

War Song 1031

Chapter 1031

Violet stuck to her point, saying, "But if we kick Jessica out, we won't have to get tangled up in this mess anymore."

"And then what?" Carissa replied calmly. "What if something similar happens again? Honestly, I think this whole situation with Jessica is a good opportunity. It gives us a chance to learn and handle things better next time. The way I see it, we should set aside our bias and investigate thoroughly. If the accusations are true, we can kick her out. But if they're not, we give her a chance. How about that?" She added, "Vivi, it's really important to set aside our biases. Every woman who's been cast out could end up being labeled with all kinds of accusations. If we just jump to conclusions, no one will want to come to us."

"I know what you're saying makes sense. If we're thinking about the workshop, it's the right approach. But on a personal level, I just can't accept Jessica. And she's not exactly innocent. We should just throw her out. Don't you dislike her?" Violet grumbled. "I do," Carissa answered flatly.

"Isn't that enough? If we both hate her, why should the workshop take her in? I was trying to think about the bigger picture, thinking we should investigate things first. But looking back, didn't she and Molly cause all the trouble from the start? She had no good intentions. She couldn't get into the workshop, so she tried to ruin it instead. Now, the people from the Marquis of Ironridge's family want to destroy us too. Just thinking about it makes me furious."

The more Violet spoke, the angrier she got.

"And you said we shouldn't let personal feelings get in the way when taking people in. But our whole reason for doing this in the first place was to help. So, why is it okay to help, but then not okay to let our feelings guide us? Without personal feelings, Skye Embroidery wouldn't even exist. "And the reason I hate Jessica so much is because she and her mom picked on you. If anyone should be angry at her, it's you. Why are you still thinking about helping her? If the workshop ends up taking in people like her, it'd be better off shutting down. "You said you hate her too, so why are we even considering keeping her? Someone like her deserves to be kicked out and left to starve or be mistreated. Honestly, when people say we're being hypocritical, I'm starting to agree with them." Carissa knew her friend's temper well, and the latter rarely spoke so harshly. However, after Jessica appeared at the workshop and was kicked out, she slandered the place with Molly. So, it was natural for Violet to be furious.

Violet had tried to approach the situation rationally, but there were too many rumors spreading about the workshop now. The things people were saying also kept getting worse. On top of that, what she saw today pushed her to the breaking point. She couldn't hold it in any longer.

Carissa waited for Violet to calm down a little before saying, "How about this? Let's meet with Jessica. Afterward, we'll kick her out right then and there if you still don't want to take her in. How does that sound?"

"I don't want to see her, and I don't even want to go to the workshop," Violet said, clearly agitated. "The place's been filled with townspeople throwing rotten vegetables and smelly eggs. What was once a decent place is now a mess."

"Alright, then." Carissa sighed, relenting. "How about we have Claire investigate if the abuse claims are true?"

When Violet heard Carissa still

planned to investigate, she felt a wave of frustration. "In the end, you still don't agree with me. You don't want to kick Jessica out. I've already done my own investigation, but honestly, you don't need to

investigate further to know that she

is trouble."

She stood up to leave. "Do whatever you want."

Carissa watched her go but didn't stop her, knowing she must feel uncomfortable and angry because Jessica's presence had brought serious trouble to the workshop.

Lulu, who had been listening outside the door, entered as Violet left.

She asked, "My lady, if we just kick her out as Ms. Spencer suggested, wouldn't that solve everything? Why get into a conflict with Ms. Spencer over this?"

Carissa looked up. "Lulu, have you considered that maybe the people stirring up trouble aren't just targeting Jessica but the workshop itself?"

Lulu was confused. "Why would anyone target the workshop? Isn't it because of Jessica?"

Carissa sighed lightly. "Right now, yes. But from the moment we started the workshop, we faced a lot of opposition and criticism. A lot of people didn't want the workshop to succeed. With how big this mess has become, do you really think a few servants could be behind it all?"

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Lulu hadn't thought it through deeply. She just felt that if this issue was causing tension between them, it wasn't worth it.

"I think, considering how much Ms. Spencer has supported you all this time, it might be better to give in just this once. Besides, there's still no evidence to show that anyone other than the servants from Ironridge Estate is stirring things up." "There are some matters where it's better to be safe than sorry," Carissa said thoughtfully, resting her chin in her hand. "But I have a handle on this. Don't worry."

After a pause, she added, "I'll visit the workshop later."

Claire hadn't left and was still standing nearby. She actually agreed more with Carissa's approach. With things already causing such a stir from the very beginning, the workshop needed to take a firm stance. "Your Grace, I'll go with you."

Carissa looked up at her. "No need, Claire. You stay and continue investigating. See if anyone has been paid to spread rumors."

"Understood!" Claire replied before heading out.

Carissa then called for Luke, asking him to visit Giles and find out how many of the servants who had been mistreated by Jessica were involved, and which incidents had been the most serious.

Violet fumed as she paced around the garden. She walked in circles for a while before spotting Helen sitting in a pavilion, listening to music. Violet immediately made her way over.

Seeing her approach, Helen quickly signaled for the singer to leave and turned to Gillian. "Let's return to my room."

"Ms. Spencer is coming over," Gillian said with a smile.

"I can see she's coming. She's been walking in circles over there, puffing her cheeks out like that. We don't need any trouble. Let's go," Helen responded.

As Violet arrived at the pavilion, she could only watch as Helen left. She knew she had acted rashly earlier, but she was really angry. That large door, which she had personally chosen and had replaced, had been ruined. Also, Skye Embroidery's plaque had been defaced with some unknown substance. The calligraphy on it was done by Kyle-did Carissa not care at all?

What hurt the most was that their good intentions had been trashed, which left Violet feeling utterly disheartened.

"What are you daydreaming about?" Travis' voice suddenly came from behind her, and he gave her shoulder a light pat.

"Stop it. I'm already annoyed," Violet grumbled, sitting down in the pavilion with a sour expression.

Travis gave her a mischievous look. "Wow, I never thought I'd see you and Cari argue. You're a bit of a troublemaker, but you always listen to her. How did this even happen?"

Violet shot him a glare. "How do you know that? You're such a busybody."

Travis plopped down across from her, clearly pleased with himself. "What's going on in this house that I don't know about? What's got you so worked up? Haven't you ever been upset before? You're letting this little thing get to you?"

"Jessica was never a good person. Just get rid of her already. Why let that trash make trouble for the common people and destroy everything we've worked so hard for?" Violet grumbled.

Travis chuckled. "People's intentions

are the least valuable thing. The workshop has nothing to do with the common folk. They probably feel like they or their families will never need anything from the workshop, and deep down, they just don't like its existence. If it gets destroyed, so much the better."

Violet's anger flared. "That's exactly why we can't let them destroy it! Just kick Jessica out and be done with it. Why are we still protecting her?"

"Carissa's not protecting Jessica,"

Travis said with a smirk. "She's protecting the workshop. We've always listened to her since we were kids, and we still do. I'm not going to preach to you, but here's one thing that really hit home. She can face all the storms of the city without blinking, because she's been

through even bigger storms before."

Those words hit Violet like a sharp arrow to the chest. Suddenly, all her anger turned into something else-something much softer, more painful. Seeing her expression soften, Travis was about to continue comforting her when his eyes flicked to something behind her.

He burst out laughing. "Ha! Here she comes to apologize!"

Violet followed his gaze and turned around just in time to see a figure doing somersaults toward them. The figure's movements were light as a feather, flipping through the air, never seeming to touch the ground. After a dozen or more flips, the person landed gracefully in front of them.

Unable to hold back, Violet let out a laugh. "How childish. You're already all grown up and you're still doing this?"

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her mouth with a smile. Though there were tiny beads of sweat dotting her forehead, her bright eyes twinkled.

Carissa hopped down from the railing outside the pavilion, plucked a rose, and bit it between her teeth. She flipped over three more times, then nimbly swung herself back up, landing lightly beside Violet. She stretched out her arms and faced her friend, offering the rose in Violet snatched the flower from her, glaring at her in mock anger. "Seriously? You're the Hell Monarch's princess consort and you're flipping around like that? Isn't that embarrassing? Do you have no shame?"

"What could I do? I offended you, Ms. Spencer." Carissa's cheeks turned pink as she laughed brightly. "Have you forgiven me yet?"

Violet sighed. "I wasn't really angry with you to begin with. Come on, let's head to the workshop and find Jessica."

She pinched Carissa's arm and shot Travis a glare. "Still laughing? You're going to dislocate your jaw."

Travis couldn't stop laughing, tears welling up in his eyes. "You guys are killing me. You looked like a monkey."

Carissa and Violet ignored him and stepped out of the pavilion.

As they walked, Violet kicked Carissa in the rear and muttered, "You idiot."

Carissa glanced back, sticking her tongue out. "Who told you to fall for it?"

Violet chuckled, but as she laughed, she remembered Travis' words. A pang of sadness shot through her chest and her eyes welled with tears.

That idiot... it had been so long since Carissa had goofed off with them.

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They entered the workshop through the back door, as the front was still swarmed with a dozen or so locals shouting and causing a ruckus-throwing rocks, splashing dirty water, and tossing old shoes at the door.

As Carissa entered, she asked Brock, a burly guard sent by Hannah, if he had been keeping an eye on the situation outside.

He nodded. "They switch shifts every couple of hours. Some are just townspeople, but others are clearly here just to stir trouble."

Courtesy of Hannah, Brock had been assigned to watch over the place ever since the unrest started, to make sure no one damaged the property or harmed anyone inside.

Immediately sensing that something was off, Violet asked, "Where's Jessica?"

The tall and burly Brock replied, "She's been hiding in her room and refusing to come out. The past couple of days, she hasn't even been doing any cleaning. Selma told her that she won't get any food if she doesn't come out and work, but she would rather starve than open the door."

"Which room is she staying in?" Carissa asked.

"Room One in Peaceful Wing."

Brock called for Selma, the elderly maid who was taking care of things in Skye Embroidery.

"Selma, go call her. Tell her Lady Carissa and Ms. Spencer have arrived."

Carissa stopped him. "No need for that. We'll go ourselves."

Carissa knew exactly what kind of person Jessica was when things got tough, she hid. She wasn't exactly someone who stood her ground.

The residential wings were named after the concepts of peace and good fortune. Though Jessica hadn't formally moved in, Selma had arranged for her to stay in Room One in Peaceful Wing.

When they arrived, Selma knocked on the door. "Jessica, open up."

"I'm not opening the door. You can't make me leave. I won't leave!" came Jessica's voice from inside, cracking and drenched in panic.

"We're not asking you to leave. Lady Carissa and Ms. Spencer are here. Open the door," Selma called back, knocking louder.

At the sound of hurried footsteps from inside, everyone thought Jessica was coming to open the door. However, the footsteps stopped after a while, and a long silence followed. Carissa and Violet exchanged a glance, confused.

What was going on?

"Open the door or we'll break it down," Violet called out, walking over and knocking a few times herself.

From inside came a muffled voice, barely audible, "I won't come out. I know you're going to throw me out!"

"If you don't open the door, we'll really throw you out," Violet replied coldly.

The silence stretched for a moment, then Jessica's sobs suddenly filled the air. Raw and uncontrollable, her crying lasted for about 15 minutes before it finally began to die down.

A moment later, a broken voice

came from inside, saying, "I didn't mean to hurt her child. Her mom went too far, so I just thought I'd give that woman some laxatives to make her sick. I know I'm not a good person. I know I've fallen from grace and you all look down on me, but I never meant to kill anyone."

"Open the door and talk. I promise we won't throw you out until everything is clear," Carissa said firmly.

However, Violet was done waiting. With one sharp kick, she shattered the window, then climbed through and unlocked the door from the inside. A broken window was easier to fix than a damaged door

Inside, Jessica had hidden herself in the wardrobe. When Violet dragged her out, her eyes were swollen from crying.

She stared at Violet's raised fist in terror, her lips trembling as she whispered, "I won't leave."

As soon as she finished speaking, more tears streamed down her face.

Violet let go of her, her voice cold as ice as she said, "If you don't want to leave, then tell us the truth. What have you done? Don't think you can fool us-we'll find out everything."

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In the side hall, Selma had prepared some coffee. Jessica gulped down an entire cup, her throat dry, her stomach growling. She was hungry and thirsty, but she dared not leave her room for fear the people outside would burst in and come for her. Seeing Jessica in such a state, Selma said, "I saw you working diligently just a couple of days ago. How about I make you a bowl of noodles?"

"Thank you," Jessica murmured softly, her voice thick with tears as she watched Selma leave.

Her eyes were swollen, and the toll of exhaustion had taken its full effect. She looked like someone utterly defeated, stripped of all dignity.

"Everything I could give, I gave. I paid my debts," she muttered, her voice flat. "I still owe people so much money. I know I don't deserve any sympathy. I'm no good, but do you really think that as a so-called duchess in Ironridge Estate, I could do anything evil?"

"My mother-in-law hates me, my husband doesn't care for me, and I don't even have control over the household. When my mom was around, I spent twenty days a month at Harmony Palace. After they took my mom away, the Kingsley family fell apart. I was demoted to a commoner, and even in Ironridge Estate, I endured everything that happened there. Even when I was upset, I kept my mouth shut."

Tears streamed down her face. "I didn't have anything against that woman who married into the Marquis of Ironridge's family. I had no say in the matter anyway. Maybe I would've cared before, but not now. When Serena came into the family, I hated her. Carissa, I know you think I brought all this on myself, because the one she wanted was Rafael. So yes, it's karma."

Jessica wiped her eyes and nose with her sleeve, choking on a sob. "I did hit Serena, but she deserved it. She was vile, using every dirty trick to vie for favor. She'd do anything to get attention, and even my mother-in-law knew about it. She punished Serena more than

once.

"As for Flora, she never offended me or anything before. After she came into the household, she always behaved herself. She would address and treat me respectfully whenever she saw me. If it weren't for her, I would've slapped her mom long ago. Why would I harm her child? Think about my situation there. Why would I bother-"

Having been listening to her ramble, Violet interrupted, "What did Flora's mom do to you?"

Jessica's eyes flared with anger. "That woman is vicious. She stole my royal jelly soup. She said I was like a useless hen who couldn't lay eggs, so I shouldn't even bother eating it. She said it would be better if her daughter, who was carrying the marquis' precious heir, ate it. She said as a lowly commoner, I had no right to such luxuries."

Carissa furrowed her brow. "A concubine's mom dared to say that about you? Where did you hear this? Could it be that someone was trying to slander her in front of you?"

"I heard it with my own ears!" Jessica's voice grew louder, thick with fury. "She said it right to my face. When I yelled at her, she turned around and started packing to leave. Then, my mother-in-law and my husband scolded me."

"How could I defend myself? Should I go to Madam Margaret and complain that Flora's mom called me a hen who can't lay eggs? Even if I did, they wouldn't believe me. They never believe anything I say."

Carissa watched as tears welled up in Jessica's swollen eyes again, as though she were on the verge of breaking down completely.

She quickly asked, "What kind of laxative did you give her? How much did you use? Who did you ask to do it?"

Jessica sniffed. "I told Serena to do it. I don't know how much she used. I just said that vicious woman should be made to suffer for two full days."

Violet gaped at her. "You asked

Serena to do it? Are you out of your mind? You treated Serena horribly and always made her life miserable. She's bound to hate you for it, and you still asked her to give someone a laxative? I don't even know what to say to you."

Jessica was vicious and stupid!

"What do you mean I made her miserable? Since she came into the family, I've only hit her three times. After that, figured things were set so I let it go. But sometimes, when she behaved badly in front of me, I'd snap at her-maybe a dozen times? More, maybe. But she got used to it, and even said I was 'teaching' her when I scolded her."

Jessica sniffed hard, then stretched out her hand as if to ask for a handkerchief. But when she saw their fine clothes and looked down at the simple, rough fabric of her own outfit, she quickly pulled her hand back.

"Even though don't like Serena, this

has nothing to do with her. It's a fact that I told her to do it. The reason pushed her into the lake later was because she sold me out and revealed I was the one who told her to use the laxative."

Carissa and Violet exchanged a glance, both unsure of what to say next.

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Violet couldn't help but think that Jessica truly was something else-bad, without a doubt, but also truly foolish.

She probably inherited her foolishness, which Eleanor must have already accepted and moved on. Otherwise, why would Eleanor have kept everything from her daughter after all those years of planning? With that thought, Violet couldn't resist asking, "How much do you know about your mom's situation?"

"What's it to you?" Jessica instantly tensed, eyeing her warily. "Don't try to frame me. I don't know anything!"

Seeing how defensive she was, Violet decided not to push further, instead asking about the maids in her former household. She seemed to think they were trustworthy and loyal to her.

"Even after I was divorced, I didn't take them with me. They won't be mistreated in Ironridge Estate, and Madam Margaret is lenient. There's no reason for them to suffer with me," said Jessica.

Carissa raised an eyebrow. "You've never considered that Serena might try to harm you? How did the medicine end up switched so carelessly?"

"She wouldn't dare," Jessica responded firmly. "Since she entered the house, she's relied on me for everything. Why would she try to harm me?"

"You say that, but didn't she sell you out?"

Jessica paused, then instinctively defended Serena, explaining, "She was afraid they would find out, so she sold me out. She only added laxatives to the medicine. She didn't actually harm anyone." "You're such a good person," Violet said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Hearing the sarcasm loud and clear, Jessica turned her face away, silent.

Carissa felt the situation was a bit incredulous, but pressed on, asking, "But this concerns the family's heir. Didn't the Marquis of Ironridge's family investigate further?"

Jessica sneered bitterly. "Madam

Margaret was sick, and so was

Emma, who was barely hanging on. The marquis sent a housekeeper to investigate, and after Serena ratted me out, I just admitted it. Since confessed, they didn't pursue it further. After all, in their eyes, what kind of cruel things couldn't I have done?"

Violet clicked her tongue in disbelief. "Unbelievable. You handed all the dirty work to Serena, without knowing what kind of drug she used or how much she put in. You look down on her, yet you trust her so much. Do you really think she won't cause any trouble? Let me tell you, even the meekest rabbit will bite when cornered. And Serena? She's weasel."

Violet despised the Warren family and felt no surprise at all over the kind of schemes they were capable of. She believed that Serena was the true mastermind behind everything.

But Carissa didn't see it that way. While it was clear that Jessica had ordered Serena to administer the laxative and that Serena had carried it out, there had to be someone else pulling the strings behind the scenes.

She asked, "Flora lost her child, but your husband didn't divorce you then. Were you only divorced and cast out after you pushed Serena into the lake and they found out you were involved in usury?"

"That's right," Jessica admitted bitterly. "But they had already been planning to cast me out before that. It was just that they decided to pile my offenses together to make it seem more justified."

Violet gave a cynical chuckle. "Well, don't feel too unfairly treated. In the end, they didn't cast you out over trying to harm the heir or the concubine. If they had, you'd be locked up for sure. Madam Margaret treated you decently, considering."

At those words, Jessica seemed to recall something and began crying again. After her sobs subsided, she blinked her swollen eyes open, barely able to see through the narrow slits of her lids.

"I remember... When I first entered the family, Madam Margaret treated me well. But I was arrogant and unruly. I thought, with my parents backing me, I could look down on everyone. I even thought Madam Margaret was trying to suck up to me.

"After my mom was imprisoned and

my dad was executed, I truly thought

the sky was falling. When I was downgraded to commoner status, thought they would be desperate to get rid of me. But... I never expected they'd still keep me around until now," she said.

Carissa suddenly asked, "What kind of person was Lady Emma? You knew her for so many years. You must know her nature better than anyone."

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Jessica thought back on all the years of tangled emotions and conflicts with Emma, who had since passed away. Death was like a light that had gone out, and in hindsight, most of the things that had angered Jessica seemed to be her own fault. She was always nitpicking and finding fault where there was none. After a long silence, she finally spoke softly, "Actually, she was a good person. She was devoted, kind-hearted, and gave birth to an heir for the marquis. She managed the household's affairs for many years. If she hadn't miscarried last year, her health wouldn't have deteriorated so quickly." "She miscarried last year?" Violet asked.

"Yes. Her health was always fragile. The physician advised her against getting pregnant again, but she unintentionally became pregnant. The child was frail and couldn't be saved. After the miscarriage, her body was severely weakened. If it hadn't been for that, she wouldn't have died so young," Jessica explained.

Carissa remembered asking Luke about Emma, but it seemed that he hadn't mentioned this. He had only said that she had suffered a lasting illness after giving birth to her second child. It was clear now that Giles might know much more than he let on, but hadn't told Luke everything-only selected bits and pieces.

Violet sighed inwardly. It seemed that Emma was truly a good person. Even someone as sharp-tongued and venomous as Jessica spoke well of her, so it had to be true.

Such a capable and intelligent woman, yet she had been repeatedly harmed by pregnancy-related complications, ultimately leading to her untimely death. It was truly a tragic waste.

"You're sure you never killed any of the servants?" Violet asked again.

Jessica looked wounded. "No, I didn't. I admit I've hit and scolded people, but not often. Madam Margaret didn't like me, and most of the people around me were my own. If I needed to vent my frustration or anger, it was always directed at my own people." During the ride back in the carriage, Violet completely abandoned the idea of driving Jessica away.

Carissa spoke up, "Let's each say who we suspect."

"Alright," Violet replied.

The two of them looked at each other, and the names came out in unison.

"Serena!"

"Lady Emma and Serena."

Violet stared in shock. "You suspect Emma? How could that be? Not to mention she's dead, but even when she was alive, she was too sick to get out of bed. How could it have been her?"

Carissa analyzed the situation with her, "If you were Serena..."

"Ugh, I'm not!" Violet spat.

Carissa nodded. "Fine. If Travis was Serena, after entering the marquis' household, she would've made an enemy of Jessica. Wouldn't she have needed to find a powerful backer?"

"Just say it's Serena, don't bring up Rod. I really don't want to run into him later and feel the urge to punch him." Violet tilted her head, considering. "You make a valid point, but didn't Serena manage to get Jessica on her side?"

"Getting Jessica on her side

wouldn't really help. She didn't have

power in the household and was

always bullying her. Serena couldn't make a connection with Madam, Margaret, and the Marquis of Ironridge didn't like her much either. If Serena wanted to stand her

ground, she'd have to rely on Lady Emma, who had authority over the household. Of course, this is just my guess. It's not necessarily the truth," said Carissa.

Violet agreed with this line of reasoning. "True. Serena couldn't

have relied on Jessica. The marquis doesn't like her either, and Serena is an opportunist. She must

understand Emma's

value-someone who gave birth to

the eldest son in the family and has control of the household."

"Exactly. If we assume that is the case, Serena must have already been working with Lady Emma. But, for one, she couldn't directly oppose Jessica, the primary wife at the time. Two, Lady Emma and Jessica didn't have an open feud, so Serena played both sides. When Jessica asked her to administer the laxative, she immediately told Lady Emma, who knew her time was running out. With the Marquis of Ironridge liking Lady Flora, who was pregnant, Lady Emma had to plan for her children's future..."

Carissa continued her analysis but then paused, realizing she was possibly assuming a lot of ill intent on Emma's part without enough evidence to prove it.

"I've already instructed Claire to continue investigating. We'll see what comes up and discuss it again," she concluded.

Violet, who had been listening intently, suddenly went quiet before saying, "But you know, I think your reasoning makes sense."

"Oh? So, now you agree with me? Who was throwing a tantrum earlier today?" Carissa shot her a playful glare.

Violet grinned mischievously. "I've forgiven you for today's little outburst. Don't bring it up again."

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Luke returned after speaking with Giles, confirming that Jessica had indeed mistreated the servants-beating and scolding them. When Luke brought up Emma, Giles broke down in tears. He said that Emma was well-liked at the estate and would have been a rightful wife if it hadn't been for Jessica.

Claire had also returned, but hadn't uncovered any new information. She had tried asking the servants at Ironridge Estate, but they didn't say anything. This meant that, aside from the few servants who claimed they had been abused by Jessica and were seeking revenge, no one else had come forward.

Clearly, the management of servants at Ironridge Estate and the confidentiality of the inner workings of the estate were handled exceptionally well. It seemed those few people were intentionally going out of their way to tarnish Jessica's reputation.

"By the way, while there were no new leads at Ironridge Estate, we did find out the reason the rumors were spreading so wildly. A few scholars wrote articles condemning the workshop, listing

several moral violations it had committed," Claire added. "What kind of scholars? Have you traced them?" Carissa asked.

Claire nodded. "Yes, the scholars are all students of Malcolm Quinton."

"Malcolm Quinton?" Violet paused, not recalling the name immediately.

"The Civil Minister from the Quinton family, the queen's dad," Carissa reminded her.

"Ah, him," Violet muttered, anger rising in her chest. "Why would he do that?"

Carissa wasn't surprised at all. She sighed lightly. "To speak up for women and to help them find a way out-that should have been the queen's role."

"But the queen didn't do it. And it's a shameful thing to be doing. Why is the queen trying to steal that from us?" Violet snapped.

"It's a shameful thing now, but Lord Quinton is thinking in the long-term. He must know that if the workshop continues, there will come a day when the people will recognize and praise it. In that case, as the Hell Monarch's princess consort, I might overshadow the queen's glory as the mother of the nation," Carissa explained.

Claire nodded in agreement. "Exactly. Even if the queen doesn't do anything, her position as the mother of the nation still earns her the people's support. But now, if the queen isn't stepping in and Lady Carissa is, that's just not acceptable."

"Then, why can't she just show some support? What's so difficult about that?" Violet retorted, fuming.

"She really can't support it now. She can't afford any criticism, not until the king officially chooses someone as crown prince," Carissa said.

"So annoying," Violet muttered, realizing Carissa had been right to consider things so carefully.

Whether it was sending Jessica away or keeping her, as long as the truth hadn't been uncovered, it would give others leverage to use against the workshop.

"Claire, keep an eye on Lady Emma's trusted servants and maids, and also pay attention to Giles," Carissa ordered.

"Understood." Claire nodded and left to carry out her tasks.

As the evening grew later, the sky darkened around them.

Violet sank back into her chair. "If Emma really arranged all of this before she died, my jaw would hit the floor."

"It's just a reasonable suspicion." Carissa sipped her coffee. "Either way, we have to get to the bottom of this."

"And the Quinton family? How do we handle them?" Violet asked.

"Tomorrow's a day off. I'll send Raf to the Quinton family to hint at some things face-to-face."

"Do you think he'll admit to anything?"

"No need for Lord Quinton to admit anything. We'll have Raf go and make it clear that the workshop is a done deal. Once he sees my junior guild member at his door, he'll know exactly what we mean."

Violet gave a small nod. "Let's hope so. I really don't want every little nuisance coming out of the woodwork. And that Lord Quinton... Now remember, he took a Kingsley family daughter as a mistress and even had a daughter with her, right?"

"That's him. His wife, Madam Marjorie, took the daughter back, saying she was going to have her raised by one of the concubines," Carissa confirmed.

"Marjorie seems like a kind and loving woman. Why is it that all the good women end up with the wrong husbands?" said Violet, her voice tinged with frustration.

A shadow passed over Carissa's eyes as she spoke softly, "That's why we need to make sure the workshop opens smoothly. Just like the women's academy, workshops will spread everywhere one day."

"I won't act on impulse again," a deeply moved Violet replied guiltily.

Rafael didn't return until nearly

midnight. After exchanging a glance

with his brother and laughing, Salvador entrusted him with a few matters to investigate. He had been busy with court duties during the day and still needed to carve out a few hours at night to offer advice to

Of course, with tomorrow being a day off, he still had to go to the Quinton family's residence for Carissa. He had been neglecting her recently, and his heart weighed heavily with guilt. When he heard that he could help his wife, he slapped his chest confidently and said, "Leave it to me."

Chapter 1038

Ignoring the late hour, Rafael sent someone to the Quinton family's residence with a notice of his visit the following day.

"Since he went against my senior guild member, he can forget about getting any sleep tonight," the prince quipped.

Carissa's lips curled into a smile. "I'll go with you tomorrow to see Madam Marjorie."

"Alright." Rafael pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead. His voice was a little rough as he whispered, "It's April, and we still haven't had a chance to go for a spring outing. Marrying me must be such a hardship for you." Carissa rested her face against his chest, recalling the time he had tumbled down a mountain.

She couldn't help but chuckle and tease him, "Do you still want to go skiing? I think the snow's probably all gone by now."

"N-no, it's fine," Rafael stammered, flustered.

He lowered his head and, with a possessive kiss, silenced her teasing.

At that moment, Sydney came in with a late-night snack. She was greeted by the sight of Lulu running out with a flushed face, nearly bumping into her.

Sydney couldn't help but laugh and scold, "What are you rushing around for?"

Sydney stepped inside. Upon lifting the curtain at the door, she spun around so quickly that she nearly twisted her waist. Still holding the snack, she quickly retreated.

Who could possibly be bothered with this ordinary meal when there was something so much more enticing to look at?

She thoughtfully closed the door behind her, a smile on her face as she glanced up at the sky. The stars twinkled brightly, while the crescent moon hid behind thin clouds, shyly refusing to show itself to the world.

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At the Quinton family's residence, Malcolm sat solemnly in his armchair. The fact that someone from Hell Monarch Estate had sent a notice of visit in the middle of the night left him slightly vexed.

On the one hand, sending a notice of visit so late could be considered courteous. On the other hand, it seemed disrespectful to disturb him at such an hour.

Naturally, Malcolm understood exactly why this was happening.

This all started with the commotion at Ironridge Estate, where things had blown up. Normally, once someone dug into the Marquis of Ironridge's family, they wouldn't dig too deep. But clearly, the people from Hell Monarch Estate weren't going to back down easily. Malcolm's feelings toward Rafael were mixed-admiration and wariness. It was much like how the king had once felt about the prince. However, it now seemed that Salvador had pushed past his doubt and was starting to trust his brother more and more. Once the balance was broken, danger loomed.

Malcolm saw it clearly and felt the urgency in his chest.

The notice of visit had been

delivered late at night, but the Hell Monarch's carriage didn't arrive at the Quinton family's residence until nearly noon the following day. Despite his impatience, Malcolm could only greet them with a smile, accompanied by his family.

Jacob and Lulu came along, both carrying gifts a necessity when visiting. However, Rafael's gift was for Gerald, while Carissa's was for Marjorie Though Malcolm wasn't he

receiving anything from them, still put on a smile. He ushered them in and followed all the formalities, from offering seats to serving refreshments.

After Carissa took a sip of her coffee, she invited Marjorie to stroll through the garden. Rafael could handle things here without her.

Marjorie looked much more haggard than the last time Carissa had seen her. Only a light dusting of rouge hid her fatigue.

The two women walked ahead, with

a small group of maids and servants

trailing at a distance. A soft breeze caressed their faces as the sun shone warmly, creating a

picture perfect day. The garden was filled with the delicate scent of blooming flowers, while butterflies danced through the air, their radiant

wings shimmering in the sunlight.

Yet, despite the beauty around her, Marjorie's face remained melancholy. It was as if the sorrow of autumn still clung to her. Only when speaking to Carissa did she offer a faint smile.

"I've always wanted to visit you, Your Grace, but I heard that you've been busy with official duties so I didn't want to disturb you. I'm so happy to see you today."

"You seem to be looking weary. You should take care of yourself," Carissa said with concern.

"Thank you for your kindness, Your Grace," Marjorie replied softly. "I assume you've come because of Skye Embroidery?"

"You've heard about it?" Carissa asked, her brow lifting in mild surprise.

"I've heard whispers," Marjorie said, stopping and bowing toward the princess consort. "If I've offended you in any way, please allow me to apologize first."

Carissa gently touched her hand, then asked, "What do you think of Skye Embroidery, Madam Marjorie?"

Marjorie met Carissa's gaze, and for a moment, her eyes were bright and clear.

"It's excellent," she said softly.

Chapter 1039

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Able to easily distinguish between politeness and sincerity, Carissa could tell that Marjorie wasn't being dismissive.

"Madam Marjorie, the queen is your daughter. If Skye Embroidery is something the queen is spearheading, then that would be the best possible outcome," Carissa said.

Marjorie paused for a moment, slightly startled. "Your Grace, if Skye Embroidery succeeds, it will certainly be remembered for generations. You've already started working on it, and although there will be obstacles, I believe it won't be too difficult for you." Carissa smiled. "It's easier said than done. In the end, it's a matter of changing mindsets."

Marjorie nodded slightly, resuming her walk. "Indeed, it's difficult. But since you've already borne the criticism, why should you share any credit with Her Majesty?"

Carissa chuckled lightly. "I believe claiming credit for this would be too shallow. The real accomplishment is ensuring that it benefits the people."

There was a brief pause before Marjorie responded, her voice laced with admiration, "You have a rare and broad-minded perspective, Your Grace. It's truly remarkable."

Recognizing the moment for what it was, Carissa gently suggested, "Perhaps you could speak to Her Majesty about it."

Carissa had a clear purpose in mind. If Victoria took the lead in backing the women's academy, while Kylie took charge of the workshop, many of the thorny issues would be alleviated. Marjorie nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you, Your Grace. I will mention it to her."

Hearing her calm, unhurried tone, Carissa knew the chances of Kylie getting involved were slim. So, she didn't waste time and asked directly, "If Her Majesty isn't interested, would you be?" They reached a pavilion and sat down slowly.

Marjorie gave a faint smile and said, "My household affairs keep me busy. I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to live up to your expectations, Your Grace."

Carissa didn't press her. "There's no need to live up to anything. Just follow your heart."

Marjorie's eyes seemed to lose focus for a moment.

Follow her heart?

Women couldn't follow their hearts. This world was ruled by men.

In the main hall, the atmosphere had grown tense after Rafael spoke.

"Skye Embroidery is my princess consort's hard work. I don't want anyone ruining it-anyone at all," he said, blunt and direct.

The words hung in the air, almost blatantly stating his intent. Malcolm had expected some subtlety, perhaps a few pleasantries first, before getting to the matter at hand.

Instead, it was brought up directly with no buildup, leaving no room for tact or grace. It was downright awkward. If anything, it would've been better to just be upfront at least then Malcolm could've come up with some excuse. Rafael, ever considerate, didn't leave the tension hanging. When the atmosphere hit an all-time low, he took the chance and made things clear, as Malcolm wanted.

"As for the troublemakers among the scholars, I'll be keeping an eye on them for now. But if they cause any more trouble, I won't show them any leniency, even with your intervention," the prince declared. Malcolm's lips twitched. He had no choice but to swallow his frustration. There was no longer any room for explanation or debate. Rafael wasn't here to ask for anything; he was here to lay down the law.

Seeing Malcolm's silence, the Hell Monarch pressed on, saying, "Given the damage they've done to the reputation of the workshop, they need to make amends. They'll need to publicly correct their lies.

"Of course, their earlier slander was

done in secrecy. I have no patience for underhanded methods. If they're going to make things right, it has to be done openly-by signing their names to the articles, which must first be submitted to Jacob for review. If he approves, they can be published."

He set down his cup, eyes sharp and serious. "That's the purpose of my visit today. I expect you to handle this thoroughly, Lord Quinton. Make sure I don't have to come back again."

Malcolm's face shifted between

shades of anger and disbelief. "Your Highness, are you forcing my hand? They have the right to voice their opinions. You can't say the

workshop is your princess's consort

project and forbid anyone from speaking against it. Remember,

under the weight of power, there will always be resistance."

Rafael took another sip of coffee, his expression unchanging as he spoke in a warm and calm tone, "I understand, but you and those scholars need to understand this: If they don't follow my instructions, they'll soon learn what real power feels like." Malcolm's face darkened with fury. "Are you threatening me, Your Highness?"

Rafael nodded, setting the cup down with deliberate calmness. His gaze was unwavering. "If you have any complaints, you're welcome to voice them, Lord Quinton. We can settle them slowly. I can find a hundred mistakes in you, but I doubt you'll be able to find even one in me."

His words hit like a hammer, the weight of them pressing down on Malcolm's chest, making it hard to breathe.

Chapter 1040

His tone deliberate, Rafael spoke slowly, "Having leverage in someone else's hands really does leave you at their mercy. I didn't make your situation public at first because a good piece of leverage should be used wisely. Now, the time has come. No more talking. If the articles aren't in Jacob's hands within two days, you'll have to write an article yourself to clear your name."

There it was—a blatant threat.

Malcolm's chest heaved with frustration, but he could only glare in silence.

Rafael remained as composed as ever, as if he hadn't just made a bombshell of a statement. He sipped the fine coffee in his cup, showing no sign of haste. He was a man of high standards, and this coffee was quite good. Malcolm's household clearly had taste, though they also liked to flaunt their moral superiority.

Such self-righteous people were often the easiest to handle, especially someone like Malcolm who was so concerned with his reputation yet careless about preserving his dignity.

After taking a moment to savor the coffee, Carissa and Marjorie returned. Rafael stood, his eyes still fixed on the pale-faced Malcolm.

"I have important matters to attend to today, so I'll take my leave. I hope I won't need to return."

Malcolm's face had turned a shade too dark to pull off even a polite smile. He stiffly rose and managed to say, "Your Highness, Your Grace, please travel safely."

In contrast, Marjorie's farewell was sincere. She turned to Carissa with a warm smile and said, "Please do visit whenever you can, Your Grace. I enjoy our conversations so much."

"I will," Carissa replied, smiling as she waved.

The carriage moved slowly through the bustling streets of the capital, the lively energy of the city apparent from the crowded roads.

Taking a rare break from their busy lives, the couple shared a quiet understanding as they got out of the carriage. They told Jacob and Lulu to head back first while they wandered the streets for a bit.

Of course, strolling through the market was out of the question. Their looks and demeanor were too striking-they would stick out like a sore thumb in a crowd.

So, they headed for Glimmering Tower, where they booked a private room and ordered a few exquisite dishes. They also asked for a bottle of ice wine. As it was poured into a glass, its fragrance filled the air. Rafael's eyes lit up. "It's been so long since I've had a good drink."

Carissa lifted her glass, clinking it gently against his, a teasing smile on her lips. "Drink as much as you want today. If you get drunk, I'll carry you back."

Rafael grinned, taking a sip before setting his glass down. He gently traced his fingers along her cheek, his gaze soft with unspoken affection.

"If I get drunk, I'll row us out onto the lake in a boat. We can lie back and watch the stars. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

His gentle voice brushed her heart like a feather, making her feel a bit tipsy. It was almost as if she were already drunk.

She smiled sweetly and responded, "Alright!"

"Darling," he said, gazing at her intently.

Carissa lifted her head, feeling a bit unfamiliar with the term. Yet, it sounded so intimate that her cheeks flushed a soft red. "Yes?"

"At the time of our marriage, it must have felt like I was pushing you into it. Did you feel wronged?" Rafael asked, his eyes filled with regret.

Their marriage was officially

arranged by Salvador, a union meant

to retract his brother's military

authority. But in reality, it was the

outcome the prince had wanted all

along.

At that time, Carissa had no real choice-pushed to either marry Rafael or enter the palace as a concubine.

"Did you feel wronged, marrying me?" Carissa countered, her gaze playful.

Rafael froze for a moment. "How could I feel wronged? You know my heart. I got what I wanted."

A warmth spread across Carissa's eyes. "Mom always hoped I'd marry a good man. I think she'd be content now." The prince raised an eyebrow. "Your mom would be content, but what about you?"

"Me?" Carissa refilled his wine, a smile lighting up her face. "I've gotten a great deal. How could I not be happy?" Rafael's face seemed to glow under her gaze. "Do you have feelings for me?"

Carissa put the wine bottle down, thinking for a moment.

Just when Rafael thought she was about to answer, she asked, "Haven't you already asked me that question?" As his heart skipped a beat, he suddenly blurted, "Carissa, I love you."

"You've already said that too."

She rested her chin in her hand, staring at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Rafael inhaled sharply, leaning in closer. Their eyes locked, and she felt her pulse quicken, her face warming.

"You'll say it eventually, but no rush. I'll spend a lifetime waiting for you to say you love me."

Carissa clutched the sleeve of her dress, her heart swelling with emotion and a strange, unfamiliar longing. Alongside it, however, was the fear of losing him.

He already had a permanent place in

her heart. She cared for him deeply,

yet she dared not let herself much. How she wished th

too

could stay together forever.

But the world was cruel. There would be separations, both in life and in death. Whether by life's parting or death's, they could come without warning, striking out of nowhere.

Tears welled in her eyes, though a smile lingered on her lips. "Alright."

He leaned in and gently bit her lip.

"I promise, we'll always be together," he said, his voice low and reassuring.

As a couple united in heart, he understood her every thought.

Carissa lifted her gaze, her long lashes brushing against his eyes. Tears shimmered in her eyes, lingering on the edge but refusing to fall.