

War Song 1001

Chapter 1001

servants would gossip and say that Rafael and Carissa were disrespectful.

Helen didn't enjoy dining with her son. Their tastes were too different, and the conversation rarely went beyond a few words. But Victoria always insisted, reminding Helen time and time again that, once a month, she had to sit down with him for a meal. Otherwise, the Helen sighed. That was just how life was constantly bound by all sorts of obligations, never able to follow one's heart's desire.

Gillian always said Helen didn't know how to appreciate her blessings, but she didn't believe there was such a thing as a truly carefree life. Even in the best of times, there were problems to worry about. Even the wealthiest, most powerful people had their burdens to bear. She would enjoy the good moments when they came, and when she was troubled, she would keep to herself-she had every right to her worries.

Rafael and Carissa weren't the chatty types, so they would ask Violet to join them for meals. Violet had a knack for lightening the mood, turning a dull meal into something lively and entertaining.

In the end, Barrett didn't resign. A few days later, he reluctantly donned his official attire and returned to his duties.

Salvador summoned him again, hoping to see some spark of determination in his face, but there was nothing. Barrett looked like a defeated dog, radiating misery and despair.

Salvador was inwardly furious. He had originally hoped to mold Barrett into a loyal minister, someone useful for the future. A military man like him, who had fought bandits, been on the battlefield, and had fallen on hard times, was someone who could be trusted. At least he was loyal.

Now, Salvador realized that while loyalty was valuable, it meant nothing without capability.

He had once hoped that Barrett would turn things around, make a name for the Nightsteel Guard, and bring the Royal Guard under its command. But it seemed that relying on Barrett wasn't going to work. Everything still depended on Ian.

Though Ian had taken on the role of commander, he had other matters to attend to. With Barrett proving to be so ineffectual, it looked like they would need to promote another deputy commander.

After sending Barrett on his way, Salvador summoned Ian.

Ian recommended two men-Galen and Kevin.

"Your Majesty, Galen and Kevin have been with you since you were crown prince. Galen is sharp and

quick-witted, while Kevin is loyal and ambitious. He's now Ms. Spencer's direct apprentice and has been steadily improving his martial skills."

Salvador raised an eyebrow. "Kevin Ziegler, from the Marquis of Elderglen's family? His cousin is Lawrence, the Earl of Dunewind, right?"

"That is correct, Your Majesty," Ian confirmed.

Salvador paused, mulling it over before asking, "I recall there was someone from the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team who joined the Nightsteel Guard-what was his name?"

"You must be referring to Ivan Lewis, Your Majesty. He's currently a second-rank guard in the Nightsteel Guard, stationed at Regal Gate."

Salvador narrowed his eyes, his long fingers lightly tapping on the table as his mind raced through the pros and cons of choosing either Galen or Kevin.

Galen was certainly capable, but he had too many tricks up his sleeve. The Nightsteel Guard didn't need someone like him promoted at the moment.

Kevin was from the Marquis of Elderglen's family. Rafael had once saved Lawrence's life, and Kevin had become Violet's apprentice, which meant he was already halfway tied to Rafael's household.

There were risks involved.

"How's Kevin's ambition?" Salvador asked.

"Kevin is certainly ambitious, Your Majesty. He sought out a martial arts mentor to improve his chances for advancement. As far as I know his relationship with his family is far from harmonious. He is driven to make a name for himself," fan answered respectfully.

Ambition and personal interests-it was exactly what Salvador needed. With those traits, the risks were manageable.

Salvador made his decision. "Kevin it

is, then. As for Ivan, promote him to

a first-rank Nightsteel Guard and

assign him to the Vanguard Unitet

The Vanguard Unit still needs a

captain, so Galen will take that post."

If Kevin had been Carissa's apprentice, the risk would have been too great. However, Violet was his mentor. As it was someone from the Spencer family, Salvador was more than capable of handling them.

Chapter 1002

Kevin wanted a martial arts mentor for two reasons. The first was because he genuinely loved martial arts. The second was because it was a means to an end, a stepping stone to his promotion.

But he had plenty of patience. If it didn't work in three years, he would wait five. If five years passed with no success, he would wait ten. The longer he stayed at Salvador's side, the more experience he gained. If he didn't give up, he would eventually succeed. Of course, he had his sights set on specific goals-he aimed to be promoted to deputy captain and then captain within three to five years.

So, when Salvador summoned him and granted him the position of deputy commander of the Nightsteel Guard, Kevin was completely stunned.

He had never been caught off guard in court before this was the first time.

It was Ian who kicked him sharply, muttering with a laugh, "What are you daydreaming about? Don't you know how to thank His Majesty?"

Kevin's trembling hands pressed against his chest as he bowed deeply and said, "Your Majesty, I thank you for your trust and this promotion. I will surely remain loyal and devoted, giving my all in service."

Salvador smiled at the words, clearly pleased. "Ian, take him out. Have him buy drinks for your men to celebrate."

Three men had been promoted. Kevin was overjoyed, Galen felt a bit disappointed, and Ivan showed no emotion at all. Having worked as a spy before, Ivan wasn't one to let anyone read his inner thoughts. Whether he was happy or upset, he kept it all to himself. Of course, Kevin was eager to treat his comrades to drinks. As he walked, he felt like he was floating in the air. He was still unable to fully believe what had just happened.

He had planned to rise through the ranks slowly. Instead, fate had dropped a reward right in his lap, leaving him dazed by it.

But even in his stunned state, he didn't forget to ask, "Wasn't Deputy Commander Warren the deputy commander? Why would they promote me instead?"

Ian chuckled. "He is still a deputy commander. He's in charge of the Griffinblade Unit, the Shieldbearer Unit, and the Skystriker Unit. You'll take command of the Vanguard Unit, the Eastguard Unit, and the Westguard Unit. Each of you will oversee three units. I know you're capable of it. If you have any decisions you're unsure of, you can come to me or ask your mentor."

"My mentor?" Kevin had kept his apprenticeship a secret, but he had been spending a lot of time training with Violet recently, so the secret was hard to keep. "I can't trouble my mentor with my work. If there's anything I don't understand, I'll come to you, Commander Ian. I hope you'll be kind enough to teach me."

Ian laughed and scolded, "You fool. You have good connections and still don't know how to use them. Your mentor and Commander Sinclair are close friends. If you go to her and she doesn't know, she'll ask Commander Sinclair. They'll surely point you in the right direction.

"But remember, the most important

thing is to never forget where you started. Always be grateful. It's His Majesty who promoted you, and

that's how you became deputet

commander. Without that, with your qualifications, you could have spent another three, five, or even seven years and still wouldn't have made it to captain."

Kevin laughed and said he was naturally very grateful to Salvador, as well as Ian, for his support. He smoothly sidestepped the topic they had been discussing.

When Salvador was still the crown prince, Kevin had served him as a low-ranking guard. Although he hadn't achieved much, he had met many people and experienced a lot, learning how to navigate the intricacies of court life.

This talk about seeking help from Violet and Carissa clearly hinted that his promotion wasn't just based on merit-it was part of a larger scheme.

Even though Kevin recognized that,

he wasn't bothered by it. Rather, he was pleased because this promotion aligned with his goal. He could prove himself capable of the deputy commander role. As long as he performed well, Salvador would see it and recognize his abilities, not just credit him because of who his

mentor was.

And even if Salvador still doubted his skills, there was nothing to be done. Kevin would just continue following the principles he believed in, living without regret and disappointment in his life.

That evening, Kevin treated his fellow guardsmen to drinks, inviting Barrett, Galen, and Ivan along. Barrett didn't refuse and went with them back to Kevin's estate.

Barrett was too busy drinking to engage much in conversation, preferring to remain silent as the others joked around.

However, Galen suddenly remarked with a touch of bitterness, "Tonight, we're still brothers-in-arms. But tomorrow, we'll have to call you Deputy Commander Ziegler."

Galen felt a pang of disappointment.

He and Kevin had always been

close, and he had often worried

about Kevin's future. But now, Kevin

had been promoted straight to deputy commander, and it felt like things were going too well for him.

It left a sour taste in Galen's mouth.

Kevin raised his cup solemnly, offering a toast. "Thank you for looking out for me all this time. I wouldn't be where I am today without your guidance and care." Seeing Kevin respect him even after his promotion made the bitterness in Galen's heart fade.

He smiled and raised his cup. "Don't say that. Come, let's drink to it. Congratulations, my friend."

As the two of them drank heartily, Galen glanced at Barrett. Though Barrett was also a deputy commander, Galen looked down on him and secretly coveted his position.

Chapter 1003

The next day, Kevin brought his parents, wife, and children to visit Violet. He also brought along a generous selection of gifts.

Violet had already heard about Kevin's promotion the night before-Carissa had been the one to tell her. At first, it didn't make much of an impression. After all, it was just a promotion.

When she saw Kevin arrive with his whole family in tow to express their thanks, however, her mood changed. Everyone's faces were beaming with joy, as if they had stumbled upon a chest of gold. It was clear they were thrilled.

Violet felt the joy of his promotion firsthand. When she learned more about it, she understood how rare it was. In the king's service, promotions didn't come easily. Unless someone accomplished a great feat, like saving the king, it could take years-one long year after another-to climb the ranks.

However, faced with Kevin's family's deep gratitude, Violet felt undeserving. She hadn't contributed to his rise. This was all due to Kevin's hard work and determination.

Later, Kevin asked his family to return home first, leaving him alone at Hell Monarch Estate. There were a few things he felt needed to be said in advance to avoid any misunderstandings or awkwardness down the line.

After explaining, he said, "This is just my guess, of course. We can't know for certain what His Majesty is thinking. Regardless, I'll focus only on doing my duty with sincerity. If there's any shortcut that goes against my conscience, I won't take it. I won't worry you or my martial aunt in any way, Sage Violet."

Carissa raised an eyebrow, about to say something. When she saw the look of approval in Violet's eyes, though, she decided against it.

It looked like she was now the martial aunt of Violet's apprentices.

The king's sudden promotion of Kevin was a clear sign that he was giving up on Barrett, who had truly disappointed him. Time and time again, Salvador had protected Barrett, but the latter's sudden move to resign was like pulling the rug out from under him. Salvador was probably furious.

After Kevin left, Violet couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. "I didn't choose the wrong one, after all. That kid truly has potential."

Carissa laughed. "Kid? He's actually older than you."

Violet leaned back in her chair, smiling as she crossed her arms. She adopted a relaxed, nostalgic expression.

"Age doesn't matter. Seniority does. In the Spencer family, I'm already an old aunt. I have grandnieces and nephews who are older than me now-some are even married. Also, I've got a whole bunch of nephews. Every time I go back to my family, I'm surrounded by a dozen kids, all calling me 'Aunt Violet'. It's noisy as hell."

Carissa lifted her gaze toward the hazy lights outside. Her mind wandered to a similar memory. After returning from Meadow Ridge, her younger, more naive nieces and nephews would excitedly gather around her. As they grew older, they stayed close to her quietly and offered her their company in silence.

As Carissa turned around, she saw Violet squatting on the ground, her hands resting on her knees. The emotions in her eyes hadn't yet settled, and Carissa could see the guilt in them and a hint of tears. Violet's expression was one of innocence and sorrow, like a dog that had done something wrong and was now pitifully seeking forgiveness.

Unable to help herself, Carissa burst out laughing.

"What are you doing down there? Sage Violet, you'll lose all your dignity if you squat like that."

"I deserve that," Violet said, before slapping herself lightly on the cheek. "I've been speaking out of turn lately."

Carissa gently cupped Violet's face, then flicked her nose playfully. "Am I really that fragile? Do you have to worry about my feelings every time you say something? I'm not that sensitive."

Violet immediately wrapped her arms around Carissa. "No, you're strong. It's me who's sensitive and fragile. I can't handle things well."

Just then, Travis walked in from outside and noticed the two of them sticking together as usual. He snorted and was about to turn away, but then his eyes landed on the table, which was covered with a stack of gifts. He stopped and stepped closer. "Who came with all these gifts?"

Carissa smiled, resting her chin on Violet's head. "Travis, always fishing for presents."

"You two won't appreciate them anyway," Travis said with a shrug. "Rather than letting them gather

dust in the storeroom, it's better if

take them off your hands. And, Carissa, if you don't want those gifts your aunt brought, you can always give them to me."

Violet grabbed a cup from the coffee table and threw it at him. "Dream on! Where's Prince Rafael?"

Travis caught the cup with one hand. "Don't waste things. His Highness won't be back until late, probably not until midnight. He's tied up with a few urgent cases."

"That busy, huh?" Violet then asked, "Did you get any news about the case I asked you to check with Ryan's uncle? Is it true the embroiderer who was abandoned committed suicide?"

Violet still couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to the story. Why choose death when there might still be another way?

"I've asked. It was definitely suicide," Travis replied as he started

unwrapping one of the gifts. Inside, there was Evergreen Root, royal jelly, and a few pieces of jewelry. "I wish everyone would just send gold and silver. That would be much better."

Chapter 1004

Carissa had long accepted this reality. She turned to Travis and asked, "So, has anyone claimed her body?"

"Lord Klein said he contacted her family. Her parents are both gone, so her brothers-in-law are in charge now. They said a woman who was cast out and then drowned herself in the river was bad luck. They wouldn't take her back." "What about her husband and his family?" Violet asked.

However, she regretted asking as soon as the words left her mouth. After all, why would they want to take her back once they had cast her out?

"Her husband is marrying a new wife in a few days. Why would he help with her funeral?" Travis replied.

Violet's brows furrowed in disgust. "He's marrying so soon? That scoundrel has no conscience."

Carissa shook her head. "I'm guessing he had someone else lined up already."

Violet's eyes suddenly widened. "But she was cast out because she had no children. Did she have a dowry? Doesn't that mean her family lost out?"

Carissa sighed. "They were common folk. There wasn't much of a dowry. Even if there had been, it's probably all gone by now. I heard she was quite skilled with embroidery and made some money selling her work, but most of it went to supporting her family. When they found her body, she only had three coins on her."

Violet stood up, eyes wide with shock. "You've already looked into this?"

"I went to the Royal Citadel myself," Carissa replied.

She had been as determined as Violet at first and was unwilling to accept the truth. After her investigation, she had come to terms with it.

"When I was asking around, I didn't know her family wouldn't help with her burial," she added.

"If I'd known you went, I wouldn't have bothered," Travis said as he sank into a chair, a dark look on his face. "The body's been at the community burial house for a while now. I went there, and it has already started to smell."

"If her family refuses to bury her, what will the Royal Citadel do with her body? They'll bury her, right?" Violet asked.

"They will. But it'll probably just be a quick, unceremonious burial. They might roll her up in a mat and dig a hole to dump her in. A proper coffin? Forget it," Travis said.

Violet had seen much of the world's suffering, but it didn't numb her heart. The last time she had felt this much anger was during Amelia's death.

Carissa fell silent for a moment before saying, "Vivi, arrange a burial for her under the workshop's name. There's no need for a ceremony. Just find a good spot, have someone change her clothes, and get her a proper coffin."

Violet nodded in agreement. "That's

a good idea. The workshop's been quiet lately, and there's some money saved up in the account. We'll make sure she gets a proper burial. let Mrs. Lloyd know. After all, she

Contributed money too."

Travis poured himself a cup of coffee and took a sip, then suddenly recalled something. "By the way, I heard something today. Duchess Jessica has been cast out by the Marquis of Ironridge's family."

"Rod, she's not royalty anymore,"

Violet said icily. "She's been

demoted to commoner. Even as a commoner, though, she still has more money than most of the

nobility I heard she's net

quite a fortune over the years With her personality and the Marquis of Ironridge family's generosity, her dowry and wealth will likely remain entirely hers to take."

Travis nodded in agreement. "That's true. She has more money than we could ever dream of."

"More than you could dream of, at least," said Carissa and Violet in unison.

Travis's smile froze. He stood up, muttering under his breath, and headed out of the room.

When Hannah heard about the embroiderer's case, she was deeply sympathetic. She immediately cursed the man involved, calling him heartless. After her outburst, she ordered the household staff to handle the embroiderer's funeral

arrangements.

Once the instructions were given, Hannah turned to Violet. "Funerals have many taboos. You're still young, so you wouldn't understand. Leave it to my staff to handle. Just go and get her full name, birthdate, and horoscope."

Violet, relieved, nodded. She wasn't familiar with the customs and had originally planned to ask Frederick for help. Since Hannah was taking charge, it was for the best.

She took out a piece of paper and handed it to Hannah. "Carissa visited the Royal Citadel previously and got those details. Her name was Hollis Lloyd, and she turned 34 this year."

Chapter 1005

When Hannah heard that the woman's last name was Lloyd, she couldn't help but sigh even more deeply.

A simple coffin, two sets of clothes-one worn by Hollis, and the other for burial alongside her.

Hannah had a kind heart. She learned that Hollis had been working for a ready-made clothing shop and earned a living by making embroidered pieces. Hannah bought the clothes for Hollis at the same shop. The shopkeeper had mentioned that both sets of embroidered clothing were made by Hollis herself.

Hollis was born in March 34 years ago and passed away this March. Her birthdate and death date were only eight days apart.

The death of a discarded woman barely caused a ripple, like a small stone thrown into a lake just a tiny disturbance, and then nothing more. No one spoke of it again.

However, there was a storyteller who shared the news of how Skye Embroidery had arranged for Hollis' burial. He also spoke about how indifferent Hollis' husband and family were regarding her death.

Those who listened cursed a few times and then promptly forgot about it. This was because they accepted and supported the idea that according to the strict rules of propriety, a woman who couldn't bear children should be cast out. Still, her husband was so cold-hearted that he wouldn't even take her body despite years of marriage. Compared to his indifference, though, her family's lack of compassion was even more infuriating.

After a moment of thought, the people reluctantly came to accept the logic: once divorced or cast out, a man was no longer bound by any obligation to his wife. He wasn't required to take responsibility for her funeral.

As for her family, well, a married daughter was like water that had been poured out-once it left, it couldn't be retrieved. If that water could benefit her family, it would be one thing, but now it was more of an embarrassment to them. Of course, they were angry.

So, who was at fault in this situation? No one took the time to ponder it deeply. In the end, it had nothing to do with them.

However, even if it was just a tiny ripple, it was still a ripple. Where that ripple touched, some hearts felt it.

This March, with the spring rains drizzling, people went out for walks and visited their ancestors' graves. The days passed in a damp and soggy manner.

By April, the damp weather finally passed, and the sun blazed brightly, cycling in the sky.

No one would have expected Jessica to be the first to seek help from Skye Embroidery.

Rafael and Carissa were on their day off, having just returned from Tranquil Sanctuary after completing a 14-day memorial service. The service had been held to guide the spirits of the Sinclair and Sullivan families. Frederick, Holly, Lily, and Lutu had stayed the full 14 days, while Rafael and Carissa had only visited when they were free from their duties.

Helen had also attended, reciting scriptures for two days.

She told Gillian, "I don't know if this will help, but if it brings peace to Carissa's heart, then I'll make it a point to do this every year at Tranquil Sanctuary.

"Though I'm not her birth mother, she calls me 'Mother'. What's the difference between a mother-in-law and a birth mother? We're all family. I've been blessed with enough love in this life-there's no harm in sharing a little with her." Gillian felt deeply touched. Helen had really changed-she had grown.

Of course, Carissa was moved by Helen's words. When the couple returned that day, they first went to visit Helen, before being summoned by Jacob to the council hall.

News had arrived from Skywing Spire that the Westhaven envoys had reached Fawnrun City.

"There were already 200,000 troops stationed at Victory Pass and beyond," Violet said. "Grand Princess Lisandra has taken the military command emblem and ordered the troops to retreat. They've been pulled back and there's been no sign of an attack, so it seems Grand Princess Lisandra still has control. The question is whether she can regain full command of the army."

Rafael and Carissa were aware of the troops' movements toward the border city. The Sullivan family had already petitioned the court and were preparing the army for battle.

They had both anticipated this move

during negotiations, as had

Salvador, which explained his anger toward Barrett's resignation. If

broke out, the Sullivan faoulder

strength at Victory Pass would be essential. It would be critical that no one undermined their position at such a time.

While they were discussing these matters, Hannah's messenger arrived with a report.

Jessica had come seeking help from Skye Embroidery and had been incredibly arrogant about it. She even demanded the workshop be renamed Jessica's Workshop, which infuriated Hannah.

Chapter 1006

Carissa furrowed her brow. "Why would she go to the workshop?"

Skye Embroidery had been advertised as a place for women who had been abandoned or cast out—those with nowhere to go and struggling to make a living.

Jessica should still be able to survive after her divorce. As far as Carissa knew, Jessica owned several properties and shops. Even after being cast out, she could continue living a comfortable life.

The maid from the Lloyd family explained, "She said she had nowhere else to go and insisted on staying. She even insulted Madam Hannah and claimed that since the workshop takes in divorced women, she qualifies. If she's not allowed in, then the workshop is just pretending to help and is being hypocritical. Madam Hannah was so upset that she sent me to inform you and Ms. Spencer, Your Grace."

The moment Violet heard that Hannah had been insulted, she couldn't hold herself back.

"I'll go," she said immediately.

Davis often called his wife a "mother tigress", but in truth, Hannah was a reasonable sort. It was difficult to handle someone like Jessica, who was being unreasonable for the sake of it. Now that she had been cast out and her life was in ruins, she was bound to lash out. Hannah still had to protect the reputation of the workshop, so she couldn't just explode with anger and kick Jessica out. That was why she had been so upset. Carissa stood up. "I'll go with you."

Violet nodded. "Alright. Let's have Jacob inform Prince Rafael about the situation there. I've already told him, and his people have likely gathered some details." "Go ahead," Jacob said, nodding in agreement.

The two women, along with the Lloyd family's maid, made their way to Skye Embroidery. The front gate was firmly shut. The maid approached and knocked, announcing their identities. The door opened from the inside.

The main courtyard of Skye Embroidery wasn't large. They didn't usually receive guests, so there were only two rows of chairs and nothing else in the way of decoration.

The middle courtyard was bigger and had several looms set up. There was a partition screen on the left, separating a room filled with embroidery frames and silk threads. This was the embroidery workshop. Hannah had always preferred the idea of the women sitting together while working, exchanging ideas and talking. After all, they were all women who had suffered. It was best if they could become like a family.

Behind the main courtyard were the sleeping quarters, which weren't divided into separate buildings. The rooms weren't very large and were connected. However, there was enough space for a bed, some cabinets, and tables and chairs. There was also a sizable garden, originally used for drying and airing out fabrics after they had been washed. Since the workshop didn't deal with dyeing fabrics, the space had been repurposed to grow vegetables and raise chickens. Currently, the workshop was empty. Hannah often came over when she had the time, bringing along two servants to tend the garden and clean up.

It wasn't long after Hannah's arrival that Jessica showed up. Now, the two women stood face-to-face in the main courtyard. Carissa and Violet had just entered when they heard Jessica's familiar, brash voice.

"Why can't I stay here? I already said

from the start you're all just pretending to do good deeds! That little wench Carissa isn't so kind. She's evil, ruined my mom's life, and now she's playing a good

Samaritan? If you don't let me stay here, I'll make sure everyone hears about this and trash you all in the streets!"

No wonder Hannah couldn't handle it. Jessica was still spouting nonsense about Eleanor, a traitor and rebel Hannah couldn't bear to hear such things, especially with the possibility of it spreading and dragging her husband into trouble.

Carissa stepped forward, her voice steady but sharp as she said, "Your mom? Who is she, exactly? Tell me how did someone so evil like me ruin your mom's life?" Violet entered behind Carissa, her tone cold, adding, "I was wondering who it was. My heavens... It's you, Jessica?"

Violet gasped in surprise as she took in the sight of the woman sitting across from Hannah.

Jessica's hair was now streaked with gray at the temples, her eyes framed by deepening wrinkles. She wore a coarse, simple dress. Her hair, once styled with some care, was now loosely gathered and pinned with a plain wooden hairpin. The fuller face she once had now appeared gaunt and hollowed, her high cheekbones jutting out. There was no trace of makeup, and her skin looked dry and sallow.

Carissa was also stunned.

This was Jessica? How could she have fallen so low?

Chapter 1007

Just moments ago, Jessica had been brash and loud. However, the sight of Carissa and Violet instantly silenced her.

She clutched the hem of her dress, her chin raised slightly, unwilling to lower her head even in her fallen state. A pair of small, gilded butterfly earrings dangled from her ears. It was out of place with her shabby attire, as if it was all she had to maintain the last bit of dignity

and respectability.

She had come alone, without even a maid in tow.

"Your Grace, Ms. Spencer, you've come at just the right time," Hannah said.

Her face was livid, ashen with anger.

"I've dealt with my fair share of troublesome people, but I've never seen anyone cause this much of a scene! She wants to stay at the workshop and insists we change the name to her own. When I asked what she was cast out for, she refused to say a word."

It wasn't hard to understand why Hannah was furious. When the workshop was first established, she and Carissa laid down strict rules. Any woman cast out for committing evil deeds or harming others wasn't to be accepted.

So, when Jessica arrived, she had to be questioned. But now, she was evasive, not saying a word, and yet still acting arrogant-how could Hannah not be enraged?

Carissa and Violet sat. Jessica saw their silk dresses and jewelry, which were just like what she wore when she was still royalty. Now, she wore coarse fabric and simple hairpins, looking old and poor. She didn't even have any makeup on her face. The stark contrast made her angry and ashamed.

But she couldn't avoid coming, and she dared not show her arrogance in front of Carissa. After all, Carissa was a government official, and Eleanor's case was being handled by Rafael.

Carissa studied Jessica and said, "Jessica, do you really want to stay at the workshop? Do you understand that it's not a place of luxury? You'll have to work here."

Jessica's bravado wavered, but she still tried to maintain her pride.

"By virtue of age, you and Rafael should be talking to me more respectfully. But I won't hold it against you. I'm here to stay at the workshop, but don't think I've come begging! You said it's a shelter for..." She paused, bitterness and resentment flashing in her eyes.

"For women who have been cast

out. I'm sure you already know why I

was divorced. You've heard all the

details, perhaps even laughed behind my back about it. But

matter what, if you say you're offering shelter, you can't just turn

me away."

"I've heard about your divorce, but we don't know why you were cast out," Carissa replied. "As for laughing behind your back, there's no need for it. It's not worth our time." Jessica's face turned crimson. "I don't believe that for a second! You must be enjoying my misfortune!"

"Your bad luck is nothing to us. But you wanting to stay at the workshop? That concerns us. Why were you cast out? We need to know the full story," Carissa said calmly.

Jessica clenched her teeth. "Isn't it

obvious? I couldn't bear a son. Don't you know? Everyone in the capital knows. They threw me out to bring in a younger wife. You helped that poor embroiderer and held a proper funeral for her, so why won't you

take me in? Why don't

care

about me? Or is it all just for show,

to polish your reputation?"

Hannah shook her head, exchanging a look with Carissa. She could sense there was more to this than Jessica was letting on. Carissa nodded in agreement.

Margaret was currently managing the Marquis of Ironridge's family's household. Hannah knew Margaret well-she was not the type to cast out a woman just because she couldn't bear children.

For ordinary families, a woman might be divorced and cast out for not producing an heir, especially if the husband couldn't take a concubine. A woman who couldn't carry on the family line was seen as no better than a barren hen.

But the Marquis of Ironridge had a

secondary wife, Emma, as well as Serena for a concubine. Emma was also Margaret's niece, and she had borne children. Jessica was Leopold's primary wife. Even if she couldn't have children of her own, Emma's children would still be regarded as Jessica's.

The contrast between the high nobility and common folk was stark. Marriages among the wealthy were often political alliances, combining powerful families rather than simply producing heirs.

Though Jessica had been stripped of her title as a duchess and her estates had been reclaimed, the Marquis of Ironridge's family wasn't the type to cast out a wife over something like infertility. They weren't so cold and calculating.

Carissa had also dealt with Margaret a few times. Before her marriage to Rafael, she had received a golden bracelet adorned with interlocking pearl patterns from Margaret as a gift, proving the older woman was in fact warm and kind-hearted.

Chapter 1008

Seeing Carissa and Violet exchanging looks, Jessica's temper flared. She didn't care whether Carissa was someone she could afford to anger anymore.

"So, you're all just hypocrites! You don't actually want to shelter women who have been mistreated and cast out. Pretending to be kind-hearted-what a joke! I'll expose you for what you really are!" she shouted. Despite that, she made no move to stand up. Instead, she sat there, still glaring at Hannah with bitter resentment.

Carissa watched her, confused. When Hannah's maid had come to report in person, Carissa had thought Jessica was simply here to stir up trouble. Now that she had seen Jessica in person, she wasn't so sure. Jessica seemed angry, but there was something about her demeanor that didn't add up. She was shouting, but hadn't even shifted in her seat. Was she so destitute now after being cast out?

"I heard you even want to change the name of our workshop?" Violet asked.

Her tone had softened a little, but she couldn't help the slight amusement creeping into her voice as she observed Jessica's pitiful attempt to be domineering.

"I just think naming it after a dead person is bad luck," Jessica sneered.

"Then, don't come here," Violet shot back, raising her voice.

No matter how miserable some people seemed, they still couldn't shake that annoying attitude.

"Do you think I care?" Jessica huffed, clearly wanting to retort with something sharp.

However, she paused when she saw Carissa's composed yet serious expression. The words she had been ready to throw out died on her lips.

"Fine, leave then." Violet smirked, her patience wearing thin. "You're really something, coming here and still complaining. Do you think you're here to live comfortably? You'll have to work for everything here." "I'm not leaving! I'm staying to see if you really are as hypocritical as you seem."

Carissa noticed Hannah's pale face, strained from trying to keep her composure. She immediately stepped in to avoid making the situation worse.

"Mrs. Lloyd, perhaps you should return for now."

Hannah didn't want to stay in the same place as Jessica any longer. "Then, I'll leave it to you, Your Grace."

Hannah was still uncertain about Jessica's intentions-part of her felt like this was all just a disturbance, but another part of her wasn't sure. Before Carissa and Violet arrived, Jessica's arrogance made Hannah wish she could slap her a couple of

times.

It was lucky they were at Skye Embroidery. If this had been Hannah's estate, Jessica would have already been dragged out and yelled at.

Once Hannah left, Carissa turned to

Jessica. "You can go back for now. We'll look into your situation. If it turns out you were indeed cast out because you couldn't bear children and you truly have nowhere else to go, Skye Embroidery could take you in but only if you genuinely need help."

"What's there to investigate? I've already told you everything!" Jessica's impatience was rising. "If I'd committed some unforgivable crime, I wouldn't just be cast out. The Marquis of Ironridge's family would have handed me to the authorities by now." "Jessica, from what I know, you have several properties and businesses. You've made quite a bit of money over the years. I'm sure the Marquis of Ironridge's family wouldn't have thrown you out penniless."

Jessica stood with her feet together, her fingers holding onto her sleeves. Her well-maintained nails didn't match her withered face at all.

"That's right! I own houses and shops. I just wanted to come here and see for myself if this workshop is really like the rumors say. Don't think you can push me around!"

"If you own houses and shops, then

you don't meet the criteria." Violet's gaze swept over Jessica, trying to gauge her situation. It was still hard to make sense of it. "Unless you have ho property, no means of support, and are truly destitute, then we'll take you in. Are you really that poor and desperate?"

"Of course not!" Jessica immediately denied, a faint flush rising on her dull, dry skin. "I'm not poor and destitute." Carissa nodded. "Then, you should leave."

Jessica turned her face away, glaring at the cracked floor. She furrowed her brow for a long moment before standing up. "Fine, I'll leave! But don't regret this."

She was just about to walk out the door when Carissa suddenly called out, "Wait, are these coins on the floor yours?"

Jessica whirled around; sure enough, she spotted a few copper coins under the chair she had just been sitting on. She pretended to fumble through her purse. "They're mine. Though it's just a few coins, I won't let you take any advantage of me."

She returned in a few quick strides, scooped up the copper coins, and left hastily.

Violet turned to Carissa. "What's going on? Is she really that broke?" Carissa herself had placed those coins there. They weren't Jessica's at all.

Chapter 1009

There was no need for Carissa or Violet to dig into Jessica's situation.

For many years, Luke had been old friends with Giles, the head steward of Ironridge Estate. He met Giles for a meal the following day, and the whole situation became clear.

It turned out that the previous year, the Marquis of Ironridge had taken a new concubine. Her name was Flora Crawford. Her father was a scholar, and she herself was well-read. She was initially engaged, but her fiancé tragically died two years ago in an accident, earning her the reputation of being a "widow-maker." She had been ridiculed ever since.

Somehow, she crossed paths with Leopold, who took a liking to her and made her his concubine.

According to Giles, the reason Leopold had taken Flora in was partly to support the management of the household. Emma had been ill for a long time and had almost died last winter. It wasn't until the weather warmed that she started recovering.

Flora was skilled in managing the household. Since her arrival, she had been assisting Margaret in overseeing the internal affairs of the estate, which the old lady greatly appreciated.

It was clear that Jessica didn't like Flora. She had been subtly tormenting her in both overt and covert ways. Margaret had berated her several times, and with the treason case involving Eleanor, Jessica had cooled down somewhat.

Three months ago, Flora had become pregnant. Due to severe morning sickness, she could hardly eat. The only thing she could stomach were the light dishes her mom used to make. Margaret had once been pregnant herself, and she knew how much a woman could miss her family during such a time. She invited Flora's mom, Barbara, to stay with them.

Knowing that Jessica had been cruel to Flora, Barbara reprimanded her a few times. With no outlet for her anger, Jessica had taken to tormenting Serena instead.

At this point, Luke couldn't help but sigh. "Since Lady Serena entered the Marquis of Ironridge's family, she has been subjected to much of Lady Jessica's torment."

"Enough about the Warren family. I'm not interested in hearing about them. Get to the point-how did Jessica end up being cast out? She didn't do something to harm Flora's baby, did she?" Violet urged.

Luke shook his head. "No, it wasn't the baby she was after. It was Madam Barbara. Lady Flora had been taking pregnancy tonics, and Madam Barbara had developed a cough during her stay there. Madam Margaret had a physician prescribe medicine for Madam Barbara, but somehow, the two medicines got switched on one particular day.

"Lady Flora ended up taking the wrong medicine the one meant to treat a cough, which Lady Jessica had added a laxative to. She already had a weak constitution, and the medicine caused her to miscarry after just a couple of days.

"When Lady Flora lost the child, Madam Margaret ordered an investigation. It didn't take long before it pointed to Lady Jessica. She admitted to it, claiming she didn't intend to harm Lady Flora's child but only wanted to get back at Madam Barbara since she had shown her disrespect."

Violet and Carissa exchanged glances.

"Just some laxatives and the child was gone? Was it really that strong?"

"That's unclear, but either way, the child was lost and Lady Flora's health was ruined. The physician said it would be very difficult for her to conceive again," Luke replied.

"What kind of laxative was it? It sounds so severe," Carissa asked.

"Giles didn't say. Madam Margaret investigated the matter herself, so

he didn't know the full story. However a few days after this incident, Lady Jessica pushed Lady Serena into a lake. The Marquis of Ironridge was furious and decided to divorce her," Luke explained.

"Was it on the grounds of attempting to harm the child and mistreating a concubine?" Violet immediately asked.

"None of it. They stated it was for other reasons."

Violet sighed. "At least she saved some dignity. But considering she has money and shops, she shouldn't have fallen to the point of needing to go to Skye Embroidery."

Luke waved his hand dismissively. "She does have a few shops and some property. When she was divorced, Madam Margaret even gave her two thousand silver coins." "What about her dowry?"

Violet asked. "She entered the marquis' household as a duchess, and the household is well-off. She shouldn't have needed to dip into her dowry."

"According to Giles, her dowry was

long gone. Over the years, her shops didn't bring in much. Her jewelry and silver were all she had left. When she was sent out, she took those with her"

Violet frowned. "Then, how did she manage to squander all of it in such a short time? I saw her today wearing a simple dress and no jewelry. Could she really just be trying to stir up trouble?"

Luke shook his head. "I don't know."

A clear, familiar voice interrupted from the doorway, "I do."

Everyone turned to see Rafael, draped in a deep purple cloak patterned with dark clouds, striding into the room with Jacob following closely behind.

Chapter 1010

Carissa smiled sweetly when she saw Rafael had returned so early, her eyes crinkling with warmth.

"Have you settled all the cases?"

"Not yet, but I didn't feel like staying up tonight," Rafael replied, his gaze meeting hers.

Without realizing it, the hard edges of his face softened. A smile tugged at his eyes as he walked over and sat down next to her. Jacob glanced back and called for some drinks. "My throat's about to catch fire. Get some cold fruit juice."

Violet laughed and asked, "What kept you so busy today, Jacob? Your voice is hoarse."

"Had to go round up the shops, negotiate with some people," Jacob said, giving a respectful nod to Carissa before sitting down.

Violet was uninterested in those details, so she turned her attention to Rafael. "You said you know something about Jessica. What's going on with her?"

"Her finances were never solid to begin with," Rafael replied. "During the investigation into the treason case, it was discovered that all the money her shops made was funneled to Eleanor. She also had some shops with other ladies, including Lady Josephine and Lady Dakota. Those were all involved in the case.

"After the investigation, any shops linked to the case were sealed, but she had two private shops left. Unfortunately, they were both registered under Henry's name. After his execution, those shops were seized and confiscated. Jessica had been hiding this from the Marquis of Ironridge, hoping he wouldn't look down on her.

"With no income, she started lending out money at high interest. Of course, that would have made her a decent profit. She even borrowed 10,000 silver coins from Lady Molly and said it was for a business venture, and that they would split the profits 50-50."

When Violet heard that her cousin was involved in this, her face immediately soured.

"Then, recently, the authorities cracked down on illegal lending and she got caught up in it. She was fined a large sum, and the money she had left from her divorce wasn't enough to cover it. She had to sell her properties and jewelry to pay the fine. If she hadn't, she would have faced jail time. Now, she still owes Lady Molly 10,000 silver Coins plus interest. After Jessica's divorce, Lady Molly sent people to collect the debt. With nowhere else to turn, she ended up at the workshop."

"She really brought this on herself! After all that, she still lent money out at a high interest. The king didn't even get involved in the treason case, yet she still didn't know how to keep a low profile? She has no one to blame but herself," Violet spat in disgust.

"How much was the fine?" Carissa asked curiously.

"100,000 silver coins," Rafael replied.

Violet's eyes widened in shock. "That much? How much money did she actually lend out?"

"50,000 silver coins. The fine is double that," Rafael explained. "Usury is no small matter, and the king's trying to clamp down on it. She just happened to hit that moment. This case is being handled

by lan's people, so there's no room for mercy." Carissa frowned. "How much interest did she collect? Did she force anyone into selling their children or worse?"

She knew people who lent money at high interest rates were heartless, often forcing those who couldn't repay to sell their children or worse. It was a cruel and damaging practice.

Jacob let out a small chuckle. "The funny part is, she didn't make a single coin off the interest. The court started investigating as soon as she started lending money. Now, she can't get back the 50,000 silver coins she lent out and still has to pay the fine." Violet raised an eyebrow. "So, doesn't that mean the person who borrowed the 50,000 silver coins got away easy?"

"Not at all," Rafael replied. "Since lending at usury is illegal, the 50,000 silver coins were confiscated by the authorities as well." Carissa's eyes widened in realization. "So, she's lost a total of 150,000 silver coins? That's enough to bankrupt anyone!"

"Exactly," Rafael confirmed.

"Otherwise, why would she have to sell her properties? She still hasn't paid off the fine and owes Lady Molly 10,000 silver coins. This whole mess is tied to Yuvan as well, and lan's been keeping a close eye on him. Naturally, he has no sympathy for Jessica either. These past few days, she's been running around and trying to use her connections, but lan hasn't acknowledged her."