

War Song 371

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Once the accountant finished calculating the amounts, the accounts were handed to Carissa.

After Carissa reviewed them, she nodded and passed them to Helen. "Mother, please have a look and see if the figures are correct."

Helen took the accounts and studied them carefully. She looked prepared for any potential confrontation.

However, as she examined it, her expression turned to one of shock.

"Did I really spend this much over the years?"

The total expenditure, including the capital outlay, amounted to an astonishing 136,000 silver coins, Although she had recorded each transaction, she had never realized the total sum would be so vast.

If Carissa hadn't taken her to review the figures and brought Eric in to be interrogated, Helen would have continued to believe she was incurring losses and would have kept giving away money to maintain her prestige against Dakota.

The 136,000 silver coins were the principal amount. The total profits from previous years plus this year's profit reached 186,530 silver coins.

According to her share, Helen was entitled to 130,571 silver coins from this profit.

Including the profit, she would need to recover a total of 266,571 silver coins from Jessica.

Helen's previously commanding demeanor instantly weakened. "That's quite a lot. It will be difficult to

recover."

"Mother, this statement not only undermines your own confidence but also underestimates Eleanor's financial standing." Carissa said calmly.

Helen wanted to respond, but the cold, indifferent look from her daughter-in-law made her think of how smoothly Carissa had retrieved the Mystic Pearls.

It seemed best to avoid pessimistic remarks.

Luke asked, "Lady Helen, Lady Carissa, should I arrange for the guards to accompany you?"

Helen quickly agreed. "Yes, arrange for more guards-several dozen at least. It's better to intimidate them first."

Carissa replied, "There's no need for guards. We're only going to reconcile the accounts."

Helen disagreed firmly, "How can we go without them? It's better to be safe than sorry. Who knows what dirty tricks they might use?"

Carissa looked up, watching them pack up the account books. "There's no need to fear any tricks. Just a few people will suffice to carry the books." "It's a must!" Helen insisted.

Luke glanced between Helen and Carissa, carefully asking. "So.... Should we bring the guards or not?"

He realized that being in his position was going to be tricky. He couldn't afford to offend either Helen or Carissa.

Carissa stood tall, and replied flatly, "No guards."

Her tone was devoid of warmth, but carried a weight of authority

Luke looked to Helen for confirmation.

Helen rolled her eyes and said, "Why are you looking at me? If she says no guards, then there won't be any!"

Was there a need to be so fierce? Was it really that important?

Luke understood the situation now. It seemed there would be no future conflicts between Rafael's mother and his princess consort. Carissa was clearly in charge.

Previously he and Jacob had been worried about how to balance Helen and Carissa to ensure they wouldn't develop grudges against each other that would lead to constant disputes within the manor.

But that worry was unnecessary now.

Carissa had been in the estate for only three days, and she had already managed to gain complete obedience from Helen.

Kiera was also a source of relief.

Since moving into the estate, she had spent her days purchasing various snacks. Now, she was so engrossed in these treats that she couldn't be bothered with other

matters, nor did she trouble the

staff.

At Harmony Palace, Eleanor frowned as she looked at the servant holding the note informing her that

one had come to visit.

"They're here again?"

It was mealtime, and she was dining with Jessica.

As for Henry... He was not worthy of dining with her.

"Mom, if they've come, then just see them. What's there to be afraid of?" Jessica said lazily.

She had been staying at her natal

home for quite some time, but bot

husband had yet to come to fetch her, which was beginning to irritate her.

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Eleanor was clearly irritated and said, "Have them brought in and seated in the side hall for a while. There's no need to take them to the main hall. I'll join them after I finish my dinner." The steward went out personally to handle the situation. Noticing that they were bringing in items that didn't look like gifts, he asked Helen, "May I ask what you've brought, Your Grace?" Helen was about to blurt out that it was the account books, but Carissa interjected first, "They are some old manuscripts for Grand Princess Eleanor to review."

The steward's eyes brightened at the mention of manuscripts. Could they be Kyle's manuscripts?

He immediately ordered refreshments to be served, then went to report to Eleanor and Jessica.

"Manuscripts? Kyle's?" Eleanor asked slowly.

"I'm not sure. She didn't say, and I didn't dare to ask," the steward replied.

Jessica had only recently learned about the Mystic Pearls and the three thousand silver coins, which had left her very angry.

Now, seeing that they had brought manuscripts, she sneered, "Aunt Helen probably thinks that she offended you by retrieving the Mystic Pearls, so she brought Carissa along to present Kyle's manuscripts as an apology. At least she has some sense."

Eleanor glanced at her. "If you continue to use that brain of yours in your husband's house, your mother-in-law will kick you out in less than three years."

The mention of Margaret darkened Jessica's expression. "That old hag! I'll poison her sooner or later."

Eleanor's tone was cold, "You'd better calm down and avoid causing any trouble that will need me to clean up your mess. Your mother-in-law isn't someone you can easily handle. Try to get close to her before saying anything else."

Jessica was frustrated. "Forget about that old hag. What do you think Aunt Helen and that wretched Carissa are here for?"

Eleanor set down her chopsticks. After the maid brought her some water, she rinsed her mouth and took a handkerchief to wipe her lips. Throwing the handkerchief aside, she stood up, and the maid draped her cloak over her.

Eleanor stepped out, saying, "We'll find out soon enough."

Seeing this, Jessica also put on a cloak and followed her out.

In the side hall, Eleanor first saw the several boxes on the floor, and her heart skipped a beat.

She was very familiar with these

boxes. The account books from The

Gilded Tower were always sent to

her in similar boxes every year, so she knew exactly what they were.

These were the very same boxes.

Now, with six boxes on the floor, it seemed that all the financial records from recent years were contained within them.

The Gilded Tower appeared to be

Jessica's, but it was actually Eleanor's. Naturally, she wouldn't acknowledge The Gilded Tower as her own since it was styled after The Golden Tower.

Jessica recognized the boxes, and exclaimed, "Aren't these the account books from The Gilded Tower?"

Carissa rose with a bright smile. "Greetings, Aunt Eleanor, Jessica. We meet again."

Jessica's expression darkened. "Don't try to start sweet-talking! Why are you here?"

Eleanor slowly took her seat, and gently reprimanded her daughter, "Jessica, don't be rude."

Jessica sat down heavily, her gaze skimming over the account books. Her face changed slightly, but soon returned to its usual expression.

"Helen, what's the meaning of this?" Eleanor asked, pointing to the boxes on the floor.

She didn't bother asking Carissa directly-it was far better to question the more pliable Helen.

Carissa wasn't stupid enough to let

Helen make opening remarks, so she said with a smile, "It's like this. Yesterday, heard from Mother that she and Jéssica had opened a jewelryshop together. After a little inquiry, it turned out to be The Gilded Tower. It was such a coincidence! Before my marriage, Kyle gave me a large gold bracelet from the very same shop."

Her face was all smiles; there wasn't a hint of sharpness in her eyes, as if she was not there to inspect the accounts at all.

Having dealt with Carissa a few times, Eleanor was not about to let her guard down. She turned to Jessica.

"This Gilded Tower is the same one you mentioned you and Helen partnered in, right?"

Jessica replied, "Yes, Mom, that's correct."

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Eleanor nodded thoughtfully. "I remember you mentioned before that the shop's initial reputation wasn't good."

Jessica vented her frustrations, "That's right! Despite several years of operation, it failed to make a profit and has been running at a loss. We had to resort to discounts and promotions at the end of the year just to cover costs for rent and wages. I truly feel guilty towards Aunt Helen. She believed in me, and Invested. in The Gilded Tower with me. Yet, instead of earning any profit, we've only faced losses." "Business is tough these days, Jessica. There's no need to feel too guilty. I'm sure Mother understands, don't you, Mother?" Carissa interjected.

Carissa turned to look at Helen.

Helen felt a bit confused. What was with the look?

Carissa had instructed her to stay silent if possible before entering, and now, she was being questioned.

But, catching Carissa's subtle hint, she could only nod and respond awkwardly, "Yes."

Carissa continued off Helen's answer, "Yes, exactly. It's not your fault, Jessica. It's tough to run a business.

Jessica quickly agreed, "Yes, of course! Business is quite difficult."

Carissa took out a document. "I've reviewed this contract. My mother-in-law holds a 70% stake in The Gilded Tower. Apart from the initial investment, she has also contributed additional funds over the years to support the business. Every expenditure is documented. Jessica, you must have contributed the remaining 30%, correct?"

Jessica felt something was off about the question, but couldn't pinpoint the issue. So, she could only nod in agreement.

"Of course. Whenever there was a need for additional funds, I contributed my 30%,"

Carissa nodded approvingly. "That's reasonable. Since my mother-in-law holds 70%, she should contribute 70% towards any additional funding, and you should contribute 30%, Jessica." "Of course, that's only fair," Jessica said, her gaze fixed on Carissa.

What exactly was Carissa getting at? Had she not seen the account books, or had she already reviewed them?

And what about Eric? Why did no one report back about someone from Hell Monarch Estate retrieving the account books? Such negligence in handling affairs must be addressed and corrected!

Eleanor read the room, and understood that Carissa must have reviewed the account books and seen the profits. The account books were evidently retrieved from The Gilded Tower, and Eric must have been caught off guard.

Eric likely had been brought back to Hell Monarch Estate for interrogation. With how spineless he was, he would likely confess everything under questioning.

Carissa's voice broke the silence, "Jessica, as long as you find it reasonable, it's settled. If the additional

contribution is 70%, then naturally, the profits should be 70% as well."

She opened one of the boxes, and pulled out the top account book.

"This is what our accountant has worked on for an entire day. I'm sure their minds have been overworked. from sorting out the accounts for these years. Aunt Eleanor, Jessica, please have a look. Despite the poor business climate outside, The Gilded Tower has actually been doing well and has made considerable profits."

Jessica's expression changed abruptly. "What? Profits? How is that possible? We just injected additional funds into the shop a few months ago!"

She took the account book, and looked at the final figures. Her eyes widened in shock. "This can't be real! This can't be the actual account book."

Eleanor frowned. "The account book should be real."

"Mom?"

Jessica looked up, unable to understand why her mother was undermining her. At this point, she should definitely not acknowledge the account book as genuine. Seeing the confusion in Jessica's eyes, Eleanor sighed inwardly.

How foolish. The books were taken from The Gilded Tower, and there would be witnesses. Moreover, a comparison with Eric's handwriting would confirm their authenticity. How could they claim the books were fake?

Eleanor's voice turned stern, "Jessica, how do you manage your staff? Didn't you ever inspect the store? You didn't even realize you were being deceived. How can you face Helen?" Realizing the gravity of the situation, Jessica grew furious. "Eric dared to deceive me? I'll have him brought here immediately."

How bold of him!

She signaled to the steward nearby,

who was about to leave, but

Carissa's cold voice stopped him, "There's

need to fetch him. I've

non

already detained the treacherous set

servant in the estate. I was only waiting to confirm with you that you were unaware and were also deceived before sending him bound to the Supreme Court, Jessica."

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Eleanor and Jessica's expressions changed at the mention of the Supreme Court. They knew all too well that the current head of the Supreme Court was Rafael Eleanor glanced at the boxes of account books.

"Since Eric deceived you as well, and you've already reviewed the account books, Jessica will also need to go through them. Leave the books here for now. After we've completed our review, we will visit you personally to reconcile the accounts. Once the evidence is clear, we'll send it to the authorities for proper action."

Carissa sipped her coffee and smiled. "Aunt Eleanor, I'm rather impatient by nature. The account books are here. Please have your accountants come over immediately to review them. If more accountants are needed, I can send someone to Ironridge Estate to bring over their accountants as well, We'll sort it out tonight, and the accounts can be recalculated by tomorrow."

"No, you can't go to Ironridge Estate!" Jessica stood up, her face pale.

Margaret and Leopold already had a poor opinion of her. If they found out about this, they might despise her even more.

Jessica had had enough of their disapproving looks.

Eleanor's gaze was as sharp as a blade. "What's this? You call me 'Aunt', but don't believe me?"

Carissa smiled and replied, "It's precisely because I trust you that I brought the account books here for us to review together. If I didn't trust you, the account books and Eric would likely be with the local authorities by now."

Eleanor slammed her cup down. "How can so many years of accounts be reviewed in just one day?"

Carissa smiled brightly and replied, "Aunt Eleanor, there are quite a few accountants for your estate and shops. I'm sure there are multiple accountants in your residence as well. Additionally, we can also call over the accountants under my natal family and the others from Hell Monarch Estate if needed."

Eleanor sneered; she could barely contain her anger. "In the end, you don't trust me!"

Carissa's smile widened, her tone still calm as she said, "Why don't you and Jessica look at the final figure we've calculated? If you two trust me, there's no need for further investigation. Just follow the figures I've calculated from the account books."

She leisurely traced the embroidery on her clothing with her fingertips, a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes.

"Or perhaps, you don't trust me, Aunt Eleanor?"

Eleanor's face darkened. It wasn't a matter of trust. She knew well enough how much The Gilded Tower had earned. The figures were likely consistent with those in her own records.

They were here not to reconcile accounts, but to demand payment!

"It's too late to review the accounts

tore

today. Leave the books here and go back," Eleanor said, waving her hand. "Take the account books back to the storeroom. We'll start the review tomorrow." to the storeroom. We'll start the review tomorrow."

Immediately, several guards came in to carry the boxes away.

Helen grew anxious. Disregarding her daughter-in-law's advice to stay silent, she shouted, "You can't take them away!"

If they took the account books, would they ever get them back? They were clearly trying to avoid paying!

However, the guards were already lifting the boxes.

A whip cracked through the air, landing sharply on the boxes. One of the guards, who had just reached out to lift a box, recoiled in fright at the crack, quickly pulling his hand back.

Carissa's face darkened. "Fine. If you

won't review the accounts, let's take

the boxes back to Ironridge Estate for inspection. If the people at Ironridge Estate won't review them, then we'll send them directly to the Supreme Court."

At her command, the servants who had come with Carissa to carry the boxes began to take them away. The guards from Harmony Palace began to push and shove, and the servants were no match for the guards. Within moments, the servants were thrown to the ground.

Helen was beside herself with frustration. She looked at Eleanor, who was smirking coldly as she slowly picked up her cup.

Did they think they could cause a ruckus in Harmony Palace, her residence?

Eleanor had five hundred household soldiers at her command. Since Carissa and Helen had brought in the account books, there was no reason for them to leave with them..

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In the blink of an eye, more than ten people surged into the room. At Eleanor's command, they headed towards the account books.

Helen was frantic. "Grand Princess Eleanor, what are you doing? The account books are clearly correct! Why are you trying to hide them?"

Eleanor glanced at her own fingers, then lazily gave Helen a sidelong look. "How do I know you haven't tampered with them?"

"Then, let's review them together. If we do it together, we'll find out if there's been any tampering, won't we?"

Eleanor snorted derisively. "There's no need to trouble yourselves. Since you've already reviewed them, it's our turn now."

Jessica barked, "What are you waiting for? Take them away!"

Carissa held her whip in one hand, and hurled her cup at one of the guards. The cup struck him squarely on the forehead and he collapsed, unconscious.

Carissa stepped forward, her whip cracking through the air with sharp, resounding snaps. The ten or so guards, despite not being lined up, all received lashes from the whip.

Carissa stood in front of the boxes, glaring coldly at the guards. "I dare anyone to try and move these!" "Carissa, how dare you strike my people? How bold of you!" Eleanor was livid.

"Aunt Eleanor, you flatter me. I may not be bold, but I have nothing to hide. I had no choice but to strike them, as it was a last resort. Please forgive me."

Jessica screamed as she rushed out, "Are you all dead? Can't you handle one woman? Someone, get some help!"

Helen was terrified. She stood up and hid behind Carissa.

Carissa's voice was icy, "I advise you not to make such a fuss. Harmony Palace is surrounded by the estates of various influential families. If word gets out, they might say you're bullying your niece-in-law. Jessica roared, "Carissa, who's bullying whom here? You're the ones who came to provoke us.

Carissa responded calmly, "Everyone saw that I came to Harmony Palace with my mother-in-law and a few servants, without a single guard. You're the ones escalating things by calling for the household soldiers and causing a scene."

Eleanor's eyes narrowed. The little schemer had more cunning than brute force.

Carissa flicked her whip lightly, yet it crackled sharply through the air, whipping up a gust of wind that struck those nearby. The household soldiers involuntarily took a step back, their faces reflecting their

unease.

These people had heard of Carissa's

exploits on the Southern Frontier battlefield. They knew she had led the charge as the vanguard,

maneuvering through a storm of

arrows with her elite troops to

breach the city gates. Her martial

prowess and courage were

unmatched, and none of the

household soldiers here

could stand against her.

Having intimidated the household soldiers, Carissa raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"It's quite strange. I've merely

brought the account books from The Gilded Tower for verification, and you're both seizing the books and calling for a fight. Is there something fishy going on here? Could it be that it's not Eric who embezzled The Gilded Tower's funds, but Jessica who misappropriated my mother-in-law's profits?"

"You're talking nonsense!" Jessica retorted sharply, but her inner turmoil was evident.

"Let's hope I'm talking nonsense. Since you refuse to review the books, my mother-in-law and I will head to Ironridge Estate."

Holding her whip, Carissa blocked the way of the household soldiers and calmly instructed her own people, "Take the account books outside. We're going to Ironridge Estate."

The household soldiers were

unwilling to act against her, and

stood by. The servants from Rafael's household were skilled and nimble; under Carissa's protection, they began moving the boxes with ease. Carissa turned, deliberately ignoring Eleanor's dark expression, and beckoned Helen, "Mother, let's go. Harmony Palace is not a place for reasoned discussions. We'll find another place to resolve this." Helen hurried forward, her steps quick and small. Carissa took her hand with one hand and held the whip with the other, leading the older woman out with the servants in tow.

"Stop!" Eleanor's voice cut sharply through the air.

Carissa turned, raising an eyebrow with a smile.

fight us? If they win, they'll be "Aunt Eleanor, do you plan to have your five hundred household soldiers charged with assaulting the royal family. If they lose, well... That would be quite a disgrace, wouldn't it?"

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Seeing Carissa's smile, Eleanor felt a deep-seated revulsion. Carissa's resemblance to Melanie was too striking.

Both mother and daughter were insufferable.

Carissa maintained her pleasant smile. "We're here to settle accounts openly and honestly. I'm not sure. why you're making such a fuss, Aunt Eleanor. Is there really something shady happening? Mother, after we sort things out at Ironridge Estate, you'll need to host a gathering so everyone can discuss this matter properly."

Jessica retorted angrily, "What nonsense are you spouting? What could be shady? Haven't I sent the account books for Aunt Helen to review all this time?"

"It's quite a coincidence," Carissa said, her tone growing stern. "The account books you sent to my mother-in-law are completely different from those I found at The Gilded Tower. The books you provided show losses, while the ones from The Gilded Tower show profits. Do you think there's something shady going on?"

Jessica was exasperated. "Why are you talking so loudly? This is the grand princess' residence, not your natal home or your current home!"

Carissa's eyes grew cold. "So what if it's the grand princess' residence? Does that mean the people here don't adhere to reason? If that's the case, there's no need for further discussion. We're leaving." Eleanor smashed her cup on the floor, her voice icy, "You want to compare and settle the accounts, right? So be it!"

Jessica turned, and spoke in an urgent tone, "Mom!"

How were they going to settle the accounts? Could they even do that?

Eleanor's gaze was as sharp as a blade. "Bring the accountants here. Have all the shop accountants come over. I want to see how Eric has been deceiving us,

Carissa smiled sweetly. "You're wise, Aunt Eleanor. If Eric is found guilty of embezzlement, he will certainly be handed over to the Supreme Court."

Eleanor's eyes were frosty with anger. Once Eric reached the Supreme Court, he would likely confess everything. Shifting the blame to him wouldn't work.

Eric was a household servant from Ironridge Estate. He was initially assigned somewhere else as a steward, but was later recalled by the family's matriarch due to his mistakes.

Jessica, recognizing his sharp skills while managing her business, saw potential in him and promoted him to oversee operations at The Gilded Tower.

Ultimately, Eric was an Ironridge Estate servant under the Winchester family's employment.

If Carissa made this issue public there, it would harm both Eleanor and Jessica's reputations. The recent scandal about the miniature chastity belt sculpture given to Melanie had already tarnished

Eleanor's name. She had hoped to lie low for a year or two, and let the matter fade from people's memories before making any further moves.

So, even when they came to claim the Mystic Pearls and three thousand silver coins, Eleanor gave them up to avoid escalating the situation.

Now, however, it wasn't just a matter of losing money. If the issue blew up, it would become a scandal of embezzlement and fraud against an honored concubine.

Even though Jessica was a princess and wouldn't face imprisonment, she would certainly be subject to public condemnation and abuse.

The Marquis of Ironridge's family was already looking for a chance to have Leopold divorce Jessica- becoming a thief would be the perfect excuse for them.

However, it was clear that the money couldn't be returned to them. Since the shop was nearly at its end, it was reasonable to let Carissa and Helen have it, considering that was always part of the plan.

Although the business had been profitable, its reputation was so poor that it could only make quick money -it was unsustainable in the long run.

With her mind made up, Eleanor moved swiftly to settle accounts. She had already reviewed the figures and knew the approximate amount of the accumulated profits over the years.

The accountants worked furiously,

claiming they could sort out the accounts within four hours. During this time, they deliberately didn't bring any refreshments and stopped the underfloor heating, allowing the cold to seep in and freeze the room.

Eleanor and Jessica held onto hot water bottles to warm themselves, but Carissa and Helen had nothing.

Carissa's inner force protected her, so she was unaffected by the cold, but Helen shivered uncontrollably. Helen asked Eleanor several times to bring in a charcoal brazier, and though Eleanor instructed it repeatedly, no one came with it.

No matter how dumb Helen was, she could tell Eleanor was doing it on purpose.

So, she moved closer to Carissa for warmth. Carissa took off her cloak and wrapped the older woman in it. Protected by her inner force, Carissa wasn't too cold. Also, she was younger and could endure it better than Helen, who was more delicate.

Feeling secure in her daughter-in-law's embrace, Helen fell asleep while leaning against Carissa.

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Four hours passed-no more, no less. Outside, night had long fallen. The cold was even harsher.

The accountant with the long beard came in to make a report.

"Grand Princess Eleanor, the accounts have been thoroughly reviewed. There are no discrepancies with the numbers compared to the ones Lady Carissa has shown us."

"That's outrageous!" Eleanor smashed another cup, which crashed loudly.

The sound startled Helen awake. she looked at Eleanor with sleep-laden eyes, bewildered by the fury radiating from the latter.

Eleanor's voice was filled with rage as she declared, "How dare that vile servant falsify accounts and embezzle Helen and Jessica's money? I will make sure he is severely punished!"

Carissa released Helen and said, "It's enough that we've settled the accounts. Since Eric is the one at Court to fault, there's no need for you to get involved, Aunt Eleanor. I'll have him sent to the Supreme recover all the embezzled funds."

"Carissa!" Eleanor's tone softened considerably as she sighed. "Jessica is at fault as well, for failing to supervise and not realizing so much money was embezzled. Since Eric is a servant from Ironridge Estate, making this a public scandal would be detrimental to both the Marquis of Ironridge's family and your cousin-in-law.

"How about this? Hand him over to me, and I'll make sure he returns the money. If he fails to do so, your cousin's share of the 30% percent will be forfeited, and The entire Gilded Tower will be yours.

You're already aware of the profits The Gilded Tower has made over the years. It will continue to be profitable. You won't be losing out if you control the entire business, right?"

*Not only are we not at a loss, but we also gain benefits. Carissa smiled. "However, families shouldn't bicker. I can't let my cousin-in-law suffer alone. Since Jessica manages The Gilded Tower, and the shopkeepers and staff were all appointed by her, it wouldn't be prudent for us to take over the shop recklessly. We might end up with losses.

Continuing the partnership is also unnecessary. After such an incident, it's hard to avoid lingering

resentments. Relatives should ideally not go into business together to avoid tearing apart relationships and harming both families. So, we plan to withdraw our shares."

Carissa took out the contract.

"If there were losses, we'd adjust according to the amount of our investment. However, since the shop is profitable, our share should naturally increase. But as I mentioned earlier, since we are relatives, there's no need to be so calculative. We'll just take back our investment and the profits from these years. As for the excess gains, we will forgo them."

Jessica glanced at the total on the paper. It was over 260,000 silver coins!

It would be better if Carissa had simply asked for her life!

"No! I disagree!" Jessica's face turned ashen. "Since it's a partnership, neither party can decide who gets what unilaterally!"

"Then, it's simple." Carissa pushed the account books aside, and looked up. "We'll sell the shop. Starting tomorrow, we'll post notices about the sale. But before we do that, we need to settle how much money we're each owed. Once the shop sells, we can split the profits seventy-thirty."

Sell the shop?

Fine, Jessica had been hoping for that. The Gilded Tower had a bad reputation. Selling would fetch little.

"Fine, sell it," Jessica said.

Carissa smiled. "It's settled, then. As for the distribution of profits, would you prefer to have Eric sent to the Supreme Court first, or will

you

advance this amount?"

Helen was stunned. This wasn't what had been agreed upon when they arrived. Hadn't it been said that the shop would be given to them?

How had it turned into a sale now? Would they be able to recover their money from selling the shop?

Eleanor's face was dark with

displeasure. But since sending Eric to the Supreme Court was not an option, the money would have to come from her.

The amount was more than a hundred thousand silver coins.

That was a painful loss.

However, Eleanor had no choice but to grit her teeth and say, "Fetch the banknotes."

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Under the bright lights, Carissa carefully counted the banknotes. It was indeed the full amount of The Gilded Tower's profits over the years, with not a single cent missing. She received the banknotes, along with some loose change.

Watching Carissa's meticulous counting, Jessica felt a gnawing rage. But at least the matter was settled for now, and she let out a small sigh of relief.

Unexpectedly, Carissa said, "Tomorrow, we'll proceed with selling the shop. I'll have someone spread the word that Aunt Eleanor and Jessica managed the shop. With your reputations attached, many interested buyers are likely to come forward. We'll set a minimum price of 250,000 silver coins. How does that sound?"

Jessica's face turned ashen. "What? You want to say that my mother and I are managing the shop? Absolutely not!"

The Gilded Tower had a bad reputation, notorious for its poor quality and frequent cost-cutting. Spreading such news would tarnish both Jessica and Eleanor's reputations.

Jessica was only interested in the money, and didn't want to admit that The Gilded Tower was hers.

Carissa replied thoughtfully, "Oh, right. It's true that you didn't really run it. Since Eric is a servant from Ironridge Estate, we should just advertise it as an Ironridge Estate property. The Marquis of Ironridge's family is a prestigious family with a long history, and with The Gilded Tower's solid business, it should still attract plenty of potential buyers."

"That's even more unacceptable!" Jessica was furious. "Carissa, I know you're up to something! What are you really trying to do here?"

Carissa feigned surprise. "A higher price means you get a larger share, doesn't it? I don't understand why you're so upset." Jessica was nearly driven to the brink by her. She couldn't believe Carissa could be so ignorant, or at least pretended to be.

It was nauseating.

And there was Helen, acting like a fool. She should have been setting rules for her new daughter-in-law to follow, but instead, she joined Carissa in this money seeking scheme. Helen used to complain about Carissa all the time, but how?

Just moments ago, they had been snuggling up together! Anyone who didn't know better would have thought they were mother and daughter, not in-laws.

As Jessica fumed, Eleanor said, "Helen, come with me. I need to speak with you privately."

Eleanor intended to have a private word with Helen, hoping to exploit the opportunity to sow discord. between her and Carissa. That would give her some leverage to maneuver the situation.

Carissa was acting overly unreasonable and was fixated on Eleanor due to the miniature chastity belt sculpture. There was no chance of having a proper discussion with her. Helen began to stand, only to be pulled back down by Carissa. Stunned, she met her daughter-in-law's icy

gaze and sat back down.

Holding her mother-in-law firmly, Carissa smiled and said, "Let's discuss everything right here. After all, there are no secrets between my mother-in-law and I."

Eleanor sneered. "What's this?

Who's in charge of the household now? Helen, you told me that you were in charge. Yet now, it seems you're listening to everything your daughter-in-law says. If Dakota knew about this, she'd certainly have a good laugh at your expense!

Helen stiffened-Eleanor knew exactly how to hit her sore spots. Dakota was the person Helen despised most in her life, and she hated the idea of being a source of amusement for Dakota.

Carissa remained seated and chose to remain silent for the moment, watching to see if her naive mother-in-law would recover her senses or if she was beyond saving.

If a single word could successfully incite her, Carissa would have no more involvement in the matter-it wasn't her money at stake, anyway.

"What does it matter who's in

charge? Whoever is capable should take charge: If Dakota wants to

laugh, let her. I can still leave the net

palace and live with my son, while she remains stuck in the depths of the palace," Helen said.

Helen didn't disappoint Carissa. After her expression shifted a few times, she managed to force a smile and finally say what needed to be said.

Eleanor's face darkened. That tactic had always been effective with Helen. She had always tried to outdo Dakota, and would never be willing to let the latter have the last laugh. But now, Helen was actually holding back?

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Carissa leaned back in her chair, her long legs and tall frame giving her an imposing presence.

A faint smile tugged at the corners of her lips, and her eyes gleamed with satisfaction. She was pleased Helen hadn't fallen for Eleanor's trap, even though her response had seemed rather forced. When Eleanor's attempt to provoke failed, she simply smiled.

"Yes, those with capability should be in charge. But I seem to recall you once complained about this being Carissa's second marriage and how she was unworthy of Rafael. And now, in just a few days, she's got you wrapped around her finger. Quite the skillful move. Helen, I'm worried that if you stay in this estate, she'll have you dancing to her tune in no time."

Carissa's smile faded, and she said coldly, "That's enough. We'll proceed as I've said. I'm done here. Goodbye."

*Hold it!" Eleanor's voice was sharp and commanding. "Carissa, don't think you can just walk away!"

At her shout, Helen flinched instinctively.

However, Carissa erupted in anger.

"Who needs your approval? I want you to pay up! I've avoided saying some things outright because I didn't want things to get ugly. But if you aren't concerned about appearances, why should I be? After all, I was a once-divorced woman!

"Eric didn't embezzle the funds from The Gilded Tower, It was you and Jessica who tricked my mother-in-law out of her money! You treated her like a fool and a big idiot.

Eric has confessed everything. My mother-in-law has been confined in the palace and was unable to leave easily, so you've done as you pleased all these years.

"Now that she's finally left the palace, you had the nerve to show her portrait to the staff, making sure everyone knew who she was so they could say those customers were just people you used to boost business."

"Utter nonsense!" Eleanor sneered coldly. "Why would you believe a thief's words?"

"I'd rather believe him than trust you two," Carissa replied firmly. "I came here tonight to settle this civilly- return the money you're supposed to, and take back all the shares you should. If you do that, this whole mess will stay between us. But if you insist on making this ugly, I'm not afraid to go there."

"From the moment you gave my mother the miniature chastity belt sculpture, I vowed to hold a grudge against you. Don't think you can hide behind your title as the grand princess to hold me down. After that stunt you pulled, I'll never forgive you as long as I live!!

Eleanor's face turned ashen with fury. Her hands, clutching a hot water bottle, shook with rage. Her glare was so fierce, it seemed like she wanted to devour Carissa.

"How dare you insult my mother? My mother is the esteemed grand princess! Carissa, you have offended your elder! Such a crime can't be forgiven. I will report you to the Royal Court!" Jessica shouted. Carissa slammed her hand on the table, and said sharply, "Go ahead, make a scene-the bigger, the better! It would be best if you also exposed all the dirty secrets of Aunt Eleanor's household."

Eleanor's face went pale. "What nonsense are you spouting? What dirty secrets could my household have?

Carissa's voice was icy, "Don't you have any? Should I go and investigate the western courtyard of this palace now?"

"Preposterous! Utterly preposterous!"

Eleanor was both furious and fearful. How did Carissa know about the western courtyard?

With a flick of her whip, Carissa shattered the mahogany wood coffee table in front of her, splitting it into two with a loud crash.

However, the noise was nothing

compared to Carissa's fierce shout,

did

"When I was being reasonable, you cooperate? Hand over the money every last bit of it! Whoever wants The Gilded Tower can take it,

but don't use it to sully net

mother-in-law's reputation!"

The household soldiers rushed forward to stand in front of Eleanor, preventing Carissa from taking any physical action against the grand princess.

"How dare you!" Eleanor jumped, staring at the broken coffee table in shock. "Carissa, do you think I can't deal with you?"

"Exactly!" Carissa snapped coldly, "You can't touch me, but I can destroy you. Your hands are filthy, and I've got all the evidence in my grasp. You think you can keep those secrets from everyone? Not from me. If you don't hand over every last coin tonight, I'll bring the Supreme Court down on this place. I'll have them investigate your crimes of..."

Eleanor's voice rose to a sharp, angry yell, "Give it to her! Bring the banknotes!"

Helen clutched her chest in fear.

Heavens, where did Carissa get the nerve to confront Eleanor like this? And she actually won!

But what could possibly be the secret in the western courtyard? It was astounding that the usually dignified Eleanor had lost her composure!

Chapter 380

Carissa continued to count the money. When the banknotes fell short, gold bars were brought out to make up the difference.

It seemed Eleanor had substantial reserves-producing over two hundred thousand silver coins was not difficult for her.

Carissa had underestimated Eleanor:

Over the years, Eleanor had supported the household soldiers, maintained hundreds of servants, frequently hosted guests, and adorned herself in luxurious clothing and fine jewelry. Every piece of her attire was of the highest quality.

Yet, seeing Eleanor's pained expression as she handed over the money, Carissa knew this sum was hitting Eleanor where it hurt.

This time, they had completely ripped off the mask of civility between them.

At least, Carissa had recovered what was rightfully theirs and what had been deceitfully taken. There was no loss on her part. As for the rift, it was nothing new. There was no need to maintain the facade of hypocritical harmony.

With that, Carissa made her way out.

Eleanor and Jessica watched as Carissa walked away. There was none of the politeness from when she first arrived. Her straightened back radiated an air of arrogance and defiance.

"Carissal" Eleanor ground her teeth in frustration; but at this moment, she was powerless to do anything.

Jessica was equally distraught. "All the hard work over the years has gone to waste, all because of that vile woman! I won't let her get away with this!"

Though Eleanor was furious with Carissa, she warned her daughter sharply, "Don't provoke her! You're no match for her. The problems with The Gilded Tower are due to your negligence. How could you let them easily find the account books? And you kept all the account books at The Gilded Tower. How did you manage things?"

Jessica was both angry and aggrieved. "I was afraid that if I took them back to Fronridge Estate, my mother-in-law would discover that I was managing The Gilded Tower."

"Then, why didn't you send them to another location? You don't only have one residence to use. If nothing else, why not destroy them after every year's accounts are settled? After all, it's not a long-term business."

"It was Eric who said we couldn't destroy them. Among all our shops, only The Gilded Tower has paid its taxes in full. We kept the account books just in case."

Eleanor frowned. 'Forget it. No one expected Helen to really move out of the palace, and no one anticipated that Rafael would marry someone like Carissa, a once-divorced woman. With her family gone, and having been discarded by Barrett, she's clearly got nothing left to lose. It's not worth clashing with someone like that. Just make sure your other dealings are clean, so she doesn't get anything on you."

"Those other businesses have nothing to do with her or Helen."

"Didn't you hear her? She's

determined to target us," Eleanor said with a hint of frustration, her heart aching at the sight of parting with so much money. "Anyway follow my instructions. Be extra Careful and don't provoke her.

Understood?"

"Got it."

Though Jessica responded, she harbored deep resentment towards Carissa and was determined to find a way to get back at her.

As Carissa and Helen exited Harmony Palace, they saw Rafael and Dylan waiting on horseback at the end of the alley.

Upon seeing them, Rafael rode up and asked Carissa, "Is everything taken care of?"

He exhaled a cloud of breath into the cold air. The weather was extremely chilly, and the biting wind was harsh. He didn't know how long he and Dylan had been waiting there.

"It's all taken care of. Why are you here? You didn't need to come." Carissa hurried towards him, placing her hand on his to stop him from dismounting. His hands were as cold as ice, so she quickly urged, "Let's hurry back. We can talk about it later."

Helen stood nearby. She raised her hand and grinned widely, her smile stretching from ear to ear. Even as the cold wind whipped around her, she didn't seem to notice the

chill her heart was warmed by the moment.

"Yes, let's talk about it after we get back."

Rafael's gaze briefly swept over his mother. It was rare to see her smiling so broadly.

"Alright. Get in the carriage quickly. Don't catch a cold, Rafael said.

"Okay, I'll get in now," Helen said, genuinely pleased that her son was finally showing concern for her.

The dim lighting made it hard for her to see exactly whom Rafael was looking at, or to whom he was speaking.

But as long as the person speaking and the one listening understood, that was enough.