility."

Carissa's gaze lingered on their joined hands. His fingers, so distinct and firm, made her heart flutter every time they touched. There was an undeniable sense of intimacy that arose from their connection.

She didn't know why, but she particularly enjoyed holding his hand. It felt like the true closeness that a married couple should share. Being embraced by him felt entirely different. During that time, they were driven by emotional impulses.

Though she couldn't fully explain it, she found herself inexplicably drawn to it.

Upon returning to Hell Monarch Estate, the gifts that had been sent to Northwatch Estate were brought back untouched.

Entering the main courtyard, Pearl handed Carissa a hot water bottle and whispered, "Lady Helen has been throwing a tantrum in the accounting room. She has smashed a lot of things. You and the prince should go check on her."

Carissa looked at Rafael. Seeing his furrowed brow, she understood there had been communication problems between mother and son.

"I'll go. You should return to the study to handle the documents," she said.

Although preparations were underway to seal off the court for the New Year and the Supreme Court would also be closing cases, Rafael was still busy reviewing old cases for reference and studying the laws. "Alright, go ahead. If you can't calm her down, send someone to get me." Rafael knew his mother very well.

"It's fine, I can handle it." Carissa gave him a reassuring look.

It was probably just a matter of Helen discovering a financial shortfall and realizing she had been deceived, causing her to lose her temper.

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Carissa first sought out Luke to get a general understanding of the situation and the current status of The Gilded Tower.

Luke assured her that there was no need to worry. They had Eric in their custody and had sent some people to monitor The Gilded Tower, ensuring that no one could slip out to send a warning. Feeling reassured, Carissa headed towards the accounting room.

Helen had not yet finished reviewing the accounts, but the entire room was filled with people kneeling in fear and anxiety. The place was in disarray-anything that could be thrown from the desk was thrown, except for the account books. Several cups had also been smashed.

Helen's hair was a mess, and her face was pale with anger. Upon seeing Carissa, her feelings of grievance and humiliation reached its peak, and she burst into tears.

"How could they do this to me?!"

Carissa entered the room, and addressed everyone, "Please rise. Everyone except for the accounting staff, leave the room. Gillian, you too."

There were quite a few accountants employed in Hell Monarch Estate, and there was also a head accountant. All of them were trembling on the ground, having never witnessed such fury from Helen before. The servants, who had been waiting in the room, breathed a sigh of relief as they stood up and left. Eric, still on his knees, was also escorted out.

Carise

approached Helen, and took out a handkerchief to wipe her tears. "Have you finished reviewing all the accounts?"

"There are still this year's accounts left," Helen replied, taking the handkerchief to wipe her tears and runny nose. Carissa's return had calmed her somewhat, but her feeling of being insulted remained strong.

"Even if we don't consider this year's accounts, The Gilded Tower made a profit of thirteen thousand silver coins. Yet, she kept coming to the palace asking me for money, claiming continuous losses and needing to cover rent and wages for the workers."

Carissa helped Helen to her feet. "Let's get some coffee and eat something. Have the accounting staff finish the rest of the calculations. Once they're done, I'll review them. Then, prepare your contract and get ready to go to Harmony Palace to reconcile the accounts with Jessica."

Recently, Jessica had been staying at Harmony Palace. She hadn't appeared when Carissa went to retrieve the Mystic Pearls yesterday. But as she was in charge of The Gilded Tower, she had to come out to settle the accounts.

"Can we even get anything out of her, considering we're practically entering a tiger's den?" Helen asked resentfully.

"Of course. What belongs to us must be reclaimed."

Helen wiped her nose and paused before adding, "If you can help me get it all back, I'll give you half of it."

"Why would I want something that's yours? What is rightfully yours is yours. The Gilded Tower is far more profitable than a makeup shop. Not only should you get what you're owed, but since you hold the majority stake in The Gilded Tower, you should also be the one to manage it. Those women won't be able to swindle even a single coin from you in the future if you do that," Carissa said.

They retreated to the side hall. Even after drinking a cup of hot coffee, Helen remained aggrieved.

"How could they have lied to me like this? They've gone too far! All these years, I trusted and respected

them. I thought that if they made a profit, it wouldn't matter if they took a bit more. I never expected them

to be so evil! Aren't they afraid of their reputation being ruined?"

"That's because when they deceived you, they never thought you would leave the palace and live outside. Otherwise, why would they let you take a 70% share of such an easy business? When investing, you had to contribute 70%. When there were losses, you also had to cover 70%, Carissa said.

"This is outrageous-absolutely outrageous!"

Helen's anger was evident, but now she seemed at a loss as she looked at Carissa.

"What should we do? Besides the initial investment of several thousand, I later added several thousand more. At this point, I don't care if I don't get my share of profit back. I'd be content if I just got back the money I injected into the business. At most, I just won't have any further dealings with them."

Helen's final words came with a hint of a sob, her voice full of grievance.

Carissa frowned.

They had talked about reclaiming everything just a few minutes ago. Why was Helen now saying she was willing to forgo the share of profit she was entitled to?

Helen's outward show of strength was truly despicable, but her tearful state also evoked some sympathy. Carissa understood why Helen's own family, the late king, and Victoria had been so indulgent with her. When Helen cried, she really did look pitiful. With her delicate bone structure, her wide-open eyes gave an innocent impression, and tears welling up in them truly made one feel their heart break for her. Carissa's mother-in-law was so transparent with her emotions-joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness all clearly displayed on her face.

However, Helen had improved somewhat, having learned to put on a facade in front of Eleanor.

Chapter 369

Carissa decided not to address the issue immediately. She instructed the staff to prepare a meal for Helen first.

After Helen had finished eating. Carissa said, "Let me see the contract. We need to check for any hidden traps. If there are any, we must prepare in advance." Helen blinked through her tearful eyes. "What can we do if there are traps?"

"There are ways to deal with them. Just bring the contract to me first, Carissa replied, not meeting Helen's gaze, especially not when she was crying.

So, Carissa turned to find Gillian and asked her to retrieve the contract.

Gillian knew exactly where the documents were kept. She quickly found the contract, and brought it to Carissa.

Carissa read through the contract three times from start to finish and found no issues with it-it was fair and impartial. As for the parties involved, Helen had used Gillian's name, while Jessica had used Eric's

name.

Surprisingly, Eric was a household servant of the Winchester family. own name

For a lady from a prominent family engaged in business outside, it was uncommon to use her due to the numerous bureaucratic procedures and the stigma of being publicly involved.

Instead, they would use the name of a male family member or a trusted servant. Servants could hold the contracts and couldn't really cause trouble, even if the property was registered in their names. Women typically used the latter method to manage their private property.

Helen and Jessica couldn't conduct business under their own names. In society, while money was appealing, merchants were considered lowly. So, as long as they made money, it didn't matter whose name was on the documents as long as they controlled the contracts.

"Is everything alright? Do you see any problems?" Helen asked anxiously as Carissa repeatedly examined the document.

Carissa looked up at her with a meaningful gaze. "There are no problems."

"Isn't that a good thing? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Carissa seemed to be looking at her like she was a fool, and Helen disliked such condescending looks.

Carissa was sorely tempted to say, "It seems that they didn't even bother tampering with the contract, indicating how easily they thought they could manipulate you."

Of course, she couldn't say that aloud, or Helen would likely respond with anger and tears, claiming she was being unfairly treated:

"It's a good thing!" Carissa put the contract away.

There's no need to wait until tomorrow. I'll visit Grand Princess Eleanor tonight. As for Eric, he should be detained tonight to prevent him from alerting anyone. Luke has already sent people to monitor The Gilded Tower, so the staff won't be able to leave to send any messages."

"So soon?" Helen was angry, but she seemed genuinely afraid of Eleanor and Jessica.

"We should strike while the iron is hot!" Carissa looked at Helen. Seeing Helen's eyes well up with tears again, she unexpectedly softened her tone, "Alright, stop crying. I'll accompany you. I'll handle whatever comes up."

Helen's voice was hoarse yet frail, "Then, I'm counting on you. Please also speak to Rafael on my behalf later. Don't let him stay angry with me."

Helen no longer spoke in the grandiose manner she used to, nor did she exhibit her previous haughtiness. The dislike that had once shown in her eyes when she looked at Carissa was gone, replaced by a hint of a sulky demeanor.

Seeing Helen in this state, Carissa couldn't help but shiver. It was quite unsettling to see someone who used to be so authoritative now appearing so demure.

By evening, the accounting records were delivered to Carissa for her review.

The current year's profits were particularly impressive. After rounding off, they had made a substantial profit of seventy-three thousand silver coins. Adding the profits from previous years,

The Gilded Tower had eamed over two hundred thousand silver coins. The business, based on the designs of The Golden Tower, had proven extraordinarily lucrative.

But that was also to be expected.

The cost of imitating designs was low, and the materials of the products weren't as pure as The Golden Tower. Even though the imitations sold for less, profit was good, as using cheaper materials boosted sales and raised the brand's visibility.

As long as rich merchants and ordinary people saw The Gilded Tower as affordable and stylish, that was enough to drive the business.

Carissa reviewed the expenditures. The costs for raw materials and finished products were quite low. In other words, the so-called pure gold might not be as pure as claimed and could even be gold-plated. If the gold jewelry tarnished in three to five years, it would provoke a major outcry.

Gillian, as the main stakeholder with a seventy percent share, would be directly accountable.

Therefore, The Gilded Tower was definitely not worth keeping.

Chapter 370

Carissa deliberated for a moment before ordering that Eric be brought in for questioning.

In the side room, a charcoal stove was set up with a fire poker roasting over it. After a while, the fire poker was glowing red-hot halfway through. Seeing this, Eric was so frightened that he nearly wet his pants. He fell to his knees and pleaded, "Your Highness, spare me! Please spare me!" Carissa sat upright, frowning slightly. "Why would I want your life? I just need you to answer a few questions truthfully."

Eric nodded vigorously. "I will tell you everything I know."

Carissa held up the purchase ledger. "Is Jessica aware that you've been purchasing cheap, rough goods?" "Yes, of course! She was the one who instructed us to get them."

"Did you inform her that the gold used in the jewelry is impure and might cause problems?"

Eric's eyes shifted nervously as he replied, "I did mention it, but Lady Jessica said it didn't matter. She said if there were problems in a few years, we'd be closed by then anyway."

Carissa sneered. "Would the shop be closed, or would you all have shifted the blame to Lady Helen?"

Eric fell silent, unable to respond.

Carissa did not press further, instead asking, "The shop has been running for several years now. Have you received complaints from customers about impure gold? How have you handled them?" Luke was standing by. He lifted the fire poker, and waved it.

Terrified, Eric trembled and answered, "We've been giving out some inexpensive gifts to silence the complaints. This year's business has been good, and Lady Jessica's plan is to close the shop after August next year, once the wedding season is over."

"That's it?" Carissa scoffed. "I said to tell me the truth. You're only giving me half the story. Do you want to see if you can swallow this fire poker?"

The fire poker was thrust directly in front of Eric, who screamed in terror and fell to the ground.

"No! Please! I'll tell you everything!"

Carissa's voice was cold, "Then, speak honestly. If you lie, you'll end up swallowing this fire poker."

Eric stared at the glowing fire poker, and didn't dare to withhold any information. He prostrated himself heavily on the ground and said, "Your Highness, I will tell you the truth!"

Lady Jessica plans to shift all the

blame onto Lady Helen when the matter comes to light. As Lady Helen is the mother of the Hell Monarch, she can handle the backlash. Then, Grand Princess Eleanor will step in to arrange the compensation. As for the

compensation, it wil

be

paid with the cheap stock from The Gilded Tower...

He paused, hesitating. If he continued, it would become even more serious.

However, Carissa didn't need him to say more.

"So, Grand Princess Eleanor will gain

a reputation for supporting the common people, while Lady Helen. and Prince Rafael become the targets of public scorn. Moreover the compensation consists of the store's cheap goods, which are hardly worth much. When it is said and done, Grand Princess, Eleanor and Jessica will have profited

immensely, gaining both money and

fame."

Eric's face turned pale, and he dared not utter a word. Clearly, the Hell Monarch's princess consort had already figured everything out.

After sending Eric away, Carissa

sneered, "She really is something else, stepping on Mother and Rafael to elevate herself. She wants to win the people's hearts while currying favor with the noble families Luke, what do you think she's planning?"

Luke thought for a moment and replied, "I'm but a dim-witted humble servant, Your Highness. I truly don't understand."

Eleanor was the grand princess, and her nephew was now securely on the throne.

What other ambitions could she have?

Luke couldn't guess, and Carissa wasn't sure either.

It couldn't just be about securing Jessica's position in the capital or in the Marquis of Ironridge's family, could it?

Regardless, since the scheme had already landed on Helen and Rafael's household, they couldn't be left to do whatever they wanted.

Carissa instructed the accountant to calculate the investment and the funds Helen had provided over the years, along with the profits divided at seventy percent, and then report the total amount.

Carissa returned to her room and changed into a water-blue brocade dress with floral embroidery. She donned a black cloak, concealing the red whip strapped to her waist, making it barely visible.