

War Song 861

Chapter 861

Viola used to shirk responsibility, no matter how catastrophic the situation. She would always distance herself, portraying herself as helpless or innocent. But this time, she didn't refute Zoey's words. She merely wiped away the tears that kept falling

Zoey looked at Viola and sighed.

Benjamin was a shell of his former self—no longer a man of status, no longer with a wife, spending his days locked away in his room. Bryan was a disappointment, failing at both martial arts and academics. He wasn't someone they could rely on.

Charlotte's side of the family had washed their hands off them, and really didn't care anymore. She even ordered the construction of a wall to divide Valor Estate in two.

Barrett was the only one in this family who was able to do anything. In addition to his special training, he still came back to care for Viola. As the man of the house, he looked over the finances and realized just how dire their situation was.

The family was truly impoverished.

Four hours later, Tara personally brought two hundred silver coins to Zoey. She arrived in a hurry, out of breath, clearly having just come back from outside the estate.

From Poppy, Zoey had learned many things. Amelia had once asked Rebecca to pawn her jewelry, but she had refused and even yelled at Amelia for it. Now, due to her own illness and the need for medication, she had finally complied and agreed to pawn it.

Zoey was naturally willing to make the trip, but she knew it would be fruitless. She took Tara along, having the latter wear a veil and serve as a witness.

Upon arriving at Arcane Sanctum, Zoey introduced herself and requested to purchase Snowdrop Pills.

Since she was a new customer, a physician came over to ask, “Which of your household members is suffering from a heart ailment? The Snowdrop Pills require a diagnosis by our head physician, Sebastian, before a prescription can be issued. Please wait a moment while I fetch him to accompany you to Silverstone Estate.”

“Oh, is it really that complicated? If the diagnosis shows it’s not a heart condition, I can’t buy the Snowdrop Pills?” Zoey asked.

“That’s correct. The supply of Snowdrop Pills is limited, so we must ensure they go to those who truly need them,” the physician explained.

Zoey nodded. “Alright, I’ll come back tomorrow.”

After thanking the shop assistant, Zoey and Tara stepped out of Arcane Sanctum. The same shop assistant, Paul, suddenly rushed out after them, calling out to Zoey.

“Madam Zoey, I know you want to buy Snowdrop Pills for the Warren family’s matriarch—It’s possible, but we’ll only sell it to Madam Amelia,” he said, pretending not to know that Amelia had hanged herself. “If the Warren family wants to make a purchase, please have Madam Amelia come herself.”

Sighing heavily, Tara’s hand trembled as tears streamed down her face.

“Thank you,” said Zoey, turning and climbing into the carriage.

Tara followed, stepping up onto the footboard with a heavy heart.

After returning to Valor Estate, Tara accurately conveyed the message from Arcane Sanctum’s shop assistant—Amelia had to come in person to buy the medicine. Otherwise, they would need to find a heart patient who required Snowdrop Pills.

There were indeed people in the capital who needed Showdrop Pills, but they wouldn’t be willing to help a cruel mother-in-law who had driven her daughter-in-law to death. Anyone who got involved would be subjected to the same scorn.

The Warren family was currently being criticized harshly. Even the Hell Monarch's proposal to open an embroidery workshop for women cast out of their homes wasn't enough to divert the public's anger.

Most of the criticisms directed at the Hell Monarch came from men, but the outrage against Valor Estate and Rebecca was a national phenomenon. It was on a completely different scale. People would occasionally debate the Hell Monarch's actions, but the insults aimed at the Warren family and Rebecca were pure and unfiltered curses.

It got worse when news broke that Rebecca needed Snowdrop Pills, but Arcane Sanctum would only sell them to Amelia. The townsfolk erupted in talks of karma. Servants who overheard dared not report back, for fear that Rebecca would fly into a rage, and they simply left.

After listening to Tara's report, Rebecca remained silent for a long time. Zoey wondered if the older woman felt any regret at that moment, and suspected she did. Someone like her would only understand regret when their own life was in jeopardy.

Unfortunately, regret was the most useless emotion. It often came too late to change anything.

Zoey had said she would stay at Valor Estate to offer some support, but aside from caring for Viola, she merely watched coldly from the sidelines. She wasn't a compassionate person, and only sought to act in a way that was true to her conscience.

She knew she could buy Snowdrop Pills through Carissa. But if she did, Amelia would never forgive Zoey- even in death.

Chapter 862

Meanwhile, Barrett took decisive action and prepared to sell off several servants. The Warren family was on the brink of collapse. His eldest brother had lost his position, the second branch of their family had split off, and it was uncertain when Barrett himself would be reinstated.

The only option left was to cut back wherever possible.

Typically, noble families avoided selling off their servants. There were always unsavory secrets lurking within the estate. It was one thing if the servants were sold to a good household, but if they ended up with a cruel family, they would surely harbor resentment and spill all the dirty secrets when they could.

So, noble families were usually cautious about such actions.

But what secrets did the Warren family still have that weren't already known?

Barrett no longer cared. The vilest curses were already on the lips of the townsfolk every day. What more could he fear?

He had never understood Amelia until he truly took over her position. Now, he finally grasped the weight of her burdens.

Barrett's feelings for Viola were now complicated. His heart ached for the loss of their child, but he was also angry at his wife's quarrels with Amelia. He wanted to ask about the miscarriage, but bringing it up would likely hurt her more, so he kept his mouth shut.

Rebecca's health continued to deteriorate. The physician said it was impossible for her to last until the New Year.

It was just a matter of time.

Barrett sent someone to summon Serena back to see their mother, but she didn't return. She hadn't come back when Amelia died to avoid any bad omens. Now that everyone outside was cursing the Warren family, Serena didn't want to wade through that mess.

Apart from Tara, there was almost no one left by Rebecca's side.

Death and despair were like a tightening noose, locking her heart in the grip of panic over her own mortality.

On Midwinter's Dawn, a traditional holiday marking the shortest day and longest night of the year, there was no family meal to celebrate together.

Rebecca, who could barely rise from her sickbed, held Tara's hand and cried. "Go to Hell Monarch Estate and fetch Carissa. I have something to tell her."

Tara sighed. "Lady Carissa won't come, Madam Rebecca."

“You tell her I was wrong... Rebecca’s eyes were glazed over, her sunken cheeks making her look even more bitter. “I was wrong.”

Tara sat on the edge of the bed, wiping her tears.

“What good does it do to realize your mistakes now? When Lady Carissa was in the family, you had a luxurious life. You had everything—jewels, silks, and satin. Sebastian even came to your door personally.

Your condition was already critical back then. If it hadn’t been for Lady Carissa calling for Sebastian, you would have been gone long ago.”

“Tell her... I was wrong. I admit my mistakes. I want her to call...” Rebecca took a deep breath. “Call for Sebastian.”

Tara looked at Rebecca. Despite having spent most of her life by the latter’s side, she felt an Icy wave of disappointment wash over her at that moment. Tara had hoped Rebecca truly understood her errors, but it seemed she only recognized that Carissa was her last hope for survival.

“I won’t go,” Tara said softly.

Rebecca’s eyes widened in shock. “You.... you’re just going to watch me die? How cruel of you!”

Rebecca gasped for air, the sound of her struggle echoing in the dim room. She felt like a candle burning at both ends, waiting for death to claim her.

Yet, she had no reliable ally—no one was willing to help her.

As for Carissa and Rafael, they made no response to the scorn directed at them from outside.

Let everyone vent their frustrations for now.

At the second morning court session, the motion failed to pass.

During the third morning court session, the number of critics had increased. It seemed the court officials were discussing this matter in private and had banded together to oppose Rafael.

This time, the prince merely said, "Only a husband who mistreats his wife and is cruel to his family would oppose this proposal. I wonder if any of you here fall into that category?"

After a moment of silence, voices of dissent rose in response.

"How shallow of you to view the issue this way! This goes against the principles of propriety! Such arrogance from His Highness shows he has no regard for our ancestors' teachings."

"You're avoiding the crux of my question," Rafael replied coldly.

"Once a woman marries, she leaves her family to join her husband. Being divorced and kicked out of the family is shameful. If such a thing brings no disgrace and someone takes her in, it could lead them to dangerous thoughts. That could damage one's family honor and ultimately cause chaos in the world," another official retorted.

Finally, Davis stood up and asked, "What about women who are accepted back by their families after being divorced by their husbands? How is that different from being given refuge by someone else?"

Immediate rebuttals followed.

"It's not the same! Even if they return to their families, they'll be looked down upon and life will be hard for them. That's why they weigh their options carefully."

"How can you say it's the same, Mr. Lloyd? Are you even a man?"

Chapter 863

"Of course I'm a man!" Davis replied. "But while men can act recklessly taking multiple wives, passing on their lineage, and relying on their wives to care for them even when they're afflicted with

illness-there's no chaos in the world. So, why is it that when a woman is cast off and finds a place to be sheltered, it somehow leads to disorder?

Why are you so afraid of giving women another chance at life? No one wants to take that step unless they have no choice. Do you all wish to force them into such a position? If not, then what is it that frightens you?"

Davis had remained silent until then, but once he spoke, he did so with purpose, having been instructed by his family to lend unwavering support to Rafael.

Carissa listened quietly from her seat in court, but didn't speak. As a woman, the backlash would be even stronger if she spoke on behalf of women. After all, what someone chose to do or say was often influenced by personal interests or gains.

No matter how eloquent Carissa was, she couldn't match their verbal sparring.

So, she could only wait for Salvador to call on her.

As expected, just as Rafael and Davis were embroiled in a heated debate with the other ministers, Salvador cleared his throat lightly and turned to Carissa.

"Carissa, I would like to hear your opinion."

Carissa appeared as if she had suddenly been called out. When everyone looked at her, she had a completely bewildered expression. But she quickly composed herself, stepping forward and nodding respectfully.

"Your Majesty, I don't have any grand theories to share. However, from a woman's perspective-and as someone who has once been divorced-I would like to express my thoughts. I wonder if the esteemed ministers would like to hear them?"

A wave of curiosity swept through the court. The fact that Carissa had been divorced piqued everyone's interest, and the arguments momentarily ceased as they awaited her words.

Some who held respect for Carissa couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy-she was about to reveal her own scars.

Salvador's gaze softened as he urged, "Go ahead."

"A woman's marriage signifies the beginning of a second life. We don't need to live in luxury. We're willing to share our fortunes and misfortunes with our husbands. Unless we're treated as outsiders, humiliated, and mistreated by our in-laws, we would never want to leave. Whether you gentlemen acknowledge it or not, you cannot deny the fact that this world is inherently unfair to women.

"You worry that opening the embroidery workshop will provide refuge for discarded women and grant them a backup plan, and that this will lead them to act tyrannically within their marriages or even cause chaos. But have you considered that as long as they have their husbands and children by their side, they would prefer to endure hardships rather than leave? The workshop will only offer them the bare necessities-simple food and plain clothes-

which they'll have to earn through hard work. This is merely a better option than retreating to a monastery or facing a dead end. It's not a desirable choice.

"Who would choose such a path unless they were truly desperate? I believe your concerns are unfounded. All of you are capable men. How can you deny a desperate woman a chance at survival? Moreover, this isn't a unique idea for Starhaven. The kingdom of Velrune has already implemented it. They even have a women's self-defense group. With that said, how can we let ourselves fall behind?"

Carissa spoke with a tone of respect and humility, her voice soft and warm, soothing to those who listened. The gentleness of her words was disarming, leaving those who opposed the opening of the embroidery workshop momentarily at a loss for words. Some even found themselves swayed by her logic.

Carissa continued, "I'm sure everyone has heard the rumors about the circumstances surrounding the late Madam Amelia from the Warren family. She first attempted to drown herself, and after she was rescued, she hanged herself. This clearly showed how desperate she was to die.

"If she had even the slightest chance of survival or another way out, she wouldn't have forsaken her children in such a manner. Her natal family lives far away, and there was no one she could turn to in the capital. Furthermore, she didn't have any viable skills to sustain herself.

"I'm sure her parents raised her with the belief that as a married woman, she only needed to follow her husband's lead and care for her children to live a stable life. So, she managed the household and

cared for her ailing mother-in-law day and night. But in the end, we've all seen the tragic end she met."

Chapter 864

Carissa's voice rang clear, neither too loud nor too soft, ensuring that everyone in the hall could hear her.

'Perhaps some of you believe that Madam Amelia's death is trivial, but what if she were your sister, daughter, or relative? Would you be able to empathize a little more? After all, everyone here has studied the teachings of the sages, and you're all compassionate toward the elderly and the weak. Many women are divorced because of serious illness or infertility. They were innocent, to begin with.'

Carissa sighed, her expression heavy with sorrow.

"A woman's life is still a life. Are we truly in a world that seeks to exterminate them?"

What if she were your sister, daughter, or relative?

Many people scoffed inwardly at Carissa's words. Yet, her mention of the teachings of the sages cast a moral shackle on them. How could they argue against that? Any rebuttal would make them seem unreasonable, as if they were out to destroy women completely.

If these words had come from a man, it would have been easier to counter. But they were spoken by a woman—the only woman in the hall—at Salvador's behest.

Carissa had expressed sentiments filled with compassion, speaking on behalf of women. Who could counter that without appearing to bully her? It would be shameful for so many officials to gang up on a lone female official, especially when it was the king who had called on her to speak.

For a moment, the grand hall fell into a heavy silence. Though some faces displayed discontent, no one dared to argue with Carissa.

Seeing this, Salvador recognized that the moment was ripe. It was time to move forward with the plan. It was necessary to remove any remaining obstacles. After all, Velrune had set a precedent. Starhaven could not afford to fall behind.

“Since there are no objections, let us try it out,” he declared. “While the court will not provide funding, the embroidery workshop must operate under government supervision. It shall not exploit or mistreat women, and all the money earned will belong to them. Should I learn that the people of Hell Monarch Estate intend to profit from these women or exploit them for personal gain, I will be the first to take action against you.”

Rafael knelt on one knee. “You are benevolent, Your Majesty. I thank you for your grace.”

Finally, they had succeeded. A smile crept onto Carissa’s lips. She hurriedly hid it by lowering her head, anxious that someone might notice her joy.

Amidst her joy, she felt a twinge of sadness. If only the embroidery workshop had been established sooner, Amelia might still be alive.

Davis raised his voice to say, “Your Majesty is wise and benevolent. I hold you in the highest regard. Women are inherently weaker. As men, it is our duty to protect them. If they find themselves at their wit’s end, should we not allow them even one path to survival? If we don’t, what difference is there between us and beasts that prey upon the helpless?”

His words carried a righteous weight, pleasing Salvador with their sentiment.

Rafael inwardly gave Davis a thumbs-up. It was clear Hannah had trained a wise husband.

Salvador gave a rare smile and announced, “Court adjourned!”

As Rafael and Carissa exited together, they exchanged a lighthearted touch of their thumbs and shared a knowing smile.

They each had their own duties—Rafael needed to return to the Supreme Court, while Carissa was due for her shift. They entrusted Jacob with the task of managing the official processes, and they would reconvene that evening to discuss details.

The public still harbored some resistance to the changes, so they needed to find storytellers and scholars to spread positive sentiments. The existence of the embroidery workshop would not

adversely affect the common folk, as it was simply a refuge for abandoned women—unless, of course, the men were contemplating divorcing their wives.

Once most of the arrangements were in place, Rafael thought it was time to celebrate. Not a grand celebration with everyone, but a small one with just him and Carissa.

It was a rare chance he and Carissa had a day off the following day, and New Year was approaching. He planned to take her to Glimmering Tower for a nice meal, then to Richspire Peak to enjoy the scenery. He had wanted to take her there for a long time.

After hearing his plans, Carissa paused for a moment before asking, “Are you sure you want to go to Richspire Peak?”

Rafael’s eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. “Absolutely! It’s supposed to be stunning there. Thomas said if you don’t go, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

“Alright.” Carissa nodded.

She looked at her junior guild member, who had never spent a winter in the mountains. It was rare to see him so animated, especially after the heaviness of recent events. Perhaps a trip to a place filled with beauty would do them both some good.

Chapter 865

The next day, the young couple set out. Rafael pretended to ask Violet if she wanted to join them,

Violet shot him a puzzled glance. He had already said last night that he was taking Carissa out for the day. He also specifically said they would be going alone and leaving everyone behind, even Dylan. Wasn’t it a bit fake to ask her now?

Even if Rafael hadn’t mentioned it, Violet wouldn’t have gone. She had her hands full dealing with the embroidery workshop, which was still under renovation. It made sense for her to keep an eye on things. Besides, if her supervision wasn’t needed, she could always accompany Helen out to a coffeehouse and indulge in some shopping and dining. After all, there were lovely places like Glimmering Tower and The Golden Tower to explore.

Why venture out into the cold and face the biting mountain winds when there was so much to enjoy right here?

At Glimmering Tower, Rafael ordered a selection of dishes. They were all staple dishes and nothing extravagant, but Glimmering Tower had a knack for elevating the simplest meals to perfection. Since they would be climbing a mountain soon and the weather was chilly, he also ordered a bottle of mulled wine. The private room they were in was cozy, warmed by a charcoal fire.

Carissa let her husband take charge. Today, he made all the decisions while she simply admired how handsome he looked.

His white fox fur coat was draped over a nearby rack, Rafael was dressed in a blue brocade coat adorned with cloud and wave patterns, its narrow sleeves and high collar framing his face beautifully. His skin had lost its sun-kissed hue, looking much fairer now, giving him an elegant, scholarly air. Only the sharpness of his dashing brows reminded people that he was a military general.

Suddenly, Carissa recalled the first time she saw him on the battlefield, looking like a wild man with his unkempt beard. During strategy meetings, she often found herself staring at it, wondering if the ends would split when it grew long enough.

A laugh escaped her lips. "I really can't understand how the man you are now is the same one I knew at

the Southern Frontier."

"I looked better back then," Rafael replied, a grin tugging at his lips. "A man needs that kind of grit to have a presence."

"You looked fine then, and you also look fine now," Carissa said, reaching out to stroke his face. Her fingers glided over his skin, which no longer felt rough and rugged.

Rafael gazed at his wife, surprised at her rare display of affection. Feeling the heat of her palm against his cheek, his heart swelled with warmth.

It was clear that spending time alone together was necessary for their relationship to flourish. Lately, they had both been so busy. When Carissa returned home, she practically collapsed into bed. Even if Rafael wanted to do something for her, he wouldn't dare disturb her rest.

He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss on her face. The fragrance of her clothes mingled with his, both carrying a light, deep water scent. Though he had the same scent, hers intoxicated him in a way that

made his heart flutter.

Once they finished their meal, the couple set off toward the mountains. There was still some snow at the base, but it wasn't deep. The path was fairly easy to navigate, allowing the horses to manage well.

Not long into their journey, however, the trail began to deteriorate. The biting wind stung their cheeks as the weather took a turn for the worse.

Rafael began to doubt himself. Was this outing really a good idea?

But they had already come this far, and Thomas had raved about the breathtaking scenery. With the added snow, the mountain views would be even more stunning.

His spirits lifted at the thought, and he said, "Let's tie up the horses here and walk the rest of the way. If you can't keep up, I'll carry you."

"I can walk just fine," Carissa replied.

She felt that it wouldn't be a problem to tie the horses here. Given the weather, it was unlikely anyone else would be heading up the mountain. Even if someone did, Lightning and Rafael's horse, Skyhawk, weren't horses anyone could just lead away.

Once they secured the horses, they took each other's hands and ventured up the mountain. The trail was indeed challenging. It was narrow, covered in thick snow, and obstructed by many dry thorny vines.

Several times, the thorns snagged Carissa's clothing, prompting Rafael to awkwardly explain, "This mountain doesn't see many visitors, so the paths aren't well-kept. But trust me, once we get higher, the views will be worth it."

"Of course, I trust you," Carissa replied with a smile, her cheeks flushed from the cold.

Chapter 866

The further they ascended the mountain, the more Rafael felt that something was off.

There were no vibrant mountain flowers or rushing streams as Thomas had described—only bare trees and endless stretches of white snow. At this time of year, the waterfalls had all but disappeared, leaving behind the starkness of early winter.

It wasn't that the snow wasn't beautiful. After spending so long at the Southern Frontier, the prince had grown weary of snow. If only there were flowing water and winter blooms to complement the landscape, it would have made all the difference.

But there was nothing—not a single orchid to be found. It was almost laughable.

However, to the north of Richspire Peak, there was a steep slope covered in unblemished snow, free of obstacles. It was a perfect spot for sledding and skiing.

Changing his approach, Rafael led Carissa with a burst of energy, using his Lightfoot Skill to dash across to the northern slope. Reaching the peak, he caught his breath and turned to his wife, his excitement palpable.

Isn't it still beautiful? Let's wait for the sunset, and afterward, we can ski down. It'll be so much fun!"

Carissa lifted her gaze and nodded.

The view was indeed a striking expanse of white and bare branches, exuding a grandeur and desolation that held a unique beauty. If only it weren't so cold...

The north wind whipped against her cheeks like a knife, and her ears felt almost numb from the chill. Though the hood of her cloak could be pulled over her head, the wind still managed to sneak in around the edges.

Yet, Carissa smiled at Rafael and replied, "Okay, let's sit here and wait for the sunset."

It was rare for him to show such enthusiasm for something elegant, so she wanted to indulge him and

keep him happy.

It was probably around five in the evening, meaning they would need to wait for at least two hours before the sun began to set—assuming they would even be able to see it in the heavy overcast sky.

She glanced at her handsome junior guild member. She would trust him with her life, but she suspected he was only joking about skiing. The slope was quite steep, and skiing would require proper skis.

Rafael had assessed the terrain and pressed the snow, deciding that with their cloaks as makeshift pads, they could slide down if they gained enough speed. After all, that was how he had done it back at the Southern Frontier.

Sitting together in the snow at the mountaintop, Rafael wrapped his arms around Carissa, trying to share warmth.

It was too cold; the wind howled fiercely, leaving little room for any feelings of beauty or tenderness. Instead, all of their inner force was focused on resisting the cold.

Carissa buried her head in Rafael's embrace, thinking she must be out of her mind to be waiting for a sunset on a day this cold. After a while, she felt her body growing stiff from the chill and glanced up at the

sky.

"It doesn't look like there will be a sunset tonight. Why don't we head back down?" she suggested.

Rafael stood up and surveyed the sky, which was a heavy, oppressive gray. The sun was hidden behind the clouds, stingy with its warmth. He felt somewhat deflated. He had originally hoped to bring Carissa here for a fun outing, but now, all he could think about was how much more comfortable it would be to curl up together by the fire back at home.

"Alright, then," he said reluctantly. "I'll try sliding down first. You just stay put for now."

Carissa's eyes widened. "Are you really planning to slide down like that? The slope is too steep, and we don't have skis!"

"It'll be fine," he replied confidently. "We always did this at the Southern Frontier. It wasn't just me. Many soldiers would do the same when chasing the enemy. We'd slide down steep snow-covered mountains- it was faster that way!"

He lowered himself slightly, turning to face Carissa. He caught a mouthful of the icy wind, yet he still smiled.

"Come on, give me a little push. Let me test the waters "

"Are you sure?" Carissa glanced down the slope, where the drop seemed endless and steep. "If you can't stop, you'll just tumble straight down!"

With complete assurance, Rafael replied, "Don't worry. Even if I fall, my Lightfoot Skill is like having wings. Worst case, it's like chicken wings-I'll flap around a bit and steady myself."

Seeing his confidence, Carissa recalled how many steep slopes they had faced at the Southern Frontier. He must have experience.

With her hands on his back, she pushed him gently. He used his arms to brace against the ground, kicked off, and shot down the slope with a whoosh.

He soared down, exhilaration washing over him. Just as he felt everything was going smoothly and planned to stop and turn back to take her with him, he suddenly realized the ground beneath him had dropped away.

He hadn't noticed that the slope had a dip hidden beneath the snow.

He was sliding too fast. When his body hit the dip, he was launched into the air. In a panic, he couldn't regain his balance. He tumbled several times and plummeted straight down.

Carissa stared in shock as he disappeared from view.

Didn't he say that having his Lightfoot Skill was like having wings?

Now, he was just... plummeting downwards!

Wasn't that tragic?

Terrified, she quickly kicked off her shoes and crouched down, stuffing her hands into them. With her body pressed against the icy surface, she followed after him.

Skiing was second nature to her. She had been doing it for years at Meadow Ridge. While wearing shoes

made it awkward, she could channel her inner strength to glide straight down if she held them in her hands.

Chapter 867

It was both frustrating and amusing.

Carissa supported the limping Rafael as they slowly made their way down the mountain. His hair was a mess, sticking up in a strange, wet clump after hitting the snow, creating an odd, wild look.

His face was a patchwork of bruises-blue, purple, and red. The red came from a cut that had bled, luckily, the wounds were shallow and, combined with the cold, had stopped bleeding quickly. A lump the size of an egg swelled on his forehead, a sight that was both pitiful and funny.

Fighting, strategizing, and governing were all his strengths, but games like this? He was utterly lost. Sliding down the slope had turned into a comical disaster.

Who knew skiing could be so hazardous?

Everyone knew not to underestimate water, but mountains could be just as treacherous- especially mountains that only got covered with snow during the coldest days of winter, hiding sharp rocks

just beneath the surface. The terrain here was nothing like the Southern Frontier, and back then he at least had armor. Here, he had none.

Rafael was mortified. He never expected that a simple act of skiing could result in such a humiliating tumble. He had hoped for a rare day off to bond with Carissa and create some meaningful memories they could cherish when they were older.

Well, this was certainly unforgettable. Carissa would likely remember this day for the rest of her life.

"Your foot hurts, doesn't it?" she asked, noticing his worsening limp.

"It's not too bad," he replied, turning his head slightly. "Honestly, you don't need to help me. I can manage on my own. Having you support me makes it seem like I'm disabled."

Carissa held on tighter, a playful pout in her tone. "No, I want to walk with you like this."

If this had been any other time, Rafael would have been thrilled. But right now, he felt defeated and utterly helpless, plus there was an excruciating pain in his foot. He suspected he might have fractured a bone. Otherwise, it wouldn't hurt this much.

With Carissa supporting him, at least he could lean on her a little, making the trek down the mountain a bit more bearable.

He couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't reacted in time to stabilize himself and leverage that moment to spring up. His once-proud Lightfoot Skill had utterly failed him.

In that instant of chaos, all he could think about was how embarrassing it would be for Carissa to witness him fall. Then, his reflexes had betrayed him, and he had rolled down the slope instead.

Rafael lifted his heavy gaze to the equally heavy sky. The only thing he felt grateful for was that the trek up the mountain had taken so long, while the descent was swift-though perhaps a bit too swift for comfort.

Lightning and Skyhawk waited for them at the base of the mountain. Rafael kept his eyes downcast, and as he caught sight of his trusty mount, a wave of frustration washed over him. He wanted to bury his face in Skyhawk's mane and weep.

Alas, he couldn't do that. He felt the sting of tears welling up in his eyes as he swung himself onto the horse, trying in vain to tame his wild hair. The more he struggled, the worse his mood became.

Carissa glanced at him, wanting to offer some words of comfort-but nothing seemed appropriate given how ridiculous he had looked during his fall.

"Maybe we should come back in the spring. I bet this place will be filled with blooming flowers then," she suggested.

"Yeah." Rafael nodded, though a thousand thoughts of refusal chummed in his mind.

Tonight would be perfect for a thunderstorm to strike Richspire Peak and erase it from existence. He never wanted to set foot here again.

As they entered the city, Rafael became acutely aware of the curious stares he received due to his bizarre hairstyle and the colorful bruises on his face. He felt a swell of indignation, but forced himself to act nonchalant as he rode alongside Carissa back to Hell Monarch Estate.

Upon their arrival, Dylan happened to walk out just as they approached. The moment he saw Rafael, his jaw dropped in disbelief. As realization struck him, he burst out laughing.

"Oh my god! Your Highness, what happened to you? This... Hahaha!"

Though Dylan felt a twinge of sympathy for Rafael, the sight was too comical to resist. He swore he was trying to hold it together, but it was impossible not to laugh.

Rafael shot him a dark look, his expression thunderous. Dylan's laughter quickly faded from hearty chuckles to awkward silence as he clammed up.

Carissa shot Dylan a glare of disappointment.

Seriously? Couldn't he show a little awareness?

Chapter 868

After Jacob had sent Dylan off to sweep the courtyard as punishment, Livius from Arcane Sanctum arrived. He was Sebastian's sixth apprentice a young, exceptionally skilled physician. He usually stayed at Arcane Sanctum and seldom made house calls.

Since Rafael was injured, Sebastian had specifically dispatched Livius to conduct a thorough examination to ensure that nothing vital had been harmed. Rafael was young and still without children. On top of that, he was taking contraceptive medication. How could Sebastian not be worried for him?

As Helen and Violet returned from shopping, they heard the news about Rafael's injury, prompting Helen to hurry over.

Livius was already treating the prince when Carissa noticed Helen's arrival and quickly greeted the older woman.

"Hello, Mother."

Helen responded with a brief acknowledgment, her eyes immediately searching for her son. Rafael hadn't had a chance to bathe after returning home, so his hair remained tousled. Upon seeing his bruised face and the swollen lump on his forehead, Helen couldn't help but laugh despite her concern.

"How...how did you end up looking like this? Weren't you just going up the mountain to enjoy the snow?"

Carissa spoke softly, "Mother, Raf had a little accident and fell."

"I see," Helen said, taking another look at her son's face. That... really does sound quite careless."

Violet hadn't entered the room, Jacob had said that Rafael's leg was injured, which meant he would have to roll up his trousers for Livius to treat him. It wouldn't be appropriate for Violet to see the bare legs of her friend's man.

Why didn't you call for the household physician?" Helen asked.

"He's out today," Carissa replied.

"Is that so? We should have at least two physicians available at all times in the estate, Helen noted as she observed the swelling of Rafael's leg, which the young physician was wrapping a bandage around. "Is the injury serious?"

"His Highness has a fractured bone in his calf, but it's not a major issue, Livius answered. After applying medicine and resting for 10 days, he should be fine. As for the other injuries, those are just superficial wounds that will heal in a few days. However, he should avoid getting the injured foot wet for now."

Carissa expressed her gratitude, "Understood. Thank you, Livius."

Livius nodded slightly, then suddenly said softly, "Rest assured, Your Grace. I just checked His Highness' heart rate, and there doesn't seem to be any damage elsewhere."

"Elsewhere?" Carissa didn't quite grasp it at first. "You can tell that from checking his heart

rate? If there's an injury, can't you just ask him where it hurts? He should know where else pains him, right?"

Livius smiled. "Some injuries might not cause immediate pain, so a check like this is necessary. Of course, it doesn't catch everything. If His Highness feels uncomfortable anywhere, he should let me know."

"I see." Carissa found that a bit odd. She glanced at Rafael. "Do you feel any discomfort anywhere?"

"Not at all."

"That's good." Carissa nodded and turned back to Livius. Then, there shouldn't be any other injuries. Did Sebastian specifically send you over because he was worried Raf might have hurt something?"

"In a fall like this, it's quite possible to injure the lower back or a major pressure point in that area, which could affect fertility. That's why my mentor thinks we should be extra careful, Livius replied.

Helen's face turned pale at the mention of fertility. "We need to take a good look, Rafael! If you feel any discomfort, you must tell the physician. Does your backside hurt? I've heard that falling on your rear can impact having children."

Rafael's face flushed with embarrassment, and he quickly interjected, "Thanks, Livius, but I need to bathe now. You should head back."

"Remember not to wet the wound," Livius advised. "I'll come by tomorrow to change the dressings."

"Okay, thank you for your hard work," Carissa said.

She escorted Livius to the door and called for someone to see him out.

Meanwhile, Helen continued to press Rafael, 'Don't be shy! If you've injured that area, you must let the physician know. We can't afford to delay anything.

Rafael gritted his teeth and growled, "I haven't! Just stop asking!"

Helen flinched at his tone. "Why are you being so fierce? I'm only worried about you! it's been so long, but you haven't gotten Carissa pregnant. She's healthy enough to bear children, but with you off fighting all the time in the past, who knows if it's affected anything?"

Chapter 869

Carissa hurried back inside, soothing Helen and sending her on her way.

Even after stepping outside, Helen continued, 'It's true! You're married now, so what's there to be shy about? When you were younger, you used to tell me everything! I still remember the time a mosquito bit you down there, and you stripped off your pants so I could apply medicine..."

"Mom!" Rafael's roar echoed through the room.

Carissa quickly called for Violet to take over leading Helen away, and instructed Qiana and Sydney to prepare hot water. Carissa would wash Rafael's hair herself.

Since he couldn't soak in the hot springs, he sat in the bath chamber, leaning forward as Carissa washed his hair while trying to avoid getting his feet wet. Though he felt a bit useless, the sensation of her fingers massaging his scalp and working through his hair brought a warm, sweet happiness amid the embarrassment.

He comforted himself with the thought that if it weren't for this injury, he wouldn't be receiving such special treatment. The last time he was hurt, Dylan had been the one helping

him.

Once his hair was clean, Carissa dried it off.

After a moment, Rafael muttered, "Mom's talking nonsense. You shouldn't listen to her." "Okay." Carissa rubbed a thick towel through his hair. "I barely remember what she said."

He continued to sound sullen as he added, "You must be disappointed. You were so excited when I told you last night, but you ended up not seeing anything."

Carissa chuckled softly. "Disappointed? Not at all! I grew up in Meadow Ridge and have always loved climbing mountains. Plus, don't you think the snowy peaks were breathtaking? And being with you, even if we just sat quietly and chatted, I'd be happy."

With no expectations, how could there be disappointment? From the moment he mentioned climbing the mountain, she knew that the only thing to look forward to today was the meal at Glimmering Tower.

"Really? You'd be happy just being with me?"

Rafael lifted his gaze to meet hers, but Carissa quickly averted her eyes, trying to avoid his gaze. She was afraid that seeing the swollen bump on his forehead would make her laugh, especially when paired with his pitiful expression.

In truth, Dylan was a bit innocent in all this-it was hard not to laugh.

"Of course." Carissa moved behind him to dry his hair, biting back a smile.

"You didn't look me in the eye when you said that."

Rafael's gloom returned. She had clearly averted her eyes.

Carissa paused, her gaze steady on Rafael.

Seriously? Did he need a mirror to see what he looked like right now?

But Carissa was a capable wife who could fight, manage a household, and soothe her husband. She took a deep breath, set the towel aside, and moved in front of him.

Crouching down to meet his eyes, she focused only on his gaze and said softly, "I may not express it often, but I truly enjoy our time together. Ha... ha-choo!

She quickly turned away, sneezing and rubbing her hands over her face to control her expression. "Sorry, I think I might have caught a chill."

Hearing that she felt cold, Rafael forgot his pride and immediately said, "Tell Qiana to make some chicken soup. The wind on the mountain was strong today. A bowl of chicken soup will help warm you up."

"Okay, I'll go tell someone to make it right now." Carissa turned and hurried out, nearly slipping as she did.

Once the chicken soup was ready, both of them had a bowl. Carissa said she wanted to check on Helen and couldn't look after Rafael any longer, but instructed the two elderly maids to take good care of him.

Helen was no longer upset and was chatting with Violet inside the room.

When Gillian saw Carissa arrive, she hurriedly called out, "Your Grace, you've come at the perfect time! I just made some pound cakes and was thinking of bringing them to you."

"Thank you, Gillian," Carissa expressed her gratitude, then greeted Helen warmly before sitting down.

"Carissa, how did he fall? Violet asked curiously.

She hadn't been in the room and hadn't seen the state Rafael was in, but Helen had mentioned it was quite amusing.

"The ground was too slippery, so he lost his footing for just a moment and fell," said Carissa, who naturally wanted to protect Rafael's dignity.

"Why go climbing on such a cold day? Couldn't he have just stayed at home? It's rare to have a free day," Helen exclaimed.

Carissa replied, "He's been wanting to go for a while, but some things came up. Since he finally had a day off, he thought he'd take the chance. Besides, the place is actually quite beautiful."

"Only you would defend him!" Helen huffed. "If King Sigmund tried to drag me up a mountain

Chapter 870

Helen often spoke of Sigmund. Sometimes she praised him, and other times, she complained. But whenever his name came up, she adopted the demeanor of a spoiled little girl, as if she had never really grown up.

She had been the most carefree concubine in the palace, occupying her position without having to navigate any intricate schemes. Even if there were plots against her, they never targeted her directly as Victoria always stood guard on her behalf.

Helen had been pampered growing up, then pampered again while having children. And now, she was pampered by her daughter-in-law. It seemed she never needed to worry about anything.

Yet, she still found trivial matters to fret over, like squabbles with Dakota or Josephine and wanting to compete with them. When she won, she kicked her legs in joy. When she lost, she puffed her cheeks in annoyance for a while. Eventually, those feelings would pass.

Even when Eleanor and Jessica schemed against her, she would only feel anger for a moment before brushing it aside. She wouldn't let negative emotions linger for long.

That was how most of her life had gone.

Now, she was eager to hold her grandchildren. Not that she truly wanted to-but because Dakota's son had a child, Helen felt the urge to have a grandchild too. If she was honest, though, did she really like children? They either cried incessantly or made loud, raucous noises. She hadn't yet discovered any redeeming qualities in them.

But whatever Dakota had, Helen wanted to have as well.

After listening to Helen talk about Sigmund for a while, Carissa returned to her room, where she found Qiana pressing a hot compress against Rafael's forehead. It seemed to be helping the lump looked a bit smaller than before and was now turning into a blackened bruise.

Lulu brought in some pound cakes, and Rafael ate two pieces. Carissa then instructed them to start preparing dinner. After dinner, the two of them lingered together for a while. Carissa was finally able to look directly at his face without flinching.

Rafael reached out with a large hand, pulling her into his embrace, his gaze deep and intense. "You haven't paid me any attention for several nights now. You just crash into bed."

Carissa smiled and replied, "But your leg is fractured, so it's not very convenient."

His warm fingers brushed against her cheek, moving up to her brow. His eyes, dark and fathomless, brimmed with a natural desire.

"I've heard there are other positions that we can try."

Carissa pressed her hand against his lips, her face flushed. "I-I won't!"

As shameless as ever, Rafael opened his mouth and bit her delicate fingertip, his gaze growing heated. "I've heard that martial artists are best suited for this sort of thing. You practice every morning, so why not put some effort into it in bed as well? Who knows, it might even help you improve your leg techniques."

Carissa wrapped her arms around his neck, her expression softening as she exhaled. "And who did you hear that from? I had no idea someone was coaching you in this area."

He turned his head away, hiding the embarrassment in his eyes. "Never mind that. Just know it's someone who knows a thing or two about it."

Had he inadvertently revealed where he had learned these things? After all, the books he had learned from were in the bookcase and locked up safely.

Well, if a specialist taught you, then I suppose it's worth a try."

Carissa extinguished all the candles with a flick of her wrist, leaving only a small flame flickering in the dim light.

In the haze of that soft glow, she asked, "Can you walk over here? Should I carry you?" "I'm not completely crippled! I can walk on my own... but you could help a bit. It wasn't this painful before, but after Livius applied the medicine, it hurt even more."

He was acting in an aggrieved manner again. How could she have never known that Rafael could be so unreasonable at times?

The layers of the canopy fell one by one, and their clothes slipped away piece by piece. The faint light couldn't penetrate the thick drapery, and the flickering shadows seemed to whisper to the world not to look, as if they were doing something embarrassing.

It was as if a new world had opened up—novel and intense.

Yet, Rafael was still unsatisfied. He leaned in closer and kissed Carissa's neck. "I think with my stamina, I could go for another round."

Carissa lay in his arms, her legs trembling slightly as she spoke in a slightly hoarse voice, "I think with my stamina, I need a few days to recover."

Feeling a surge of tenderness, he hugged her closer and pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. Get some sleep."