

## War Song 1071

### Chapter 1071

The gifts remained untouched in the storage room, and Carissa hadn't even bothered to glance at them.

After dinner, she took a lamp and went inside alone.

Rafael offered to stay with her, but she refused, insisting she wanted to open the gifts by herself. Even Violet's attempt to join her was turned away at the door.

Though Rafael was uneasy, he moved a stool just outside and sat, keeping vigil from the hallway.

Dylan had returned with news. When Barrett learned of Aurora's death, he had thrown himself against a wall in a violent fit. His wound bled heavily.

Dylan was still in shock. He had seen it with his own eyes-Barrett had slammed into the wall with such force. Dylan felt as though Barrett was trying to end his life right then and there.

Luckily, in his rage, Barrett had stumbled, which lessened the blow. Otherwise, there was no doubt he would've died on impact.

Confused, Dylan asked Jacob, "Why would he do that? If he wanted to die for Aurora, why didn't he just go with her when she was taken? That would've shown his feelings for her. Why wait until now, after Aurora has been executed, to throw himself into death?" Jacob thought for a moment, equally perplexed by Barrett's actions. "Did they manage to save him?"

"I don't know. When I left, they were carrying him inside. His wife was screaming in a panic, and the whole estate was in chaos. Oh, and his younger sister came charging at me. She almost scratched me up-I was lucky to get away." Dylan's voice still held a trace of fear as he recounted the incident. That woman had been ferocious. She looked like a wild animal, mouth open wide as though she wanted to devour him whole.

Jacob patted him on the shoulder. "With that family, you can't make sense of things. Best to keep your distance and avoid getting involved."

Dylan, still rattled, nodded. "I'm glad I went to tell him myself. If he had come looking for answers at the estate and then slammed into the wall, I would have been in trouble. My mouth wouldn't have been able to get me out of that mess." Jacob nodded in agreement. "Right. Go rest now. Don't dwell on it."

Dylan reluctantly agreed, but he couldn't shake off the feeling. He had to talk to Violet and Travis about what had happened. He had never seen anything like it before. Barrett had never seemed particularly devoted to Aurora, but he now seemed to be putting on a show of deep affection. It didn't make sense.

It was hard to tell if Barrett's behavior was genuine or just a performance. It didn't make sense—who was he trying to fool? If the king ever found out, Barrett would be reprimanded. The entire court would only look down on him, and even his wife would be nothing but heartbroken and disappointed.

Jacob moved a chair over to the storeroom door to speak to Rafael about it.

Neither Jacob nor Rafael could understand Barrett's actions. Perhaps they both felt it wasn't important enough to dwell on, so they didn't push the matter further.

Inside the storeroom, Carissa finally opened the chest her seventh uncle, Wade, had sent. She stood in front of it for a long while before moving the lamp aside and unlocking the chest. The gift from Wade was rather unique.

It was a row of syringes. When she twisted the cap off one, inside was a thin steel needle—short, about the length of half a finger, as delicate as a seamstress's needle.

Curious, she counted the syringes. There were thirty in total, each containing fifty needles.

She wondered what this could mean. Why would he send her needles? Did Wade want her to focus on embroidery from now on?

As she picked up one of the needles and examined it under the lamp, she realized it wasn't an embroidery needle at all. It had no hole for thread—one end was sharp, while the other end was flat.

Just as she was starting to wonder, she noticed a small carved cherry wood box in the left corner of the chest. The box wasn't very big, about the size of a jewelry box.

She opened it, and inside was a bracelet. The bracelet was made of pure gold, with two gemstones set in it—a ruby and a sapphire.

It wasn't particularly refined—if anything, it was a bit crude. The clasp was visibly damaged, and she could make out a tiny crack along the seam. The crack wasn't glaringly obvious, but if one looked closely, it was clear enough.

She also noticed the sapphire

seemed to move. Curious, she

pressed on it and heard a soft click

as the gem shifted, revealing a small hole underneath. She pressed the ruby, and it slid to the side,

uncovering a small opening about

the size of her pinky finger.

Carissa was unsure of the bracelet's purpose, so she set it aside for now and opened the chest her third uncle had sent. When she saw what was inside, she couldn't help but laugh—inside the box were numerous small willow-leaf knives.

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How small were they?

They were about the length of a pinky finger, but as thin as paper. Carissa casually grabbed a handful and threw them, and the flying daggers sank deep into the wall.

Of course, the daggers themselves didn't have that kind of power. But because of their willow-leaf shape and thinness, they became extremely powerful when propelled with inner force.

Carissa wasn't surprised. After all, she could throw leaves or flowers with nearly the same precision and power. Of course, the damage wouldn't compare to a throwing knife, which was far more effective—deadly, even.

She thought back to a visit from her third and seventh uncles when they had come to Meadow Ridge. At the time, Adrian had been experimenting with concealed weapons. She had just started training and had complained to her uncles. She said if only there were a hidden weapon that was both easy to use and lethally effective, it would be perfect.

Suddenly, a memory struck her. Her expression changed, and she quickly grabbed the bracelet. She poured a few more needles from the syringe, placed them into the small opening of the ruby, and closed it. She pressed down on the sapphire, and with two sharp hisses, the steel needles shot out with incredible force. Both needles embedded themselves into the wooden beam above her.

Since she had aimed upward, the needles lodged into the beam. But if she had been facing an enemy, the needles would have struck with lightning speed, so fast that the target wouldn't have time to react.

She remained dazed for a long time, tears streaming down her face.

This was exactly what she had told Wade. If there were a hidden weapon that didn't rely on inner force but could still be powerful on its own, she could use it even if gravely injured or on the verge of death. She would be able to take her enemy's life and avenge herself. Wade had actually created it.

At the time, she had only been speaking casually. She knew how difficult it was to craft such a concealed weapon, especially one disguised as jewelry.

She couldn't help but sob aloud.

Outside, Rafael had been listening closely. He had heard the sound of the throwing knife earlier, but the needles had been completely silent to him. However, Carissa's crying reached his ears loud and clear. "Carissa, what's wrong?" he called out in a panic.

Carissa wiped her tears and opened the door. She held up the bracelet, letting the light reflect off it as she waved it before him.

"This is a gift from my seventh uncle, Uncle Wade."

Rafael's sharp eyes immediately noticed that the bracelet was different. What seemed like a crack was in truth a hidden clasp with a mechanism inside.

"It can hold steel needles," Carissa said excitedly, pulling him inside. She quickly took a few needles from the syringe and began loading them into the bracelet. This time, she filled it to its maximum capacity. It could hold more than twenty needles.

The bracelet's round design

accommodated the slightly flexible steel needles. Once inside, the clasp's mechanism bent the needles slightly. When triggered, the needles would spring straight as they launched, gaining additional acceleration from the snapback

motion. This made their force upon release truly extraordinary.

Carissa tested it again, aiming upwards. Her shot missed the mark slightly, and the angle was just a bit off.

Rafael noticed the issue and adjusted the bracelet for her. He rotated the sapphire slightly, shifting it an inch. When the needles launched this time, they shot out straight and hit the correct angle.

"So, if an enemy is in front of me, the sapphire shouldn't point directly at them? It needs to be offset by an inch?" Carissa asked, intrigued.

"Exactly. If it's aimed directly at them..."

Carissa removed the bracelet, placed it on the ground, and adjusted its direction. Lying flat on her stomach, she triggered the sapphire. The needles shot out-but instead of flying straight, they arced back toward her original position. In other words, if the sapphire was aligned directly with an enemy, the needles would loop back toward the bracelet's user. The added tension from the bend increased the force of the needles, making them even deadlier.

"Incredible," Rafael muttered, clearly

impressed. "It's a reverse

mechanism. If you don't adjust the bracelet, you risk hurting yourself And if the bracelet falls into an enemy's hands, they won't know the trick. The moment they activate it, they'll end up injuring themselves."

"Why didn't Uncle Wade mention this? If I hadn't noticed, I could have hurt myself!" Carissa exclaimed.

Rafael frowned thoughtfully. He

doubted Wade would have

overlooked such an important detail.

Searching the box where the

bracelet had been stored, he didn't find anything at first. But then he ckd

noticed a piece of brocade

beneath a wooden box that had been set aside.

He lifted it, revealing a fabric covered in dense, handwritten notes.

"It's a letter from your seventh uncle," Rafael said, handing it to her carefully. "Do you want to read it?"

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Carissa hesitated for a moment before finally taking the letter.

She sat down on the wooden chest, holding the letter in her hands for a long time before carefully unfolding it.

Wade had never been fond of reading. He preferred carpentry, crafting mechanisms, and excelling in martial arts. Dominic had often chastised him, accusing him of neglecting serious pursuits. Even

as a military officer, Wade was expected to understand military strategy and tactics, not just rely on brute strength. Dominic had forced Wade to study through threats and even the occasional caning.

But effort without interest-and a near-total lack of talent-meant Wade had never made much progress in academics. His handwriting was notoriously messy. He had once joked that his strokes were a masterpiece of wild grace, a chaotic dance of dragons and snakes that only the truly enlightened could appreciate.

Remembering his words, Carissa glanced at the haphazard script and couldn't help but agree.

Fortunately, she could make out the general meaning, even if a few words eluded her. What mattered was the content.

The letter explained the concealed weapon's usage. The mechanism required a slight offset to hit its intended target, just as they had just tested.

It wasn't a deliberate design choice, Wade clarified in the letter, but rather the result of a rushed process. The war was looming, and there hadn't been time for refinements. He had promised to make improvements once the battles were over and send her a perfected version as a gift the following year.

He also mentioned the throwing knives, describing how their streamlined shape allowed them to cut through the air at great speed. The thin, razor-sharp blade required less inner force to use, relying instead on skillful technique.

Wade ended the letter by mentioning several designs for other hidden weapons, already sketched and awaiting construction after the war. Once completed, he planned to send them all to her.

The letter contained little else. It was mostly an ode to his own genius, with an unabashed confidence that no one in the next 50 years would surpass his mastery of concealed weapons.

Rafael held a lamp to illuminate her reading, but he didn't intrude on the contents of the letter. He was lost in his thoughts, remembering Wade's sacrifice. Wade had fallen at the battle of Victory Pass when Leroy had first appeared. It was the war's opening skirmish, a disastrous ambush that caught them unprepared. Wade's life had been one of many lost in that ill-fated engagement.

Carissa folded the letter slowly-once, twice, three times until it was a small square. She opened her sachet and carefully tucked the letter inside.

Tears slipped silently down her cheeks, dripping onto the backs of her hands. She didn't wipe them away. Instead, she turned to another chest. There was still one more box left from her uncle. When she opened it, though, it contained only mundane trinkets. It wasn't Carissa who made the observation-her seventh uncle had left a note inside the box. Placed neatly on top of its contents, the note read simply: Just mundane trinkets.

Carissa began unpacking the box, one item at a time. Inside, she found a fox fur cloak, leather hides, and warm winter clothing. There was even a pair of white fox fur gloves, so soft and plush that within moments of wearing them, her hands began to sweat. She moved on to the other chests, opening them one by one.

There were several pairs of shoes. Carissa recognized her grandmother's handiwork in the stitching-two pairs of embroidered shoes and two pairs of soft lambskin boots, each a testament to her grandmother's love and care.

Among the remaining items were clothes, a few pieces of high-quality emerald still uncut, but no gold or silver jewelry. The conditions at Victory Pass had clearly been harsh for everyone.

"These look like baby clothes,"

Rafael remarked, pulling out a few tiny outfits both for boys and

girls He also uncovered two pairs of

tiger-head shoes and matching net

tiger head hats, placing them

carefully on the lid of the chest.

Carissa gently touched the small shoes. Her aunts must have made them, likely around the time she married Barrett. Back then, her life had seemed



predetermined-marriage, children, managing the household, and

raising the next generation.

It was the future Melanie had always envisioned for her.

The tiger-head shoes were

Pet

exquisitely made, with round, bright eyes and soft, rounded ears. The stitching was meticulous, and the craftsmanship brought the little tigers to life. Carissa imagined that any child lucky enough to wear such shoes would surely feel surrounded by love and blessings.

She carefully put everything back into the box, except for the shoes her grandmother had made.

The bracelet, now fully loaded with needles, she slid onto her wrist. It was her uncle's gift to protect her, a tool meant to save her life.

"There are still some clothes. Do you want to wear them?" Rafael asked, gesturing to another chest.

Carissa ran her fingers over the fabric, hesitating. Then, she shook her head slowly. Tears slipped down her cheeks. "I can't bear to wear them. If they get worn out, they'll be gone forever."

"Then leave them be," Rafael said gently, "but maybe take them out once a year to wear. That way, you honor their love without letting it go to waste."

He helped her seal the boxes again, glancing at the throwing knives. "You should take a few of these with you too. They seem useful."

"Yeah. There's a leather pouch for it here." Carissa rummaged through one of the boxes and pulled out a black leather knife pouch.

The pouch was stitched with individual slots for the throwing knives, keeping them neatly organized. The design made them easy to draw her fingers barely brushed the knives, and one seemed to leap into her hand. Even now, Carissa struggled to accept that her seventh uncle was truly gone.

Yet, she knew denial wouldn't bring him back.

They were gone forever.

Chapter 1074

Aurora's death brought Carissa no solace-not even a sliver of comfort.

That night, Carissa lay in bed. Her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and steady, giving the impression of deep sleep. In truth, she wasn't asleep at all.

Scenes from the past played vividly in her mind, frame by frame, like butterflies flitting in a canyon, always just out of reach. She tried to hold onto something-anything-but her grasp remained empty.

It was nearly dawn when she finally drifted off, her exhaustion overwhelming her restless thoughts.

Rafael opened his eyes. He hadn't been sleeping, either. He could tell Carissa wasn't truly asleep. A sleeping person's body relaxed completely, but hers remained taut, which indicated she was only pretending to sleep. However, she was genuinely asleep now.

His heart ached. Since their marriage, their relationship had been harmonious-even loving. But Rafael knew Carissa had always kept her heart locked away. She would talk to him about anything else: political matters, even the weighty affairs of their nation. Yet when it came to her feelings and emotions, she buried them deep within.

She buried her wounds beneath a facade of composure, refusing to let herself experience joy. It was as though she believed she no longer deserved it.

No matter how bright her smile appeared, there was always a shadow in her eyes-a profound sadness she couldn't shake. That sorrow made her remarkably self-aware, but it also kept her tethered to her pain.

She had once been a lively young woman, like a wildflower blooming freely in the mountains, embracing life with the most unrestrained attitude. Now, even the curve of her smile seemed measured.

Rafael longed for her to open up to him, to share her burdens. He wished she could let herself cry, like the moment she had collapsed into his arms after reading her uncle's letter. He had thought she might finally speak her mind then, but she had remained silent. Quietly, he reached for her hand, his long fingers closing gently around hers. Her small hand fit entirely within his grasp.

She didn't wake, only sank deeper into sleep. Even in sleep, her dreams were haunted-filled with bloodshed and violence.

Carissa was skilled at hiding her emotions, so much so that she avoided thinking of the past altogether. But when she did, it always brought the same nightmare: the brutal massacre of the Sinclair family.

She hadn't seen it with her own eyes, but the gruesome state of her family's corpses was enough to piece it together.

In her dream, she saw her mom drenched in blood, crawling across the ground. One ear had been severed, and her eyes were red with blood as she dragged herself toward Carissa. A blade sliced into her back-one stroke, then another-blood splattering everywhere. Carissa watched, her eyes wide with horror. Gripping her Rose Spear, she charged forward. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't land a blow on the murderer. It was as though an invisible wall separated her from him, keeping her from avenging her family. This was more than the barrier between dreams and reality-it was the chasm between life and death.

She hadn't even been able to face her enemies, let alone exact her revenge.

In her nightmare, she screamed, her voice raw with rage.

To hell with the greater good! She would kill every one of those murderers for her family. She wanted to hack Aurora into pieces and toss her remains to the wild dogs.

One by one, her mom, her

sisters-in-law, her nephews, her nieces-they all fell to the ground, their blood pooling around them. She smashed into the barrier with her spear until her head throbbed

and her hands bled, but she couldn't break through. She could only stand there, helpless, as they took their last breaths before her eyes.

She hated it. She hated it so much!

"Carissa! Carissa!"

Rafael's voice broke through the nightmare, his hands gently patting her face.

She jolted awake, her eyes snapping open. Her hand flew to his throat her body radiating a deadly aura. As her vision cleared, it wasn't an enemy she saw-it was Rafael, his face etched with worry.

She froze, her hand slowly dropping as her expression shifted from confusion to regret.

"I'm sorry," she rasped. "It was just a dream."

Her voice was hoarse, barely audible. Her face felt cold and damp. She raised a trembling hand to her cheek and realized it was soaked with tears.

Rafael pulled her into his arms, his voice gentle but firm. "It's all right. It's over now. It's all over."

Carissa took a few deep breaths, steadying herself. Wiping away her tears, she murmured, "Don't worry about me. And don't tell Violet-I don't want her to fret over me." Rafael's heart clenched.

"You can talk to me," he said softly. "You don't have to keep everything bottled up inside. It's not good for you-it'll only hurt you more."

Carissa offered a pale, fragile smile. "The revenge is done. I'm happy now. Truly. Don't worry about me."

But Rafael saw through her words. She always acted this way, afraid to burden anyone else.

Sometimes, he couldn't help feeling a pang of jealousy toward Violet and Travis. With them, Carissa let her guard down just a little more. She might still hide some things, but she shared more with them than she ever did with him.

After all, they had grown up together, and their bond was different.

#### Chapter 1075

The next day, Carissa woke as if nothing had happened. She took up her riding crop and headed out the door, her demeanor calm and unbothered. Meanwhile, Barrett was nursing severe injuries and had taken a leave of absence.

After learning the full story, Salvador was livid.

"If he'd truly been loyal, he wouldn't have treated Carissa that way in the first place! And now, injuring himself over a criminal? Neglecting his duties? Disregarding the reputation of his family? He's neither loyal nor devoted. What use is he? A disgrace through and through."

Derek observed the situation and knew exactly why the king had been reluctant to abandon Barrett despite repeated offenses. One reason was out of respect for the late General Matthias Warren. Another was to use him to control the Mystic Army. Lastly, it was difficult to remove him right away without affecting the generals at Victory Pass.

But with the Westhaven forces retreating, Derek suspected the king's patience was running thin.

As expected, when court convened that day, the officials gathered outside with grievances. Derek had waited deliberately for the Oversight Minister, Irvin, and casually mentioned that Salvador had grown angry over Barrett's latest misconduct.

Ever the righteous man, Irvin pressed for details. Derek refrained from saying much, but Irvin was resourceful and had no trouble uncovering the truth. Within half a day, news reached him-Barrett had been distraught over Aurora's punishment by the Westhaven forces and had deliberately injured himself.

It was a disgrace Irvin couldn't tolerate. At the Oversight Department, he wasted no time railing against Barrett.

"How shameful!" Irvin bellowed. "As a son, he dishonors his family. As an official, he neglects his duties and squanders His Majesty's trust. If he's so intent on dying for that criminal, why doesn't he just do it and be done with it? At least he'd stop embarrassing the court!" Once he finished speaking, he immediately sat at his desk and started writing a formal complaint to Salvador.

Irvin's actions inspired a ripple effect. Many officials, outraged at how Barrett's behavior might embolden the Westhaven forces, joined in. For three days, reports condemning Barrett flooded the court.

When Irvin made his formal complaint, many officials quickly agreed. It wasn't that they couldn't see the value in Barrett, but the fact that he had slammed into a wall over Aurora-what kind of rumors would spread to the people of Westhaven?

After three days of continuous complaints, Barrett's precarious position finally crumbled. Salvador issued an edict to remove him from his post and ordered him to reflect on his actions.

Barrett's removal created a ripple of promotions. Kevin was elevated to fill his role, and Galen, in turn, took over Kevin's previous post. Though Galen remained subordinate to Kevin, he seemed content with the advancement.

When the edict reached Grace Mansion, Viola sat in stunned silence in a side hall. Minutes passed, then hours, yet she didn't say a word.

Her lips trembled several times, as though she wanted to speak, but no words came.

Barrett's self-inflicted injury had shaken her to her core. It left her heartbroken, though not for the reasons one might expect.

In truth, of the three men she had known in her life, Barrett was the one she respected the least. But there had been a time, long ago, when she had genuinely been drawn to him.

Now, seeing him willing to harm himself so drastically for Aurora, she understood one thing with chilling clarity-this man was beyond saving. He was no longer someone she could even consider keeping in her life. But what could she do?

Her marriage to Barrett was her second one, she divorced, there was little chance she would marry again. Even if she did, she wouldn't be able to find a good match. As she had once said about Serena what was left for her? To become someone's concubine?

Impossible! She was the third daughter of the Earl of Silverston's family. How could she stoop so low?

But staying married to a man who'd lost his position, a man who was nothing more than a pile of useless mud? The thought was unbearable.

Viola sat for a long time, torn between her pride and her future, Finally, she rose and walked into Barrett's room. She needed to tell him the news. Part of her hoped that he would finally show some regret after hearing it.

Yet, when Barrett heard he'd been dismissed from his post, he didn't look angry or upset. Instead, he sighed as though a weight had been lifted.

"If you want to leave," he said calmly, "then leave. Take whatever valuables are left here. They're yours."

Viola's composure broke, and she let out a choked sob. "You're that eager for me to go?"

Barrett met her tearful gaze, his voice steady and detached. "You've suffered enough staying with me. I know you don't really want to stay here anymore."

Tears streamed down her face as she cried, "You're right-I don't want to stay here, but not because of the hardship! It's because your heart isn't with me. You'd rather die for Aurora. What's the point of me staying?" Barrett's eyes flickered with an emotion she couldn't quite place.

"You're right. I've let you down you. I really wanted to make things work between us, but... Somehow, the more we tried, the further apart we grew. I've never been able to make you happy."

"I would've been happy if you'd just focused on your duties and done your job!" Viola shot back through her tears.

"But I did, at first," Barrett countered, a bitter smile tugging at his lips. "Even then, wasn't I never good enough for you? Weren't you always resentful that I ranked below Carissa?"

The moment the words left his

mouth, he regretted them. It

sounded as though he was blaming Viola for everything. He shook his head and sighed. "No, it's not your fault. It's mine. I didn't amount to anything. I failed you. I embarrassed you."

Viola sank into a nearby chair, her tears falling freely. Her emotions churned-hatred, frustration, helplessness. She didn't want to stay, not now that Barrett had lost everything.

But where could she go? Returning to her family home was an option-her mother would undoubtedly take her in. Yet what would come after that? Would she resign herself to living out her days alone, without a companion? She didn't want that, either.

Chapter 1076

Viola sat in the chair for a long time before finally deciding to compromise.

"Can you promise me two things?" she asked. "If you can, I won't ask for a divorce."

Barrett let out a weary sigh. "What are they?"

"First," Viola said, her tone firm, "you're never to mention Carissa or Aurora again. At least, not in my presence."

Barrett fell into a long silence. Then, finally, he nodded. "All right."

"Second," Viola continued, "you must pull yourself together and return to the Nightsteel Guard. Get your old position back as deputy commander."

Barrett blinked, clearly taken aback. "But I've been dismissed. How am I supposed to return to the Nightsteel Guard?"



Viola leaned forward, her words quick and insistent. "I'll ask my sister-in-law to pull some strings for you. All you have to do is agree. Once you're reinstated, you must commit yourself fully to your duties-work hard, earn a promotion, and listen to me from now on." Barrett shook his head. "I can't ask her to do that. I've already lost the king's favor. For her to help me, she'd have to spend a fortune and exhaust her connections. Those resources are better saved for her children-for their futures and their marriages. It's not right to waste them on me."

Viola's frustration flared. "What do you mean, waste? I'm the third daughter of the Earl of Silverstone's family! Her money and her influence belong to the family, don't they? If her children can use them, why can't I?" "You're married and out of the family now."

"And? Even as a married woman, I'm still the third daughter of the Earl of Silverstone's family!"

Barrett sighed deeply. For a long time, he said nothing.

"Well?" Viola's voice rose, sharp with irritation. "Will you agree or not?"

Barrett met her eyes and said, "Let me ask you this instead. If I return to the army as a common soldier and start over from the bottom, would you still stay?"

Viola shot to her feet, her disbelief

and anger evident. "Are you out of your mind? Go back as a common soldier? How would you provide for this household? How would you keep this estate standing? Do you have no sense of responsibility? No backbone?!"

"You've spent years climbing to where you were, and now you've thrown it all away for that despicable woman—and you expect me to suffer through rebuilding from scratch with you? What kind of woman do you think I am?" She was frantic, thinking he must have lost his mind or gone crazy. To become a lowly soldier-how could he even say such a thing?

Did he want to join Thomas' army and become a common soldier? Or go to the Southern Frontier or Victory Pass? What difference would there be between that and her living like a widow?

Her voice trembled with fury and frustration. "I don't understand do you even want this marriage to work? Or are you deliberately trying to drive me away?"

Barrett was calm both on the outside and inside because he had made a decision. His whole life had been full of uncertainty. He would regret things today, regret them tomorrow, and then reminisce about them later. He was tired of living like this.

Barrett's mind flashed to Carissa,

remembering the day he returned from the Southern Frontier and saw her again. Even when he had betrayed her trust and when he had formally divorced her, she had remained composed and unshaken. At the time, he had dismissed it as her being too cold and lacking even the most basic human emotions.

Now, he understood. She wasn't emotionless-she had simply made her peace with her choices. After enduring far worse, she had learned to face everything with calm determination. Calmness was truly important.

Now, looking at Viola, he saw his past self. He didn't find it laughable, just pitiful.

He looked at Viola with pleading eyes. "If you're willing, wait for me for three years. After three years, even if I can't rise high, I won't just be a nameless nobody."

Viola let out a sharp, disbelieving

laugh. "Three years? You want me to

wait for three years, and for what?

To see you climb a little higher than nothing? That's your great ambition?" She jabbed a finger toward him, her voice scathing. "My husband can't be a useless failure!"

Barrett might have been a bit sad, but he didn't show much of it.

"Fine. If you're unwilling, then I won't hold you back. I wish you happiness and peace in the future."

Chapter 1077

Viola's heart was as cold as ice. She couldn't understand why she kept ending up in this situation.

Divorce was always a last resort-something she had never wanted to resort to unless absolutely necessary. She turned to her father-in-law Jonathan and her brother-in-law Benjamin, hoping they could help persuade Barrett. She even went so far as to seek Charlotte's support, who had long been indifferent to their affairs. The death of Amelia had utterly hardened Charlotte's heart. So, it was surprising that she agreed after hearing what Viola said. "Return to the military and starting from the bottom again? That's a good idea. I support it."

Viola knew better than to rely on Charlotte. But she thought since the woman was still an elder in the family, Barrett might listen if she stepped in to persuade him.

After hearing the words, Viola angrily swept the cup off the table. "If you won't help, at least spare us the cold remarks."

With that, she stood up and left.

Jonathan and Benjamin didn't try to persuade Barrett. It wasn't that they agreed with Barrett becoming a common soldier. The truth was, asking Zoey for help was unrealistic. Although the two families were supposed to support each other after the marriage, the Warren family's influence was all but gone.

What was the point of continuing to help someone who could offer nothing in return? Even a dog would grow tired of it.

After trying-and failing-Viola returned to Silverstone Estate.

She made her intentions clear: she wanted a divorce. She couldn't stay in the Warren family, not when the man who once held such power was now nothing more than a common soldier. The ridicule would be unbearable. Besides, no one knew when the king might take the estate back. Would she have to rent a home then?

Naturally, Evelyn didn't allow it. She immediately sent for Zoey, but was told Zoey had gone to Skye Embroidery.

In truth, Zoey had deliberately gone away. She had already heard from Poppy about Viola's plans.

Her younger sister-in-law's impulsiveness annoyed Zoey, who didn't want to offer any advice that might later be thrown back at her. Of course, she wasn't happy about Viola's repeated threats of divorce and returning to her family. It would surely affect the marriages of her children.

But what could she do?

Zoey couldn't stop Viola from returning to stay at Silverstone Estate. In this world, a woman wasn't considered part of her birth family after she was married. However, Zoey herself had a daughter. She couldn't bring herself to turn her back on Viola like that. Avoiding it altogether seemed simpler.

In a way, Zoey's arrival at Skye Embroidery saved Violet, who had been dealing with Molly for two days straight. Molly had been insisting that Violet visit Edgeview Estate.

Violet knew exactly what Yuvan was after and had been planning to give him a piece of her mind. However, since Carissa had advised her not to go and not to stir up trouble, she decided to listen and avoid making Carissa angry.

When Zoey arrived, Violet quickly made an excuse for being busy and sent Molly away.

"How's Karen doing?" Zoey asked.

"Still the same," Violet sighed. "Won't eat, won't talk. She's just waiting for you to come and talk to her."

Violet shook her head, worry etched on her face. "I don't dare leave her alone. I'm afraid if I do, she might try something again."

Karen Whitley had come two days ago, but not on her own accord. Carissa had saved her and brought her back.

The other day, while Carissa and

Michael had been out on patrol, they found Karen standing at the very bridge where Amelia had tried to

take her life. Just as Karen was net

about to jump, Carissa used her Lightfoot Skill to rush over and save her. Then, she brought Karen back to the workshop.

Seventeen years old, delicate as a flower, but there was no spark of life left in her eyes. All she wanted was to die. Even back at the workshop, she had been contemplating throwing herself against the wall.

Her family lived on Hibiscus Lane in the capital. Her dad was an official in the Protocol Department, holding a sixth-rank position. Though his position wasn't high, their family upheld a strict code of conduct. However, that discipline turned to cruelty when it came to Karen's disgrace. Not only did they refuse to report it to the authorities, but her dad even blamed her for the dishonor and insisted that she take her own life. Karen's mom, unable to bear it, secretly helped her daughter escape.

But where could a young girl go? Her body and reputation were ruined, and her life was shattered. So, she had gone to the bridge from which Amelia had jumped, intending to end it all the same way. Karen had been in Skye Embroidery for two days now, refusing to eat or drink. If this continued, her life would certainly be lost.

The story of her being humiliated and kicked out of her home was something Violet heard from the servants of the Whitley family.

When Carissa went to speak with Karen's father, Douglas Whitley, he denied everything. He denied having a daughter named Karen and acted as if he didn't know what Carissa was talking about. He even brought out his other daughters who also denied it, saying there was no such person as Karen in their family.

## Chapter 1078

It was Hannah who finally spoke up, saying there was no need to keep searching. Since the Whitley family denied Karen's existence, she would be a new person, with no ties to them anymore. Though Carissa and Violet felt that the Whitley family was heartless, they couldn't deny that Hannah's words made sense. There was no use in continuing to pursue the matter-it wouldn't change anything. Getting revenge, even just to vent, wouldn't solve the problem. What mattered now was getting Karen to live, to give up on the idea of ending her life, and to speak out about the person who had wronged her. Zoey had already promised to help with counseling, and now seemed like the right time to step in.

She brought in a bowl of millet porridge and glanced at the pale and listless girl lying on the bed. She looked so exhausted yet still so beautiful, with her pale face barely hiding her beauty.

Zoey entered without saying anything. She simply took out a handkerchief and gently wiped the young woman's face and her hands, and then stroked her hair.

It was Karen herself who shifted and pulled away.

"Dirty," she murmured her first words since coming to Skye Embroidery.

She disliked herself for being dirty.

Zoey took her hand, her voice soft and comforting. "You're not dirty, my dear."

Karen remained unmoved, her expression still blank.

Zoey sat with her for a while before gently offering the millet porridge, speaking to her like one would to a child. "Come on, have a sip."

Karen didn't open her mouth, but her lips twitched slightly.

"Open up," Zoey coaxed, bringing the spoon to her lips. "Just one bite."

Karen still didn't open her mouth. She didn't even dare to look at Zoey, avoiding her gaze as if afraid her dirtiness would taint the elegant lady.

Zoey sighed. "I know you don't want to live anymore, so I put arsenic in the millet porridge. If you want relief, just drink it. Afterward, tell me who harmed you, and we'll make sure they pay for what they've done. You can go in peace."

At the mention of arsenic, Karen's eyes slowly focused. Her body trembled as she mustered enough strength to sit up, and she reached out with shaky hands to take the bowl. Without hesitation, she drank it down in large, desperate gulps. The bowl of thin porridge was quickly emptied.

Zoey took the bowl and set it down, using a handkerchief to wipe Karen's mouth.

"The arsenic is potent. In about an hour, the poison will take effect. Tell me who did this to you, and we'll make sure they pay for it."

Karen was a naïve girl, and she

didn't question Zoey's words. She truly believed the millet porridge contained arsenic and that she could finally be free. She lay back down tears slipping down her cheeks. "If I'm going to die anyway, then let me die like this. No need to seek revenge."

Zoey was taken aback. Didn't Karen hate the person who ruined her life? Or was it that she didn't trust the people in Skye Embroidery?

"I don't want a proper burial. Just throw me into the mass grave," Karen muttered, wiping away her tears. Her eyes were still empty, just as they had been before.

Zoey sighed softly. "Silly girl, how could we let you die? Everyone is hoping you will live. There's no arsenic in the porridge. We just wanted to help you get revenge and to give you the strength to live on."

Karen closed her eyes, tears rolling down again as she sobbed uncontrollably. "Why can't you just let me die? I don't want to live anymore."

Zoey sat beside her, letting her cry and offering no comfort.

Later, Carissa arrived and instructed Alana to watch over Karen. Zoey stepped outside to speak with Carissa.

"Her situation might be more

complicated than we thought," Zoey said, explaining how she had tricked Karen into drinking the millet porridge. Logically, she should hate that person more than anyone, but she'd rather die than reveal who it was. Even if she doesn't know the person's identity, she could at least explain what happened and where it took place. With those details, we could investigate."

"Maybe she doesn't want to remember? For her, this event is catastrophic. It's understandable if she can't bring herself to talk about it," Leona said.

Carissa nodded thoughtfully. "It's possible, but there could be more to it."

Carissa was the one who had saved Karen, pulling her off the bridge that day. When she asked who her family was so she could return her, Karen had screamed, "I have no family! I'd rather die than go back! I'd rather die away from them!"

Later, they found out that the Whitley family had abandoned Karen because they thought she was impure and wanted her to poison herself. Hence, they thought Karen was angry at her family. But Karen had always wanted to die, so wouldn't taking poison give her exactly what she wanted? Why did she listen to her mom and run away?

"Maybe we should ask her mom when we get the chance," Carissa said, looking up. "Her mom clearly wanted her to live. Maybe she knows more."

Chapter 1079

Violet took care of the matter at Skye Embroidery, while Carissa had her own pressing concerns—mainly, the opening of the women's academy.

Carissa had already found five teachers—the royal chancellor's granddaughter Rosalind, Meredith's sister-in-law Harriet Wright, the Ashford family's matriarch Catherine, Kyle, and the Wardell family's eldest daughter, who had once served as Meredith's study partner. Athena Wardell was now thirty. She had been engaged to a childhood friend, but he had died on the battlefield while they were preparing for their wedding. Since then, Athena has refused all proposals and had no intention of marrying.

Kyle was the only man among the teachers. He was a renowned scholar in Starhaven, known for his noble character and virtuous nature. No one would have objected to him becoming a teacher at the women's academy. In fact, his reputation only drew more students to the school.

Catherine had withdrawn from social circles for many years. In her younger years, she was a renowned scholar who traveled extensively across the vast landscapes of Starhaven with her husband. She had written the book *Chronicles of the Mountains and Rivers*, and the current map of Starhaven was based on the work of her husband.



The couple had contributed greatly to Starhaven. Even a few years ago, they were still journeying far and wide. It wasn't until her husband's passing that Catherine finally settled down. Now in her seventies, Catherine was still strong but rarely left her home for social events.

When Carissa visited her, she had agreed to help. The older woman had said that although her eyesight was poor, the fire in her heart still burned brightly, and she wanted to pass on her knowledge.

As for Kyle, Carissa had relied on his reputation to attract students. After all, with his fame, every family wanted their daughter to be his pupil.

The current plan for the academy was to have five teachers and an intake of one hundred students.

At first, Carissa had thought that attracting students would be difficult. In this world, women were often valued for their modesty rather than their intellect. Even the daughters of high-ranking families typically only studied basic lessons in women's etiquette. To her surprise, within just one day of announcing the opening, all one hundred spots were filled.

The queen dowager herself had named the women's academy-Gracewood Women's Academy. The name meant it was a noble and serene academy for young ladies of high standing.

All the student information was sent to Carissa first, as she was appointed the headmistress of the academy. She had originally planned to decline, as she already had many responsibilities and couldn't help much with the academy. Since the king appointed her, she couldn't refuse.

All the students were from official families, including children of both high and low-ranking officials.

Jacob looked over the documents and remarked, "For this first group of students, we should be prepared-they're here to network." Carissa nodded. "I understand."

It was hardly surprising. The world

of politics was all about making connections, hoping to help the futures of the men in their families. Moreover, studying under such distinguished teachers would be beneficial when it came to securing advantageous marriages,

Zoey's daughter had also secured a spot, and Zoey was genuinely hoping to expand her daughter's horizons.

The academy was bustling with activity. At the same time, Violet had uncovered some troubling details.

That evening, when she returned to the estate, she didn't even bother to wait for Rafael and Carissa to finish their meal in the dining room. She barged in, slamming her palm onto the table so hard that the dishes rattled and nearly flew off.

Lulu quickly stepped forward.

"Ms. Spencer, be careful with your hand! Breaking the table is a small

matter, but hurting yourself

is a big problem." Lulu moved her chair over for her to sit. "You haven't eaten yet, right? Please sit down and

eat. You can talk as you do."

Knowing that Violet had discovered something regarding Karen, Carissa quickly filled Rafael in on the situation. Upon hearing this, Rafael suddenly looked thoughtful. "Is she Douglas Whitley's eldest daughter?"

"You know about her?" Violet asked Rafael, glancing at Carissa-had she mentioned this to him beforehand?

Carissa shook her head, then turned to Rafael. "Do you know her?"

Rafael wore an expression that said it was complicated. "I've heard some rumors, but I thought they were just that-rumors."

Chapter 1080

Rafael had gotten the gossip from someone working in the Supreme Court. He had been discussing matters with everyone, and during a break, he and Matthew went inside for some refreshment. As they talked outside, the topic came up.

Douglas had been in office for five years and was looking to advance. He had heard that Malcolm had a mistress, who had since been sent to a convent, but not before she had given birth to a daughter.

This led Douglas to believe that Malcolm was a man of indulgent tastes, and he decided to offer his daughter as a concubine to Malcolm. When Malcolm refused, Douglas, ever the schemer, assumed Malcolm's wife had disallowed the arrangement. Douglas devised a plan to send his daughter to Malcolm while his wife was absent, hoping to force the issue.

He learned through various means that Malcolm, whenever he had time off, would go with his wife to visit temples or take walks in the countryside. Douglas bribed the gatekeeper to find out their plans. Once he learned they would visit the hot springs after their trip to the temple, he secretly sent his daughter there in advance.

But things went wrong. Although Malcolm had booked the hot springs, his wife Marjorie became ill and he stayed behind to take care of her. Meanwhile, Douglas had already drugged his daughter and sent her to wait at the hot springs. Somewhere along the way, a lecherous man snuck in and violated Karen. Afterward, the man disappeared without a trace.

Later, Douglas learned that Malcolm had never even gone to the hot springs. However, Karen had lost her purity and Douglas couldn't find out who had done it. He had sacrificed everything and gotten nothing in return.

To make things worse, the rumor about Karen losing her innocence somehow spread. Fearing it would harm his career, Douglas claimed it was his daughter who had acted improperly and had an affair, so he secretly dealt with her to preserve his reputation. When Carissa heard this, she slammed her fist onto the table, the dishes rattling with a loud crash. "So, you're saying Douglas tried to use his daughter to further his career? When that failed, he wanted to have her killed?!"

Violet was seething with anger. "What I've found out is almost the same, but with more details. Douglas tricked his daughter into going to the temple first. When he took her away, he had someone drug her and sent her to the hot springs. And this isn't the first time he's done something like this-he did it before with his sister, and she died."

"This is outrageous! We need to report it to the authorities!" Carissa exclaimed in fury.

It was rare to see Carissa angry to this extent, but Rafael couldn't help but remind her. "Unless Ms. Whitley

comes forward to accuse him herself, who's going to take the case? Even if someone did, for child to sue their parent-first, they'd have to endure thirty lashes to repay the kindness of their parent. How could a young woman bear that? Besides, Ms. Whitley has wanted to die for some time. She probably doesn't want to expose what happened."

Violet was trembling with rage, her voice shaking.

"How could a father be so vile? To use his own daughter's suffering for personal gain his career, his

future-without any regard for her life? And even if the man who

violated her was Malcolm, there net

were still dozens of other people involved in this. Even if she had become Malcolm's concubine, her life would have been destroyed. To think such a thing could happen in the world of officials... It's beyond horrifying."

Carissa's heart sank, and she finally understood why Karen would rather die than remain in her family. To her, that place had become a hell on earth. "Is there nothing we can do?" Carissa asked Rafael, her voice tinged with helplessness.

Rafael's eyes held deep pity, not just for Karen, but also for her late aunt. However, the situation was difficult to handle. If they pursued it

seriously, it would definitely hurt

Karen, who was already determined

to die.

"I've heard he has other daughters," Rafael said with a shake of his head. "Since Ms. Whitley failed, the next victim most likely will be one of the others."

"Those other daughters-none of them acknowledged Karen as their sister," Violet spat angrily. "We don't have to care about them."

"They didn't deny her of their own will," Carissa said. "They were forced to do so. You can tell just by looking at the situation."