

War Song 821

Chapter 821

On the day of the assessment, Carissa ordered that all leaders of the Mystic Army, even if they were just captains, had to be present unless they were on duty.

At first, Alistair thought this was a direct dig at him. After a long rant about Carissa to his wife, he finally stepped out the door.

Women could be so petty! With someone as small-minded as Carissa in charge of the Mystic Army, who knew how many troubles were going to arise in the future?

When he arrived at the Capital Guard headquarters, he quickly learned that the day's assessment wasn't just about him—it was tied directly to the Civil Department's evaluations.

That realization made him nervous.

He had offended Carissa. If he performed poorly today, he could face penalties like a salary deduction or even a demotion. If he had known, he would have prayed more before leaving the house and sought blessings from his ancestors.

Barrett was also there, but he wasn't participating in the assessment since he had just taken office and wasn't required to undergo evaluation yet. Having witnessed Carissa's skills on the Southern Frontier battlefield, Barrett knew that Alistair stood no chance against her. Alistair could only hope to survive a few exchanges.

Carissa wasn't in her official uniform today. Instead, she wore a blue brocade attire and a crown, exuding a scholarly air instead of an authoritative one.

Standing on the stone steps of the training grounds, she called out, "I will personally assess you today. Feel free to show me everything you've got. The deputy commanders must last at least 50 exchanges under my hand. If you can't, you'll all face special training. The other captains need to last 20 exchanges, and if you can't manage that, you'll face special training as well."

Her voice echoed clearly in everyone's ears. Some people laughed, while others furrowed their brows. Those laughing clearly had never witnessed Carissa's martial prowess, while those frowning included Alistair, Barrett, and a few other deputy commanders.

Lasting fifty exchanges against her was impossible.

In other words, attending this special training was unavoidable.

"I've also arranged for your special training instructor," Carissa said, casting a cold glance over the crowd. Once everyone fell silent, she called out for Violet.

When everyone turned, they were surprised to see a beautiful woman in red.

She was here to be their special training master? A woman?

Violet gestured for a chair to be brought out to the front. With a graceful sweep of her feet, she settled into the seat, her posture casual yet haughty.

She scoffed inwardly. She was here to accept apprentices today.

Naturally, Alistair was not pleased. He asked, "Commander Sinclair, you just said you would personally assess us. Are we supposed to take turns fighting you?"

"That's right!" Carissa affirmed.

"What weapons are we using?" Alistair asked, wanting to clarify first. He knew Carissa was proficient in wielding a spear.

Carissa replied, "Unarmed. It'll be about your techniques, footwork, and reactions."

Alistair was overjoyed. "Really? No backing out now."

Men were naturally stronger than women, and their reflexes were faster. Without weapons, lasting fifty exchanges with Carissa should be no problem. At most, he could win through sheer strength. After all, there was no way she could handle that many opponents at once.

Just as he was plotting to have the twelve captains wear her down one by one, Carissa called out, "Michael, you're up first."

Michael stepped forward and respectfully said, "I look forward to your guidance, Commander Sinclair." Inside, he was thrilled. He had witnessed Violet's skills on the Southern Frontier battlefield—she was impressive. If she could offer him guidance, his own martial arts skills would surely improve.

He steadied his stance, his fists raised in a defensive position.

"I'll let you have one strike!" Carissa declared. "Everyone will have the same opportunity."

Michael took her at her word. He spread his fists like claws and lunged for Carissa's shoulder. This move was meant to aim for the heart, but since Carissa was a woman, he couldn't do that. Instead, grabbing her shoulder would be enough to flip her over.

Michael was quick, but Carissa dodged effortlessly as his claws came in for the grab.

He spun around and swung his fist, and the two exchanged blows at a pace so fast that those watching struggled to count the number of moves that had passed.

However, Violet was counting. "Seven, eight, nine..."

Just as they reached the forty-second exchange, Michael finally caught hold of Carissa's shoulder.

He was elated!

But to his shock, she shook him off, causing his hands to tingle with numbness. He immediately released her and attempted to leap back, but was just a second too slow. Carissa landed a punch to his chin; as he stumbled backward, she followed up with a series of swift, angled kicks that sent him flying.

It took him a moment to gather himself as he got back on his feet. He rubbed his chest and suppressed the pain, then bowed and said, "I've lost."

He knew Carissa had been merciful. Considering their previous sparring matches on the Southern Frontier, there was no way he could have lasted more than 40 exchanges against her!

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Next up was each of the twelve captains, but none managed to last the full 20 exchanges against Carissa. They all fell short at around fifteen or sixteen exchanges.

Max put up a decent fight, making it through 40 exchanges before he was taken down. When he stood back up and bowed, he wore a satisfied smile—he felt proud of his performance.

Finally, it was Alistair's turn.

Alistair had been intently watching Carissa's moves. He felt like he had a good grasp on her patterns. He figured he could manage 50 exchanges without much trouble. His leg techniques were his strongest suit, and Carissa's kicks lacked the necessary power. On the other hand, her punches were incredibly fast. If he could focus on using his lower body, he believed he would hold the advantage.

He bounced on his feet a few times to stretch his muscles. "I'm up."

Carissa wore an enigmatic smile. "Yes, it's your turn."

For some reason, seeing that smile sent a shiver of unease down Alistair's spine. He couldn't shake the feeling that she was hiding some devastating technique just for him.

"First move is yours," Carissa offered, showing no signs of fatigue after the earlier rounds. She still looked as energized as when she had first started.

Seeing her take a slight stance, he knew she was ready. He feinted with a punch, then kicked toward her. As his foot aimed straight at her, he quickly changed direction mid-kick, targeting her chin. He executed the maneuver swiftly.

Most people would only block for their abdomen or chest, but Carissa read his intentions easily. She brought her elbows up, creating a solid guard in front of her. With a powerful thrust, she sent Alistair flying

back.

He stumbled backward, scrambling to regain his balance. He executed a backflip mid-air and landed on his feet. But before he could steady himself, a flurry of kicks came his way. He barely had time to brace himself, dodging and evading as best he could. Carissa lunged forward with a flying kick, twisting in the air to strike again.

With three or four consecutive kicks, Alistair felt his balance slipping. His insides felt like they were rearranging themselves, and he stifled a groan of pain.

This wasn't going to work—he needed a new strategy. Gritting his teeth against the discomfort, he closed the distance between them, narrowing their fighting range. This way, Carissa wouldn't be able to use her kicks effectively.

However, in his focus on her legs, he completely forgot about Carissa's superior punching skills.

In close combat, with no weapons involved, fists became the ultimate weapon.

A punch landed on his chin, another struck his cheek, and a third hammered into his skull. Alistair found himself unable to mount any sort of counterattack—everything was happening too fast. All he could do was shield his head and endure the blows..

Meanwhile, Violet counted off, “45, 46, 47...”

As

they reached the forty-eighth exchange, Carissa easily broke through his defense and raised her leg high in a swift motion. Her foot was level with her body, and she drove a kick at his chin, sending him flying backward.

It was the same technique he had tried to use earlier. He had the space to execute it, but Carissa employed it at close range, combining fluidity with overwhelming power. Alistair hadn't seen it coming and crashed to the ground.

Being unable to get up meant he had lost.

Members of the Royal Guard helped him to his feet. Alistair gazed at Carissa, his eyes filled with a mix of resentment and disbelief.

Both Michael and Max had managed to last over 40 exchanges against her, and while she had the upper hand, there had been a sense of back-and-forth in their fights. Even if it was hard for them, they were still trading blows.

But for Alistair, he felt like he had simply been a punching bag. He was unable to retaliate at all.

His martial arts skills were superior to Michael's and Max's, yet here he was, facing a humiliating defeat. This outcome proved that Carissa had gone easy on both of them, but with him, she had delivered a thorough beating.

At that moment, Alistair couldn't decide whether to feel vindicated or not. After all, he had endured 48 exchanges—one more than Michael. If everyone were blind, he could claim a victory over both Michael and Max. In that ridiculous scenario, his argument would hold water.

Carissa flicked her sleeves and stepped beside Violet.

“From now on, Violet will be your martial arts instructor. I hope you all remember to respect your teacher. Though you're not her apprentices, teaching is the same as mentorship, so you can all call her Sage Violet. She is more than capable of that.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

“But how skilled is she? Does she have the qualifications to teach us?”

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Violet smiled slightly before launching herself at Carissa, who sidestepped to avoid her, then grabbed her arm and pulled her back. In a split second, Violet executed a backflip and soared through the air.

The two exchanged blows for what felt like an eternity, their movements so swift that it was nearly impossible to follow. The sound of their strikes cut through the air like thunder, and on more than one occasion, their flying kicks shattered nearby flagstones into pieces, leaving the onlookers in shock.

Their match made everyone reconsider the earlier assessment—it felt like the true test was taking place right before their eyes. Based on what they were seeing now, Carissa could have easily taken them down in just a few moves.

After over a hundred exchanges, the two finally came to a halt, stepping back to catch their breath. Despite their intense battle, their appearances were only slightly disheveled.

Barrett watched from the sidelines, feeling a whirlwind of emotions. He had seen the power of both Carissa and Violet on the Southern Frontier battlefield, where their skills had been put to the test in real combat. Back then, it was all about strength, agility, and speed.

But this sparring session was different. It was raw talent, and their techniques were dazzlingly effective.

Seeing such formidable women made Barrett realize what a treasure he had let slip away. Recalling the words he had said to Carissa after returning from the expedition, embarrassment flushed his cheeks.

How had he found the nerve to say such things? He still couldn't quite grasp what had possessed him at the time.

Michael was the first to react. He immediately knelt and declared, "Sage Violet, please accept my greetings."

Max was taken aback for a moment, then quickly followed suit and knelt. "Sage Violet, please accept my greetings."

They were not merely acknowledging Violet as a martial arts instructor—they were genuinely accepting

her as their mentor.

Michael flashed a cheeky grin at Max. “Sorry, but I’m the eldest apprentice and your senior now.”

Max sighed, “You sly dog! I was a step behind.”

Alistair hesitated for a moment, then asked uncertainly, “Do we really have to accept her as our mentor?”

“No need for that,” Carissa replied coolly. “Whether or not she accepts an apprentice is up to her. She doesn’t take just anyone. She’s only here to help you improve your skills, so calling her Sage Violet is enough.”

“No way! We want to formally accept her as our mentor,” Michael insisted.

For those in the Mystic Army, advancing their martial arts skills was the only way to ensure their future.

Violet hadn’t planned on taking on any apprentices, but now that both of them had knelt, she felt obliged to accept them.

“Well, if you’re kneeling...” she began.

Before she could finish, Alistair quickly dropped to his knees and proclaimed, “Sage Violet, please accept my greetings!”

“I guess I’ll just accept... What?”

Violet almost stumbled over her words as she and Alistair had spoken at the same time. She had intended to only take on Michael and Max, and didn’t want to accept Alistair. The man was such an opportunist. He knelt just as she was speaking, catching her off guard,

Noticing Barrett stepping forward, Violet panicked at the thought of him kneeling too.

“Alright, I’ll take three apprentices and the rest can still learn from me. We’ll hold the formal apprenticeship ceremony in a few days. I have to leave now, I have matters to attend to.”

Barrett naturally wanted to learn martial arts. In the past, he had believed his skills were decent. But after witnessing the prowess of Carissa and her companions on the Southern Frontier, he understood what it meant when people said there were always greater heights and more skilled individuals in the world. However, he had no intention of accepting Violet as his mentor. She was just a young woman, headstrong and impudent. No matter how skilled she was, she was hardly fit to be someone’s mentor.

The thought of being a Crown Guard commander and kneeling before such a young woman was laughable. How could Barrett face his subordinates after that? Would he have any authority left?

Moreover, Violet wasn’t even an official sage. The distinction between an instructor and an official sage was significant.

As Violet hurried away, she realized she didn’t truly want apprentices, but Carissa was in charge of the Mystic Army. If Carissa’s soldiers weren’t skilled enough, everything would fall on Carissa’s shoulders.

Violet didn’t want to see her friend work herself to the bone.

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A couple of days later, Max and the other two prepared a formal banquet for the apprenticeship ceremony at Glimmering Tower. They invited Violet, along with Rafael and Carissa, to witness the occasion.

After returning home that day, Violet felt a wave of regret. How could someone like her, with such a temper, take on apprentices? Being tied down in that way felt stifling, especially since she was younger than them. It wasn’t that she couldn’t command respect—it just seemed unnecessary.

Wasn’t it enough to teach them a few things and be known as a sage?

She was thinking of ways to decline when they insisted on holding the banquet—at Glimmering Tower, no less. The extravagance of it was absurd and yet stirred a sense of vanity within her.

After contemplating it, Violet realized that since the Inferno Guild would eventually be in her hands, perhaps she might as well accept the role.

Once she came to this conclusion, she chose appropriate weapons for them. Then, she brought Rafael and Carissa along to the banquet.

After the three men bowed to her and presented her with wine, Violet said, “First off, don’t go around announcing that you’ve officially become my apprentices. Yes, you knelt before me that day in front of witnesses, but since there was no formal ceremony, it didn’t count. Now that we’re having this apprenticeship ceremony and feast, only the people here know about it. Outside, you can call me Sage Violet.”

The three men nodded obediently.

Violet then distributed the weapons she had brought for them. “Michael, you’re the eldest apprentice. I’ve seen your swordsmanship, and this sword will suit you well. Its name is Whispering Breeze. I hope you can advance in your sword skills.”

“Thank you, Sage Violet!” Michael accepted the sword with both hands, unable to contain his joy.

“Max, you’re the second apprentice. You usually use a knife, right? Amethyst Edge is for you.”

“Amethyst Edge?” Max was practically bouncing with excitement. “Thank you, Sage Violet! Thank you so much!”

There was no need to explain how much martial artists cherished their weapons. He used both swords and knives, but the dagger suited him perfectly.

“Alistair!” Violet called, her tone shifting as she turned to him.

Alistair knelt obediently. After going home that day, he had been wrestling with his thoughts. He had truly struggled with whether he had acted impulsively in taking a young woman as his mentor.

Would he be able to face anyone if word got out?

But seeing the exceptional weapons the others received, he felt a pang of regret for hesitating that day. He had let Michael and Max take the titles of eldest and second apprentices while he remained behind. Rubbing his swollen cheek, he recalled the pain he had endured during the assessment. His whole body ached and his lips were chapped, making it difficult to speak.

Yes, Sage Violet!” he managed to say, though his words were a little slurred.

Violet was initially reluctant to accept him. But seeing him, who once strutted about with his nose in the

air, now kneeling before her calling her Sage Violet, she softened a bit. After all, his skills were impressive, and he could support Carissa.

For her friend’s sake, Violet decided to tolerate him.

She handed him a sword, her tone considerably more serious than before.

“Your leg technique is good, but you need to hone your weapon skills. When the time comes to face a real enemy, you can’t always rely on bare hands.

“This sword is called Obsidian Dragon. It weighs 18 pounds but is incredibly sharp, and it’s able to slice through iron like mud. If you want to master your swordsmanship, you’ll need to enhance your inner force. Naturally, I’ll teach you all about inner force cultivation.

As the heavy sword landed in Alistair’s hands, he could hardly believe his luck.

He had certainly heard of the Obsidian Dragon sword before. It was forged by the legendary blacksmith, Hellbreaker. Many had tried to purchase it for a hefty sum but had ultimately failed.

So, the sword had ended up with the Spencer family.

All of his initial reluctance transformed into uncontainable joy, and he barely registered Violet mentioning she would teach them about inner force cultivation.

He unsheathed the sword, revealing its dark, glistening blade. A cold gleam radiated from its black surface, the sharpness of the edge visible to the naked eye.

Violet plucked a hair from her head and blew it toward the blade. To Alistair's astonishment, the hair was immediately severed. He was stunned.

It could cut a strand of hair in the air?! Goodness, he had really struck gold!

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After returning home from the apprenticeship ceremony and banquet, Violet turned to Carissa and said, "I can't shake the feeling that this whole apprenticeship ceremony was a farce. I wasn't even a good apprentice myself, and now I'm supposed to take on students—students who are older than me and from the Mystic Army, no less! If I can't teach them well, won't I just be dragging you down?"

Carissa took Violet's hand and motioned for Rafael to head back inside. She wanted to take a stroll with her friend in the garden.

"If you really don't want to do it, then just pretend the ceremony and banquet never happened. You can remain their instructor. As for whether you teach well or poorly, there's no need to worry. A mentor can only guide. The rest is up to the individual. Your skills are excellent, and you can certainly keep them in line. If they struggle to learn, that's on them, not you."

"It's just... They're court officials. Teaching them martial arts in the way of the martial world might not be appropriate," Violet replied.

"The king naturally wants the Mystic Army to grow stronger since it serves as a barrier for the city against threats," Carissa explained.

Violet murmured, "If it's that important, how can he trust you to manage the Mystic Army?"

"Because he knows there are conspirators yet to be uncovered, and he's aware that none of them are from the Hell Monarch's household."

Carissa didn't delve deeper. They had already discussed this in depth before.

"In the end, he wants us to help flush out that person. If that conspirator does manage to incite trouble, we can fight back and protect him."

“Still, when the threat is gone, the tools used to deal with it might be put away or forgotten,” Violet said lightly.

“When the threat is gone, it will be time for peace. We’re not greedy for power. Once the time is right, we can take the apprentices back to Meadow Ridge and enjoy a carefree life,” Carissa replied.

“You’re right, Meadow Ridge really is wonderful,” Violet said, recalling the carefree days she had spent there, filled with joy.

The capital might be prosperous, but it was riddled with schemes and deceptions.

“I do have my selfish reasons,” Carissa admitted, looking apologetically at Violet. “I want you to teach them martial arts because I’ve noticed Yuvan trying to get closer to Barrett. He may be looking to infiltrate the Mystic Army. Even though I’m the commander, the Royal Guard, Garrison Unit, Capital Guard, and Crown Guard have all operated independently in the past. I can’t expect them to be completely loyal to me right away.

“That’s not the problem, though. The issue is, as their superior, they won’t tell me who they associate with or discuss things in front of me. But as their mentor, you’ll be different. You’ll have a different approach. When you’re giving them lessons, there will be breaks. They’ll chat, and you can listen in. You’ll get a sense of whether anyone from Yuvan’s household has contacted them.

“Also, since you’re officially their mentor, you’ll have some authority over them. If something comes up, at

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least you can shout at them to pull back from the brink I’m not worried about Michael, but for Max and Alistair, we’ll have to see,” Carissa said.

The challenge suddenly felt more significant, and Violet found herself quite pleased.

“With that goal in mind, I can take on this role of mentor with a clear conscience. You know me, Carissa- I might not be a qualified teacher, but as a spy or eavesdropper? Now that’s my specialty! After all, Winona has a whole team dedicated to this for me.”

She added, "Of course, it's not under the direct banner of Skywing Spire. Everything we're doing right now, has nothing to do with them."

Carissa nodded. "For now, your main focus should be on Barrett. His brother-in-law, Oliver, is someone Yuvan is trying to win over. With Celeste gone to the Southern Frontier, I suspect she's already gotten

close to Oliver."

"Leave it to me!" Violet nodded firmly, then added, "But Barrett might not even want to learn martial arts. He doesn't have to take the exam this year."

"He will," Carissa replied with a smile. "He's currently the Crown Guard's commander. If he doesn't improve his martial arts skills, he'll struggle to hold onto it. Plus, he won't need to formally apprentice with you to train. So, he'll definitely come."

Violet frowned. "Asking me to teach him martial arts makes me a bit queasy."

Carissa comforted her, "You'll be teaching a big class, not one-on-one, so you won't have to deal with him, alone. Don't worry. It won't be too nauseating."

"For the sake of the bigger picture, I guess I'll just have to endure it. Ivy can give me something to my stomach," Violet said with a grin.

Carissa took her hand and said, "Thanks for your hard work, Vivi."

settle

Violet pulled her hand away and playfully slapped the back of Carissa's head. "What's with that? Don't say stuff like that!"

Chapter 826

Tonight at Hell Monarch Estate, everyone finally gathered for dinner.

Carissa was surprised to find that Kyle still hadn't returned to Meadow Ridge.

"Kyle, you haven't gone back yet? I thought you left already! I was wondering why you didn't even say goodbye!"

Kyle shot her an exasperated look and bumped her head with his knuckles. "You ungrateful brat! I've called out to you several times and you completely ignored me. I was wondering if I had offended you somehow. Turns out you just didn't see me."

Feeling a bit sorry for her, Rafael gently rubbed the back of Carissa's head as he explained, "She's been really busy lately, so she was probably deep in thought and didn't hear you calling her. Just a few words would've sufficed. You didn't need to get physical."

Rafael spoke with respect. After all, Kyle was still a sensor guild member, but there was a hint of grievance

in his tone.

Kyle chuckled. "It wasn't like I hit her hard. Besides, she's used to it. If anyone has roughed her up the most, it's still your mentor, Sage Everett."

Rafael paused for a moment, then said, "Sometimes, Sage Everett doesn't hold back either. I'll talk to him about it later."

Kyle sat down, his expression filled with comfort. His junior guild members truly made the best pair.

Rafael cared for Carissa deeply, even if she seemed a bit oblivious to it. But that was alright. Carissa was slowly coming around and learning to repay the kindness of others.

Jacob had brought out some wine, and the group settled down to eat together. Lately, the people in Hell Monarch Estate had been busy behind the scenes, though it hadn't been publicly acknowledged.

As the toasts flowed and laughter filled the air, the recent gloom of their cases seemed to dissipate.

Jacob, who excelled in both martial and scholarly pursuits, wanted to impress Kyle. So, he cheerfully suggested, “Since we have wine, why not play a game of Poetry Order?”

As soon as he said this, both Travis and Violet stood up and spoke in unison, “I’m full!”

Jacob furrowed his brow. “Full? Travis, you eat more than anyone else! You always fight it out at the dining table until the end, and you haven’t even cleared your plate yet.”

“I’m just not hungry today!” Travis said.

As he eyed the dishes on the table, he swallowed hard. The moment the game was mentioned, he felt like he could no longer afford to eat.

Carissa laughed and said, “Jacob, we’re fine with drinking, but let’s skip the games. Otherwise, Rod will be up in the middle of the night searching for snacks in the kitchen.”

Jacob finally caught on and laughed, “So, if Travis doesn’t want to play drinking games, why has Ms. Spencer also decided she’s full?”

As a mentor, Violet didn’t want to show any weakness. “I’ve been eating a bit too much lately and got a little tired of it. I’m just not that hungry right now.”

Jacob poured her a glass of wine, smiling as he said, “Alright then, we’ll skip the games and just enjoy the

wine.”

With a grin, Travis settled back down. “I may be tired of it, but I can still eat more.”

Violet shot Jacob an exasperated look. “We were having a perfectly good meal. Why make it so exhausting? I’ve returned all the literature knowledge I’ve learned to the teacher, so I’m done with the

brain work for now”

Jacob raised his glass. "It's my fault. I'll take three drinks as punishment."

Rafael shot him a warning glance. "Drink less. Your dad is in the capital now and your family is finally reunited, so you should hold back a bit."

"Of course, I'll drink less," Jacob replied cheerfully. "Ever since I returned, my grandfather and mom have been feeling much better. With my dad back in the capital and the family together, I've been well-behaved and have spent every day with them. Everyone is always smiling, which really puts my mind at ease."

Jacob had never been a heavy drinker, but he enjoyed his share, especially in the evenings, when he would often have a couple of drinks to help him sleep. The worries that had hung over him for so long had made it hard to rest, but now that the family was together, he figured it was time to drink a little less.

As they neared the end of the meal, Rafael asked Travis, "Any news from the surveillance on Hartstone

Estate?"

Travis had people keeping an eye on Hartstone Estate and was quick to respond, "There hasn't been much movement. They're basically staying indoors."

Kyle added, "Harvey is shrewd and cunning, probably far more so than Yuvan. He knows how to bide his time, while Yuvan is the restless one. Yuvan has the advantage of having someone like Wayne around to keep him in check. Otherwise, he would have already messed up."

"That's true. By the way, how is Liam doing these days? Rafael inquired.

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"The medicine has been delivered, but we haven't heard back yet on whether it's effective," Jacob said.

Kyle, who usually stayed out of political affairs, chimed in, "The situation in Westhaven is complicated right now. Crown Prince Edmund is acting as regent, but their king hasn't passed yet.

Half the old officials in the court oppose Edmund's aggressive policies. Even though Edmund was close with the late crown prince, Arthur, he completely disagreed with his methods. Liam was once a fervent supporter of Arthur, so I'm afraid the situation won't improve even if he survives."

The old king sure has a strong will to live." Violet remarked. "He's been on the brink of death for ages. What's keeping him alive and clinging to life?"

Kyle replied, "It's certainly the chaos in the country. Arthur had the support of the people, and the transition between the old king and the crown prince was almost complete. Now, with the late crown prince gone and a new one in place, the court is mostly filled with Arthur's supporters. Edmund doesn't even have Liam backing him, and nobody thinks highly of him. It's a complete mess. I heard a few days ago that the king couldn't eat anymore, so it wouldn't surprise me if he's already passed. We just haven't gotten the news yet."

"Has Winona sent you a message?" Carissa asked, surprised. Her senior guild member typically didn't involve himself in such matters.

"Yes, she has written to me."

"But-

Before Carissa could finish her question, Kyle looked at her with a teasing glint in his eyes. "But what? My junior guild member is already caught up in court affairs. Can I stand by and do nothing? Can everyone in Meadow Ridge remain uninvolved? Even if we keep a low profile, we still have to lend a hand."

Carissa felt a lump form in her throat. "I'm dragging you all into this. You've been enjoying such a carefree life in Meadow Ridge, and here I am, pulling you into the chaos. You used to lose yourself in painting and traveling, and now you're stuck in the capital because of me. I feel terrible about it."

Kyle reached out as if to pat her on the back of her head, but instead, he ended up coming into contact with Rafael's hand. Rafael had seen his movement and already placed his hand on Carissa's head.

Kyle couldn't help but chuckle. "There's more than one way to live a life. While it's great to enjoy life freely, taking on some responsibilities is part of being a man."

Carissa sniffled a little. “But I just don’t see you as a man.”

Kyle paused in surprise. “Is that an insult?”

“No, that’s not what I meant!” Carissa rushed to clarify. “I just think of you as a refined gentleman... who is also a man, of course.

Violet chimed in, “To be honest, I’ve always thought a real man had to be tall and muscular. You’re impressive, Kyle, but sometimes when you wear those loose clothes, I can’t help but think you look a bit fragile. You look like you couldn’t even crush a chicken with your bare hands!”

Carissa raised her chin proudly. “When it comes to martial arts skills, I’m the best apprentice in the Pathfinders Guild.”

“Not quite,” Travis interjected, looking up from his food to glance at Rafael. “He doesn’t spend much time at Meadow Ridge, but his martial arts skills are impressive. He’s also part of the Pathfinders Guild and is your junior guild member, so doesn’t that mean his talent is even greater than yours?”

Rafael immediately shook his head, “No, Carissa is definitely more talented. You shouldn’t say that, Travis. My skills are impressive because I’ve been practicing since I was three years old and have learned from over a dozen mentors. I’ve picked up the best from each of them.”

Being the best apprentice in Pathfinders Guild was something Carissa was most proud of. How could Rafael take it away from her?

Besides, what Rafael said was true. He had started training when he was just a child and had put in countless hours over the years. In his opinion, his diligence outweighed any natural talent, whereas Carissa truly had a gift for it.

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Rafael added, “Sage Everett once said that Carissa is the most naturally gifted apprentice he has ever seen. She can learn many techniques after just seeing them once.”

Kyle chuckled. “Sage Everett did say that, but you left out part of it—he also mentioned that she’s too lazy. All she thinks about is running around the mountains, climbing trees to poke bird nests, digging holes to catch snakes, and waving mouse tails to scare children.”

Travis' expression remained blank as he replied, "I'm one of those victims. She came at me waving at mouse tail, and when she threw the mouse at me, I ran back to my mentor crying. My mentor punished me, saying a man shouldn't cry. But the next day, she stormed over to the Pathfinders Guild to demand compensation."

Violet was familiar with the story and jumped in, "In the end, they reached an agreement and reduced the rent by a year."

Carissa's sentimental moment was abruptly cut off, and she felt embarrassed. "Why are you bringing up my childhood when we were talking about Westhaven? Enough of that. Let's eat!"

Travis put down his cutlery and looked at Violet. "They reduced the rent by a year? Really? How do you know that?"

"Because the Inferno Guild is also based in Meadow Ridge. How could we not know? The whole place is aware of it! Every year, when it's time to pay rent, your mentor sends you to spar with Carissa, right?"

Travis gasped in shock. "Are you saying that my mentor intentionally sent me to spar with Cari so I'd get beaten, and then she would confront Sage Adrian to get out of paying rent?"

Violet nodded seriously. "Yep, the whole Meadow Ridge knows about it."

Travis' face fell. "No way! My mentor is dignified and steady. How could she do something like that? I lose almost every time I fight with Carissa. My mentor says I get beaten because my skills aren't good enough, and if I can't practice well, I deserve to be punished."

Violet patted his shoulder. "Oh, you poor thing! You didn't know? But it doesn't matter. Thanks to all those punches you took, your guild hardly ever has to pay rent. Even when you do, it's just a little."

Carissa shook her head. "That's not right. Sage Adrian said he reduced their rent because their guild is so poor and struggling. Sometimes, he even sends them fabric and blankets. He taught us to always be willing to help others."

Violet shook her head. “No, that’s compensation.”

She and Travis turned their gazes to Kyle in unison. “So, what’s the story here?”

Kyle raised his glass, a charming smile lighting up his handsome features. “It’s a bit of both—compensation and help.”

Carissa and Travis exchanged glances, both feeling a bit downcast.

I can’t imagine the princess consort was once such a mischievous girl,” said Jacob, intrigued.

Rafael was slightly tipsy by now. His gaze was warm and dreamy as he spoke, “She wasn’t mischievous. She was like a little sprite who wandered into Meadow Ridge—lively and full of childlike wonder.”

Carissa was touched by her husband’s words.

But before the feeling could fully take root, Violet squashed it down by saying, “A sprite? Cari, he just called you a monster.”

Carissa shot her friend a glare. How could such a lovely compliment come out sounding so twisted from Violet’s lips?

Rafael glanced at Kyle, silently urging him to give Violet a playful smack on the back of the head.

Go on, do it!

Kyle pretended not to see Rafael’s frantic signal and popped a piece of dried mushroom into his mouth. He smiled and said, “Now that the case has reached a turning point, shouldn’t we consider moving forward with establishing a women’s academy while keeping an eye on Yuvan?”

Teaching and mentoring were Kyle’s top priorities. Plus, this time, the king was establishing a women’s academy in Carissa’s name, which made it more significant.

“Yes. We’re already scouting locations,” Jacob replied. The academy definitely can’t be set up at Hell Monarch Estate. One, it’s to avoid suspicion. Two, to prevent too many people coming in and out the estate, which could raise unfounded doubts. If I’m not mistaken, once the academy is established, ordinary girls won’t be able to attend—only the daughters of noble families will be allowed.”

Violet frowned. “What’s the point of that? Noble families just hire tutors to teach reading and writing, and then focus on women’s virtues and skills. Only a select few, like Rosalind, get to learn more.”

Carissa nodded. “Noble families are more likely to hire tutors because they have the resources, but most officials don’t. It’s a slow process—change takes time, Just like how meals are eaten one bite at a time. It’s too early to promote women’s education among the common folk.”

Given the presence of so many men, Carissa didn’t voice the unspoken truth—most men wouldn’t want women to be too educated. They feared it would threaten their positions.

Chapter 829

At Valor Estate, Viola gradually calmed down as her pregnancy progressed

However, Rebecca’s health continued to decline with the onset of winter. The more medicine she took, the more wan she appeared.

Sebastian still refused to come. Whenever Rebecca felt particularly unwell, she would complain that Viola lacked the skills of Carissa, who had truly vast connections.

Viola refused to indulge her mother-in-law. Not only did she not attend to Rebecca’s needs, she didn’t even bother to check on her. She left the older woman’s care entirely to Amelia, the eldest daughter-in-

law.

Rebecca lamented to Barrett, “You’re now the Crown Guard’s commander, yet you can’t even manage your own wife? She’s disrespectful and rebellious, and is always contradicting me. A poor choice in a wife can bring disaster for three generations!”

Barrett was in the midst of his career's ascent, and he didn't want to quarrel with Viola. Every argument left him drained and exasperated, so he had to comfort his mom while also asking Amelia to take better

care of her.

Amelia found herself in a bind.

"Taking care of Mother is my duty, Barrett. I'd do it even if you didn't ask, but I'm not well myself. Plus, the household finances are really tight. Your wife is running things without a care in the world, and the money is disappearing fast. We don't even have enough to buy the Snowdrop Pills for Mother next month. Maybe you could talk to your sister about it? After all, she's part of the Marquis of Ironridge's family now. Surely she has some funds?"

Barrett replied, "I'll find a way to get the money. There's no reason to have Serena manage our household

affairs."

Amelia sighed. "If that doesn't work out, let's sell some of our servants. With so many people to support, we need quite a sum of money for food every month. We also have to ensure everyone has appropriate clothes for every season."

"Please discuss that with Mom, Barrett said.

"If it were that easy, I wouldn't need to bring it up with you. Mother won't agree to sell off any servants, especially now that you've become Crown Guard Commander. It wouldn't be proper for the household to lack a certain level of decorum."

After a pause, Amelia continued, "Aurora's monthly allowance is non-negotiable. If she doesn't get it, she'll throw a fit—her tantrums can be worse than Viola's. We'll have to figure out how to cut expenses. To be honest, I've already sold everything I can."

Amelia felt a deep sense of helplessness. Each person was more formidable than the last, and she couldn't possibly confront them all.

Barrett waved his hand, his brow furrowing slightly. “Don’t mention her and don’t worry about her. As long as she doesn’t cause any trouble and stays in Blessed Haven, that’s all that matters.”

“Well, she’s lucky then, but I’m the one suffering,” Amella retorted, unable to suppress her frustration. “If it

weren’t for her, Carissa would still be here. Carissa could handle any burden on her own. She wouldn’t require as much effort as me to handle things.”

Barrett tried to keep the peace. “Please be understanding. Amelia. Now that Viola is pregnant, you’re the only one who can manage the household affairs.”

“Then, you’d better make sure I get the money to manage it,” Amelia replied, knowing she shouldn’t mention Carissa but was unable to contain her frustration. “Don’t blame me for speaking harshly, Barrett. When Carissa was here, everything at Valor Estate ran smoothly. We never lacked money. When Mother was ill, we had the best medicine and Sebastian was always available. And now? I truly don’t understand how Aurora can compare to Carissa in any way.”

As Barrett’s mind conjured up Carissa’s graceful features, his heart raced. He shook his head violently as if to dispel the thoughts.

“Let’s not dwell on the past. From now on, you’ll manage the family finances. I’ll turn over my monthly salary to you and you can oversee everything in the household.”

With that, he hurried away, desperate to escape.

He knew what he had lost, and understood that it could never be reclaimed. Yet, after taking office, his gaze would inevitably follow Carissa whenever he saw her in her official uniform.

Barrett couldn’t even face his own heart. It was only after losing Carissa that he felt regret and learned to cherish what he had. But by then, it was far too late.

Chapter 830

Back in their room, Viola was busy with some needlework. After her previous outburst, she had settled down quite a bit.

Barrett nervously informed her that he had given Amelia the authority of the household.

Viola shot him an annoyed look. “It should have been handed over to her in the first place. Not to mention, I’m pregnant now. Even if I weren’t, I shouldn’t be managing the household.”

Barrett let out a small sigh of relief. He sat down and looked at her. “Needlework is hard on the eyes. You really shouldn’t be doing it. Let Mom and the others handle it. I remember Poppy is good at sewing too. You can give it to her.”

“As a mom, I need to make a few things for the baby,” Viola replied, her face lighting up with a gentle smile. “Besides, even though there are three of you receiving salaries, it’s not easy to support a whole family. Mother still needs her medicine, so it’s better to save wherever we can.”

didn’t really

could

Barrett was puzzled by her sudden concern for frugality. Having servants do the needlework connect to saving money. But as long as she wasn’t upset and there were no conflicts at home, go on smoothly..

He didn’t aspire to great achievements anymore. He simply wanted a peaceful household and to keep his position.

“You came home early today, which is good. There are a few things we need to discuss. Now that my pregnancy is progressing, we need to find a wet nurse and we must hire the best midwife. Childbirth is always a perilous journey. You’ve heard about Lady Legna’s difficult labor, right? We need to head to Arcane Sanctum and stock up on some medicine. While we’re at it, we can buy Snowdrop Pills for Mother.

Barrett nodded, understanding the dangers involved in childbirth. “Sure. What’s the name of the medicine? I can pick it up on my way home tomorrow.”

“It’s called Evergreen Pills. It’s made from Evergreen Root and donkey-hide gelatin mixed with pain- relieving herbs. Get about seven or eight of them. If the pain becomes too intense during my labor and I start to lose strength, these pills will be the best remedy.”

“Okay, I’ll get them tomorrow. As for the midwife and the wet nurse, I’ll ask Amelia for help. She might know someone, or Aunt Charlotte might be able to assist.”

“Aunt Charlotte?” Viola scoffed. “I wouldn’t count on her. She doesn’t involve herself in household matters anymore. If she had a place of her own, she would have moved out long ago. Even with your promotion, she still looks down on you. I have no idea where she gets her confidence. No one in her branch of the family has accomplished anything.”

Barrett sighed. Viola knew that Charlotte was upset with his side of the family because of what happened. to Carissa.

“It’s not entirely her fault. Back then, our family was dealing with one mess after another. She’s a straightforward person, so she got angry with us because of it. Now that things have calmed down, I believe she would be willing to lend a hand.”

“No need! I wouldn’t bother her even if I needed help,” Viola replied, her tone a little irritable.

Noticing the anger creeping into her voice, Barrett decided not to push the issue. “Alright, then. If you don’t want her help, we can ask Amelia instead

.”

“I know I’m putting her out too, but once I have the baby, I’ll make sure to thank her properly.” Viola set down her needlework and stood up, stretching her back. “By the way, your salary has increased significantly, and there’s an additional bonus at the end of the year. You should give a third of it to the family fund and leave the rest for me to manage.

Barrett paused, surprised. “If Amelia is managing the household, then my entire salary needs to go i the family fund as well. Dad and Benjamin’s salaries go there too.”

into

Viola understood that Barrett wanted to take care of his family, but having a child changed things. She took a deep breath and said patiently, “Isn’t it enough that they contribute to it? We need to set aside some money for the baby. We can’t give everything to Amelia. What will we do when we need money ourselves?”

“Amelia gives us our monthly allowance, and anything the baby needs can be drawn from the family fund. The child’s food and clothes are given extra consideration.”

Viola was upset. “You have the highest salary, with an annual salary of 138 silver coins. Including your food allowance and year-end bonus, you’re bringing in 200 or 300 silver coins a year. Your father and brother’s salaries don’t even add up to 200 silver coins, Why should I put up with this? That won’t work.”

Barrett frowned. “So, what do you want me to do? We can’t just have Amelia manage the household without giving her any money.”

“Who says we’re not giving her any money? I told you to give her a third of your salary,” Viola shot back.

“How can a third be enough to cover the expenses? Besides, I’ve already promised her that I’d give her the money. If that’s not enough, we might need to sell off some servants. It should save some money if we’re not keeping so many people under our roof.”

Viola sneered. “Sell off servants? That’s something only desperate families do. You’ve been promoted and now want to sell off servants? If word of that got out, what would people think?”

Barrett could feel the tension rising again, and the flicker of hope for a harmonious home was suddenly extinguished.