

War Song 1171

Chapter 1171

"Randall, kneel!" Ruth's voice suddenly rose as she addressed him.

"You have been disrespectful. Ask Lady Carissa for forgiveness! She is both your cousin-in-law and aunt-in-law. Only when she forgives you can you have any peace with your mom in the afterlife!"

Just as Randall moved to kneel, Carissa shot him a cold stare. "Go ahead. See if you dare kneel before me."

The chilling command in her voice stopped Randall in his tracks. His bent knee straightened abruptly.

Carissa stood. "If there's nothing else, I will take my leave, Your Grace."

From behind, Ruth called out urgently, "Your Grace, no matter what happens in the future, please protect my grandchildren!"

Carissa halted and whirled around to face Ruth, and said coldly, "Lady Ruth, you have such a compassionate heart. It's a pity my aunt never received such kindness from you. Since that's the case, I don't think your grandchildren need anyone's pity or protection." "Your Grace, they're still your family-they're your cousins! You have to look out for them!" Ruth cried.

"If they behave, why would they need someone to look out for them? Do you honestly think the royal family's offspring will be reduced to beggars? You're overthinking this, Your Grace. If you're not, perhaps you should speak to your children and grandchildren-not me." Without waiting for a response, Carissa turned and walked away.

Randall hurried after her, blocking her path. "Cousin!"

"Aunt Avis didn't give birth to you," Carissa snapped, her voice seething with contempt, "so don't call me that."

Among Yuvan's three sons, Randall wasn't the most despicable. However, Avis had raised him after his birth mother died, yet he hadn't shown any devotion to her as a parent. When Avis was alive, Randall never respected her. Now, after her death, he cried and claimed to regret his actions.

How despicable!

"Your Grace, I just wanted to sincerely apologize. I didn't mean anything by it," Randall stammered, unable to meet her gaze.

"What's the point of saying that to me?" Carissa shot him a cold look, her eyes full of disdain. "Say it to the one who raised you. Now, get out of my way."

Randall's eyes dimmed. "I know words won't make a difference, but you know my position in my family. No one listens to me. I'm powerless to change anything."

"That's not an excuse you should be using," Carissa snapped. "You are

Prince Yuvan's eldest son. Even if no one listens to you, you have the

power to protect your mom in secret. But you're too afraid of angering your dad. You stood by and watched as the woman who raised you died alone and forsaken. You and your two sisters are worse than animals."

If Carissa had been her old self, she would have beaten him up.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry for what happened to Mom!" Randall cried, tears streaking down his face.

Seeing him break down only infuriated Carissa further. It was pointless to get worked up over someone like him.

Sometimes, having a rebellious son

was better than having one who was nothing but a useless lump. Look at him-abandoned in the capital to fend for himself, and he still couldn't find a shred of resolve.

Her voice sharp, she snapped, "Why are you crying? If you've made a mistake, make it right! If you truly

feel guilty for your mom, then stone

clinging to some notion of father son affection. His Majesty kept you in the capital not just to serve as a hostage. Think about it and stand up for yourself!"

After saying that, she couldn't help but kick him before walking away.

Randall stood frozen, Carissa's words striking him like a bolt of lightning, illuminating every dark corner of his mind.

Without thinking, he blurted out, "Lunvale!"

Carissa stopped in her tracks, turning to face him. "Lunvale? What do you mean by that?"

Randall had acted on impulse and shouted, but he wasn't mentally prepared to do anything else. When he met Carissa's sharp gaze, he quickly backed down and became timid as usual. "I-It's nothing," he stammered. "I'm going back to take care of my grandmother."

With that, he hurriedly turned and ran off.

Chapter 1172

That single word, "Lunvale", sent Rafael and Carissa hurrying back to Hell Monarch Estate as soon as the banquet had ended.

In the council hall, a large map was spread out before them. Lunvale was located in Ebonflow. It was once the fiefdom of Lorenzo, Augustus' brother. Generations later, it had become the domain of the Realm Defender.

The title of Realm Defender was just that-an honorary title with no military power behind it. The current Realm Defender was Tiberius Sanford. A Realm Defender usually received a salary from the court, but by this generation, the benefits had been significantly reduced. During previous investigations, Tiberius hadn't been overlooked. Though Lunvale was still relatively prosperous, it was far removed from both Valken and Stonebridge County. Moving troops to Lunvale would take significant effort.

On top of that, Tiberius was someone with no great ambitions. He had all sorts of bad habits-drinking, gambling, and other vices. He had already squandered most of the family fortune passed down by his ancestors.

According to previous background checks, he had one wife and 32 concubines, and at least 50 to 60 women in his harem. His ability to gather women was unmatched-if he couldn't purchase them, he would trick them. If that didn't work, he simply took them by force. Because of this, his relationship with the local authorities was also poor, and the officials often had headaches from his actions. Each year, there were at least a hundred cases involving him causing trouble and forcibly taking women.

However, Lunvale was his fiefdom and they couldn't drive him out. Even though he was causing trouble, he was still the Realm Defender. The officials couldn't be too harsh with him.

There weren't many complaints filed against him. The governor of Lunvale served for three years and was always careful to protect the royal family's image. They didn't dare submit too many reports because they were afraid Salvador might favor a relative, and that it would hurt their career. So, they just put up with it as much as possible.

This allowed Tiberius to keep causing trouble in Lunvale.

"He has one clear characteristic," Jacob said, breaking the silence. "He's reckless because he's desperate."

Rafael thought for a moment.

"When one gets desperate enough, he'll try anything to make money. But after all these years in Lunvale, Tiberius hardly has any friends left and doesn't have any real power. How does he make money? He can't even borrow any. Let's check which of his properties or land he owns privately."

Jacob pulled out the earlier

investigation notes, flipping through the pages as he spoke. "He only has one or two estates left. The better land has been leased out. The remaining estate is in an awkward location. It's either impossible to rent or unsuitable for farming or

planting fruit trees."

"Send someone to investigate quietly," Rafael instructed, his fingers pressing against his temple. "I'll speak with the king. We'll give Randall a task and see what he reveals."

No one wanted to be useless. Randall, born of a concubine, had never known a father's love. Even though Avis had raised him, her health was always poor. While there was maternal affection, it never gave him the strength he needed.

He was raised with harsh discipline and constantly put down. As a result, he lacked confidence and drive, had no temper, and was extremely passive.

However, it was precisely this kind of life that needed a rope—a rope that might either strangle him or help him climb out of the depths.

Giving Randall a task would reveal whose side he chose. If he helped Yuvan, he would condemn himself. But if he remained loyal to the task, perhaps there was a way out.

Salvador also believed that giving

Randall a role could be useful, and so arranged for him to work at the Supreme Court as a warden to oversee prisoners.

wasn't high-ranking, but it would

allow him to see many lives rise and fall. The hope was that this might reshape his outlook on life.

When Randall received the appointment to the Supreme Court, his emotions were a complicated mess. Honestly, he was scared because this was something he got by betraying his dad. Everyone around him now would no doubt try to pry more information from him.

Amid his fear, there was also a flicker of happiness, as if he had glimpsed a faint light shining down on him. Deep down, he felt that while he might be insignificant in Yuvan's eyes, he might finally be

taken seriously by others. That night, he thought a lot, and one word kept coming to his mind-power!

No wonder Yuvan was so obsessed with that ultimate power-what one in power said could change lives and even determine their fates.

The attraction of power was as great as its terror.

Just before dawn, Randall picked up his quill and wrote a letter to his only true friend-Barrett.

From that moment, Randall felt like they were truly moving forward on their own path.

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Randall started his new position with great apprehension.

At first, he feared someone would come to question him about his dad. After several days passed without so much as a word from Rafael and no inquiries about Yuvan, his anxiety began to ease.

It was Matthew, Rafael's deputy, who spoke to Randall on a few occasions. Matthew was kind and eager to offer guidance, and Randall was grateful for his advice.

Whenever Randall found something unclear, he wasn't afraid to seek Matthew's help, even if it meant bypassing his immediate superior.

Having never held a proper office before, Randall was determined to perform well in his new role. As the warden, there was much to learn. He also had to manage the guards under his command, and the days were busy with his many responsibilities. Rafael had advised Matthew not to push Randall for answers just yet. He needed to learn how to handle the job and experience a sense of accomplishment before deciding what path to take.

Only then would he truly be able to decide where his loyalties lay.

Since Midwinter's Dawn, matchmakers had begun to flock to the Farrell family's residence.

Naturally, Alice was eager to find a suitable wife for Thomas. Beyond the need for heirs, he needed someone by his side, someone who could care for him through life's ups and downs.

Ever since her son had narrowly escaped death and made it back alive, Alice no longer fixated on the idea of grandchildren. All she wanted was for him to live a peaceful, steady life. That was more important than anything else.

After what happened with Viola, Alice placed a high priority on a woman's character when choosing a daughter-in-law.

She had previously considered a match for Thomas with the daughter of a sixth-ranked official, a young woman of both virtue and talent. However, that prospect had fallen apart after Viola and Silas' scandal came to light.

Now, more families were showing interest. Alice hadn't had a chance to look into the characters of these young women, and she intended to take her time investigating.

To her surprise, the Quinton family also sent a proposal.

Jocelyn Quinton, the youngest daughter of Howard Quinton, head of the Quinton family's fourth branch, had just turned 15 six months ago. She wasn't even 16 yet.

When Alice heard this, she didn't even consider the girl's character yet-she just thought Jocelyn was too young. The candidates Alice had been looking at were all over 18.

While it wasn't common for someone to still be unengaged at eighteen, it did happen. Sometimes it was because the family had gone through a period of mourning, which delayed the marriage. Other times, it was because an engagement had been broken off. Either way, it was important to get to the bottom of what had happened.

Some women were on their second marriage. Alice wasn't opposed to them, as long as the match was suitable. However, none had caught her eye as a proper match for Thomas.

As for the Quinton family, she politely declined. She said the Farrell family wasn't worthy of them and that Jocelyn was far too young. Thomas couldn't possibly be a good match for her.

To her surprise, after refusing, Kylie sent for her to come to the palace.

Alice felt suspicious-how did the queen know about this?

It was uncommon for a woman of her status to be summoned to the palace so suddenly. She had turned down the match the evening before. And now, in the early hours of the following day, came the royal edict. It felt as though someone had intentionally informed Kylie about her rejection.

Was the Quinton family acting on the queen's instructions?

Feeling uneasy, Alice immediately sent for Timothy's wife, Opal.

"The queen has summoned me to the palace, and I fear it concerns the marriage between Thomas and Ms. Quinton. Something's not right. You must go quickly to Lady Carissa and Violet. I'm worried the queen will issue an edict to marry them."

Opal was immediately alarmed. "Buy some time, Aunt Alice. Tell the chamberlain that you need to bathe and change before entering the palace. I'll slip out through the side door and look for Lady Carissa."

"Alright. I'll try to delay as much as possible. Hurry and go," Alice replied.

The chamberlain who had come to deliver the edict, Ellis Latham, was outside sipping a cup of coffee.

The Farrell family's steward, Lincoln, went to the treasury room to retrieve a banknote. Then, he approached Ellis and nodded respectfully.

As he discreetly slipped the

banknote into Ellis' hand, he smiled

and said, "Mr. Latham, please wait a moment our mistress needs to take a bath and change before entering the palace. I'll have some pastries brought to you, so please enjoy them while you wait."

Ellis tucked the banknote away, and a satisfied smile spread across his face.

"Tell Mrs. Farrell not to worry. I'll take a little break. It's rare for me to have a relaxing moment while serving Her Majesty. Sometimes, I go all day without a sip of coffee."

Lincoln bowed and poured another cup, then smiled and said, "What luck, Mr. Latham! We just got a new batch of the best coffee beans in the region. It's fragrant and fresh. You must drink a few more cups."

"Is that so?" Ellis raised his cup and took a sip, the taste lingering pleasantly in his mouth. "This is good coffee indeed. It's too bad that after this, who knows when I'll be able to drink it again?"

Lincoln didn't miss the hint and quickly stood up, then ordered, "Get some of these coffee beans for Mr. Latham to take with him."

When the coffee beans arrived,

Lincoln saw that Ellis was in a good

mood, so he smiled and asked, "I

wonder why Her Majesty suddenly asked for our mistress to be summoned to the palace. Could you kindly enlighten me, so that our mistress doesn't say anything wrong and act inappropriately in front of the queen?"

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Ellis had accepted the coffee beans and the banknote, but his mouth seemed to be sealed tightly.

"Once she meets Her Majesty, everything will be made clear," Ellis said. "Mrs. Farrell holds a noble title now, doesn't she? I doubt she would act inappropriately." Lincoln smiled in response. "Indeed, Mr. Latham. You speak wisely."

Though he was smiling, Lincoln inwardly cursed. Unless it was a matter of life and death, how could someone refuse to share a little information?

Carissa had planned to visit Gracewood Women's Academy that day, as Jocelyn had started causing trouble again. Catherine had sent someone to inform her last night, asking her to come and manage the situation.

Just as Carissa stepped outside, she saw the litter from the Farrell family approaching. The bearers were running fast, as though something urgent had come up. Carissa hurried over and asked, "Has something happened to the Farrell family?"

Opal lifted the curtain and spoke quickly. "Your Grace, the queen has summoned my aunt to the palace. It's likely regarding the marriage between Thomas and Ms. Jocelyn Quinton. My aunt is afraid the queen may issue a royal edict to force the marriage and is asking for your help."

Carissa was taken aback. "Jocelyn? The one attending Gracewood Women's Academy?"

"Yes, that's the one," Opal said, her tone anxious. "A matchmaker was sent yesterday to propose the marriage, but my aunt refused."

Carissa understood immediately. She quickly ordered Violet to accompany her to the palace to offer her greetings to the queen dowager. The two of them mounted their horses and set off at once.

Meanwhile, Alice had already boarded her carriage and was heading to the palace with Ellis.

Carissa and Violet arrived first and offered their greetings to Victoria. Victoria was known for being considerate of the concubines and other ladies in the palace, typically only calling them for formal greetings on the first and fifteenth days of the month. On the other hand, Salvador had already come earlier that morning to offer her his greetings.

Upon hearing Carissa's report, Victoria scowled. "Foolish matchmaking! Does she think I can't see through her schemes?"

Victoria knew full well what Kylie was after. It was all a play to use Thomas' military influence to support Connor.

Ever since the day Connor had shown contempt for Ryan, Victoria had been greatly displeased. The boy wasn't yet fully grown-neither too young nor too old. Regardless, he had a teacher, and yet he

lacked manners and acted spoiled and willful. He seemed to think too highly of himself and looked down on everyone he met.

After that incident, both the king and queen tried to discipline him. When he came to offer his greetings to Victoria, he was always on his best behavior. Still, despite his outward obedience, she saw the reluctance and resentment hidden behind the formalities.

Kylie likely understood the situation all too well, which was why she sought to build connections for Connor. The Quinton family controlled nearly half the civil officials in the court, and many of the appointed officials in other regions were Malcolm's former students.

Though the Quinton family

respected the military on the

surface, they secretly looked down

on the martial officials. Their current move to court the military officials was transparent to all.

This was something Malcolm would never have done in the past. Ever since his scandal involving a

mistress had been exposed,

however, his reputation had

suffered. It had likely thrown him off

balance.

As soon as Alice arrived at Everspring Palace, Victoria's head chamberlain, Keith appeared. He said that Kylie had been summoned, and her presence was needed immediately.

Kylie hadn't had the time to bring up

Thomas and Jocelyn's marriage when Keith appeared. She turned to him and said, "Please return first and tell Her Majesty that I'll be there

soon."

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Keith smiled gently, maintaining his polite demeanor. "Her Majesty requested that you come immediately, Your Majesty. It would be best if you went now."

Reluctantly, Kylie called for someone to entertain Alice while she and Lydia made their way to Serenity Palace.

Carissa and Violet, of course, had already hidden themselves, ensuring Kylie wouldn't spot them.

"Greetings, Mother."

Kylie entered the hall and bowed deeply, her fur cloak wrapped tightly around her to ward off the cold. The chill in the air had reddened her cheeks as she made her way here. "Sit down," Victoria said as she nodded slightly.

"Thank you, Mother."

Kylie relaxed as the warmth of the room settled over her. She carefully removed her fur cloak and handed it to Lydia before sitting down slowly.

"May I ask why you've summoned me so urgently, Mother?"

Victoria had always shown respect to Kylie in the past, and today was no different.

"On Midwinter's Dawn," she said, "your aunt and younger cousin came to the palace. I was thinking, your cousin must have just come of age, right?"

Kylie's heart sank slightly, but she kept up the pretense of ignorance. "I'm not sure which cousin you mean, Mother."

Victoria fixed her gaze on Kylie, not allowing her to feign confusion.

"Your cousin from the fourth branch of your family, Jocelyn."

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Kylie smiled.

"Mother, you remembering her name is truly a blessing for her. My cousin is indeed of age this year, just 15 and a half. My aunt has been arranging a marriage for her and has come to me for help."

Victoria nodded. "So I've heard. Your aunt favors the third son of the Marquis of Glandale. I sent someone to inquire about him-he's talented, of good character, and would make an excellent match. They are of a similar age, and it seems quite suitable." Kylie's face instantly darkened. Under Victoria's sharp gaze, she felt as if her every thought had been laid bare. Still, she tried to salvage the situation, fumbling for words.

"Marriage is a significant matter, and it shouldn't be rushed. It's important that my cousin herself finds the match agreeable."

Victoria nodded thoughtfully. "That's true. So, I won't bestow a marriage edict upon her just yet. She should choose for herself. If she truly approves, she can come to me for a favor. On your behalf, I would be willing to issue an edict then." Kylie's expression tightened with frustration. Wasn't this an obvious refusal to allow her to arrange the marriage?

Who had leaked the information? It had only been yesterday that her people had visited the Farrell family, and today that she had called Alice to the palace. Kylie hadn't even had a chance to speak to Alice about it, and Victoria had already called her to be rebuked. "There's nothing else to discuss. Just go back and tell your aunt that she should wait for your cousin's wishes. After all, marriage is not something parents should force upon their children." Victoria dismissed her with a wave.

Kylie rose and bowed. "I'm grateful for your concern, Mother. I will take my leave now."

Lydia also bowed and stepped forward to help Kylie with her cloak. Both women left the palace.

Once they were gone, Carissa and Violet stepped out from behind the partition screen. They had been hiding behind it, listening to the conversation between the two women.

Violet was curious and asked, "Your Majesty, why not just directly grant the marriage between Jocelyn and the third son of the Marquis of Glandale?" Victoria chuckled softly.

"Silly girl, marriage is a serious matter. If it's not a match based on mutual affection, it will only end in resentment. That's harmful to both parties. In her current behavior, Jocelyn is clearly not a suitable match. She's caused such a stir at Gracewood Women's Academy, and it doesn't reflect well on her. As for the third son of the Marquis of Glandale-he seems like a man who could be of use."

Violet let out a soft exclamation. "You've really thought things through, Your Majesty. Unlike me, I'm too short-sighted. The only thing I'm seeing right now is that she doesn't seem like a good person."

Victoria smiled. "One cannot judge a person's worth by their actions in a single moment. Life is long, and who hasn't done a few things they regret? Especially in their youth, when they're impetuous. Of course, if they don't recognize their mistakes or worse, refuse to correct them-that's another matter."

Victoria rarely gave lectures, but she had a soft spot for Carissa and Violet. She wanted to offer them some advice and share her experience.

She was aware of the situation at Gracewood Women's Academy but didn't feel it necessary to intervene just yet. A few bad apples didn't

require her to take charge. The net

academy would be fine. It wasn't

going to last long if it couldn't find its footing without her intervention.

She believed that after a little disorder, things could eventually get back on track.

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Kylie stormed back to Everspring Palace. Taking a deep breath outside the hall, she forced a smile and walked inside.

Alice quickly rose to her feet. "Your Majesty, you have returned."

"Mrs. Farrell, I apologize for the wait. Please sit."

Although Kylie could no longer arrange the marriage, she still hadn't given up on her plans. She maintained a cordial and pleasant demeanor toward Alice.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Alice sat down. Seeing Kylie's expression as she entered, Alice sensed that Victoria had already given her a warning, which meant that Carissa must have already gone to see Victoria.

She felt a small sense of relief.

Since the marriage discussion could

no longer be broached, Kylie

engaged in casual conversation, asking about the Farrell family and all their affairs, before eventually signaling to Alice that it was time to leave.

Alice put on a confused expression. It was as if she found it strange that the queen had summoned her to the palace without saying anything important, but didn't dare to ask.

As she was about to leave, she paused, casting a questioning glance over her shoulder before walking out.

Kylie's face immediately darkened, and she gave orders. "Lydia, find out who visited the queen dowager last night or today."

After an hour, Lydia returned and reported, "Your Majesty, I've asked the palace guards. Lady Carissa and Ms. Spencer entered the palace today. They went to Serenity Palace." Kylie furrowed her brow. "Why her again?"

Kylie had carried a grudge against

Carissa for a long time, ever since Salvador tried to bring her into the palace. Then came the

met

investigations into Eleanor, which

exposed Malcolm's affair and

tarnished the Quinton family's reputation. The trouble with Ryan and Connor only fueled her

resentment further.

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Kylie was so enraged that she threw a cup across the room.

"She's nothing but a hindrance! She's always causing trouble for me!"

Lydia stood to the side and said, "Your Majesty, ever since she was appointed by the queen dowager to establish the Gracewood Women's Academy and became its headmistress, she has gained considerable favor among the noble ladies of the capital. I believe now, half of the influential families in the city hold her in some regard. She has become difficult to deal with."

Kylie thought back to Midwinter's Dawn, when the noblewomen praised Carissa to no end-how they admired her devotion to her marriage and how they praised her as capable and a shining example for women.

If Carissa was an example for women, then what did that make the queen?

The thought deepened Kylie's resentment.

"The queen dowager once said that Aurora was an example for women. Now Carissa has taken that title for herself. Isn't she disgusting?"

"Your Majesty," Lydia replied carefully, "she loves to seek attention and is currently at the height of her popularity. Remember, too much success can turn into a downfall. If things turn against her, her popularity will become a source of trouble for her. The queen dowager is still shielding her, so it would be unwise to challenge her now."

Kylie's voice turned cold. "The queen dowager protects her only because of the old friendship she shares with Carissa's mom. Her Majesty insisted on establishing the academy. The king never fully agreed to it, but he went along with it out of devotion to his mom. "Does Carissa truly think she's a great headmistress? Ask her how well she can read! It's embarrassing. Her Majesty values the academy so much, but if it fails, we'll see if she still protects Carissa." Lydia's tone became more cautious.

"Before, Ms. Jocelyn made things difficult for the teachers at the academy. These matters never reached the queen dowager's ears. But if anything more extreme happens, it will be impossible to keep hidden. If the queen dowager is truly angered, His Majesty will not stand by your side."

Her words hit a nerve with Kylie.

Annoyed, she said, "I won't act rashly. If I do, I can make sure I stay out of it. There's no way I'd be foolish enough to send my cousin to handle it. I'll think it over some more. You don't need to keep nagging me."

Lately, she had been carefully

planning an alliance with the Farrell family, and Thomas was the most suitable candidate. Among the court's generals, only he remained unmarried, and his command over

the military was absolute.

To hold real power, one needed to control the army. Marrying into a family of military leaders was pointless if the power lay with the father or grandfather.

Everything had been going smoothly-until Carissa ruined it all.

How could Kylie not be angry? And how did Victoria know about the third son of the Marquis of Glandale's family? That conversation had been private, just between her and her aunt. She hadn't told anyone else. Could there be spies in her palace?

The people around her had been in

her service for years, especially those trusted enough to serve in the inner halls. Even those waiting outside in the outer halls were loyal confidants. If one of them were the source, they must have been planted long ago.

How could Kylie investigate?

She was afraid that any mistake in the investigation might hurt her own people.

"Investigate the queen dowager's people in Everspring Palace. Look into it quietly and see who seems most suspicious," Kylie ordered.

Lydia lowered her voice and whispered, "Your Majesty, I've already looked into it, but I couldn't find anything."

"You've already looked into it?" Kylie was a bit surprised.

"I've heard that the queen dowager has people placed in every palace, so I've checked several times but couldn't find anything," Lydia replied quietly.

"Besides, even if we found someone,

what could we do? If the queen dowager wants to place people or bribe them, it's far too easy for her. In terms of scheming, no one in the harem can outmatch her. I've also noticed that she often turns a blind eye to many things. If it doesn't concern her, she won't intervene. Maybe this time, she sensed what you were planning and stepped in because she's worried about you meddling with state matters."

Kylie cursed silently. What mother wouldn't think of her son's future? And her son was the eldest legitimate heir-was she supposed to allow another prince to succeed to the throne?

Chapter 1177

After leaving the palace, Violet headed to Skye Embroidery while Carissa went to Gracewood Women's Academy.

Carissa had already warned Jocelyn not to cause any more trouble, threatening to expel her if she did. Alas, it seemed the peace hadn't lasted long; the trouble had resurfaced.

When Catherine saw Carissa, she knew immediately it was because of the problem with Jocelyn.

"She has no interest in her studies," Catherine said. "It might be best to persuade her to withdraw voluntarily. That way, it won't cause too much of a scene, especially since she's a young lady who's supposed to be engaged soon."

Catherine was never one to be afraid of the Quinton family. She genuinely cared about Jocelyn and her future. If Jocelyn were expelled from the academy, it would severely tarnish her reputation.

Catherine had more sympathy for young girls. She understood that if a girl failed to make a good match, it could affect the rest of her life.

Carissa nodded. "Please don't worry, Mrs. Ashford. I'll find out exactly what happened before I speak to her."

"Well, there hasn't been any major trouble, but she and those other girls have been causing disruptions in class," Catherine replied. "Especially when Ms. Young is giving lectures. They make noise and stir up trouble, and it's upsetting everyone. Even Ms. Young is troubled by it. After all, she's still young and doesn't know how to handle such things."

Carissa was sure Rosalind should know how to handle it, but perhaps she also realized this wasn't just a personal issue for the girls. There might be someone behind the scenes trying to undermine the academy's existence. This was something beyond Rosalind's control, so she hadn't acted hastily.

Carissa went to find Rosalind but ran into Jocelyn, who was accompanied by her two close friends, Hailey and Cassidy. To Carissa's surprise, they were there to apologize.

Leading the way, Jocelyn and her friends bowed deeply to Rosalind, their faces filled with remorse. Their words were sincere.

"We were wrong before. We've caused trouble for you, Ms. Young. We humbly ask for your forgiveness. We promise it won't happen again. Whatever punishment you see fit, whether it's writing lines or striking our palms, we will accept it without complaint." Carissa didn't step inside. She only stood at the door and watched.

She didn't believe for a moment that

Jocelyn and the others truly

understood their mistake. It wasn't plausible for a group of

troublemaking students to suddenly realize they were wrong without some deeper reason. Either they were hiding something, or someone had told them to apologize.

As for Rosalind, it was unclear if she had noticed anything. Her expression showed a trace of relief at their admission of guilt-but only a trace.

"Since you acknowledge your fault and are willing to accept punishment, each of you will receive 20 strikes on the palm. Go to Ms. Wardell to receive your punishment," she said with calm authority.

Rosalind was referring to Athena, who was once Meredith's study partner. Though Athena didn't teach regularly, she was in charge of discipline at the academy. She was strict, and many students feared her.

Jocelyn clearly hadn't anticipated

such a punishment. She thought

they would simply be made to copy lines, as that had been the usual penalty before. The sudden anger that flashed in her eyes was quick and sharp, but since she was facing away from Carissa, only Rosalind noticed it.

"Why are you still standing there?" Rosalind's voice was cold and commanding, carrying the weight of a teacher's authority.

Jocelyn clenched her teeth and tried to appeal to Rosalind. "20 strikes is too many, Ms. Young. Could you make it lighter? Perhaps a writing punishment instead? I'll copy as many lines as you want."

The other two girls joined in,

pleading that they would rather copy

lines than receive strikes on their palms as punishment. They claimed it would prevent them from writing for a long time, which could delay their studies.

Rosalind's response was firm. "You can either leave Gracewood Women's Academy, or you can go to Ms. Wardell for your punishment. Make your choice, and stop wasting my time here." Her tone left no room for negotiation, but Jocelyn and the others were still unwilling to accept their fate. They argued that their mistake wasn't severe enough to warrant such a harsh punishment. Each of them chimed in, their voices overlapping as they surrounded Rosalind, making a chaotic mess.

Rosalind could reason with people, but dealing with this kind of chaos clearly wasn't her strong suit. Just as she was about to lose her temper, Carissa's voice came from the doorway. "What? Are 20 strikes too little? Then how about 30? If you keep arguing, I'll make it 40."

Chapter 1178

Carissa stepped into the room, her cold, piercing gaze sweeping over them. The three girls immediately lowered their heads, too intimidated to meet her eyes. Seeing her arrive, Rosalind let out a relieved breath, as though a savior had finally appeared.

Carissa's voice cut through the tension like a blade.

"What are you waiting for? Do you want me to increase the punishment, or would you prefer to leave Gracewood Women's Academy? If you're not here to study, then don't take up space. There are plenty of others who would be eager to learn." Hailey and Cassidy flinched at her words. They

quickly pulled on Jocelyn's sleeve, their eyes urging her to leave before things got worse. What had started as 20 strikes was now 30, and if they lingered any longer, it could easily climb to 40 or 50. However, Jocelyn wasn't one to back down so easily. As a pampered daughter of the prestigious Quinton family, she had never endured such humiliation. After a long pause, she finally stifled her defiant glare.

Before Carissa could say the dreaded 40, Jocelyn turned on her heel and stormed off, dragging the others with her.

Once outside the door, Jocelyn's face flushed with anger, her hands trembling. If it weren't for Kylie's orders, she would have never stayed in this wretched place.

Women only needed to know how to read and write, and that was enough. All this studying was pointless! It would be far better to learn how to manage a household or command servants. At least that would be useful after marriage.

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Rosalind rose and greeted Carissa properly. "Greetings, Your Grace."

Carissa smiled. "I imagine having such students must give you a headache."

"It's only a few of them, so it's not too bad," Rosalind responded with a light smile.

She gestured for Carissa to sit as she began tidying up the lesson plans spread across the table.

"If they were just being rowdy, it wouldn't be so troublesome. What concerns me is the possibility that someone doesn't want the academy to succeed."

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion as she asked, "Who do you think it might be, Your Grace?"

Carissa had a rough idea, though she wasn't certain. She offered a comforting smile. "There are many who don't want to see the academy thrive. Rather than waste our energy guessing, it's better we focus on doing what we do best."

"You're right, Your Grace." Rosalind nodded in agreement, offering a faint smile. "Originally, I asked you to come and handle their behavior, but now that they've apologized, I suppose you didn't need to make the trip after all."

"Sometimes it's good to make a visit," Carissa replied. Truthfully, she could have skipped today. Their actions were more childish than anything truly wrong. There was no need to expel them, but a small punishment was still necessary to maintain discipline.

Rosalind reported the situation with a calm expression. "Everything else is going smoothly. In fact, many of the students are especially eager to learn. They particularly enjoyed the lessons with Mrs. Ashford, as she has traveled to many places and experienced different cultures in her youth. She tells them stories, sharing tales from beyond the walls, and they listen with great interest. Even I find myself going to listen whenever I have the chance."

Carissa was grateful to have Catherine here. "It's truly a blessing to broaden their horizons. These young women have been confined to the inner chambers their whole lives. Some have rarely stepped outside the outer courtyard, only venturing out during festivals. The constraints of being a woman have bound their feet and obscured their vision. The world they know is

limited to the confines of their

courtyards."

Rosalind nodded in agreement, fully understanding the truth of it. She herself had only gained a broader perspective because she had the opportunity to read more books than most.

She gazed out at the winter sun, her profile soft and graceful.

"The academy truly is a wonderful thing."

Carissa leaned her chin on her hand, admiring Rosalind. Rosalind was undeniably beautiful, but it was more than her looks-what truly captivated people was the quiet elegance that came from her depth of knowledge.

After what happened with Thomas,

Rosalind never again spoke of

marriage. It was as though once she had let go of the idea, she truly had moved on. When it came to matters of the heart, Carissa knew better than to pry. People should live in the way that suited them best what mattered most was their own peace of mind.

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Meanwhile, Athena showed no mercy. She had sent someone to inquire with Carissa and confirmed that the punishment would be 30 strikes across the palm. When the time came, the maidservant struck hard.

Since the students used their right hands to write, it was the left hand that bore the brunt of the punishment. The heavy ruler struck with each blow, the pain intensifying as it went on. The girls held on at first, but soon their resolve broke, and they cried pitifully. Athena paid no attention. She sat calmly sipping coffee, only speaking once the punishment was over. She had the girls treated with medicine, gave them a few words of rebuke, and sent them home.

That evening, Jocelyn returned home, crying uncontrollably. She demanded that Vera take her to the palace to speak with Kylie, to have her punish the others and get revenge for her. Vera was already frustrated with the matter of Jocelyn's marriage, and she couldn't stand her daughter's tantrum.

Annoyed, she snapped, "Enough! You're doing this for the queen's sake, aren't you? She'll remember your loyalty. Once you marry General Farrell, you'll be free to leave the academy."

"I don't want to marry that old man!" Jocelyn's rage flared, ignoring the pain in her hand. She jumped to her feet, her eyes swollen from crying but filled now with hatred. "How dare he? Does he actually think he can take a young girl like me? Who does he think he is? I'll never marry a lecher like that!"

Chapter 1179

Vera quickly pressed her hand to Jocelyn's mouth.

"Stop shouting nonsense! How dare you speak of such vulgarities? If those words reach your uncle's ears, he'll scold you thoroughly."

The Quinton family upheld strict traditions, and every action and word from the younger generation had to be proper.

Jocelyn shook her head and slapped Vera's hand away. "How can he criticize us when his own behavior is so dishonorable? I don't fear him anymore!"

"Enough!" Vera scolded, her tone sharp. "You're being childish. Others might harp on your uncle's past, but we've been covering for him all this time. Remember, he's still the Civil Minister and his son-in-law is the king. So many people's careers depend on him-don't forget that!"

Jocelyn sniffled, pouting as she fell silent, not daring to speak ill of her elders again. "I just can't stand General Farrell! He's weak and cowardly. His wife had an affair with another man and caused a huge scandal, yet he doesn't even say a word."

"This is the queen's decision," Vera replied calmly, applying the medicine to her daughter's wound. She took the opportunity to carefully explain the differences between marrying Hubert and Thomas.

Jocelyn had always admired Kylie, but she couldn't agree with her mother on this matter. Kylie had mentioned Thomas out of the blue the other day, and Jocelyn had found it strange.

She couldn't help but ask, "Did General Farrell speak to the king about this? Does the Farrell family really think they can marry into ours? They should know their place! I can't stand those military men. They're smelly, shabby, and rough!"

Vera understood her daughter's stubbornness. Realizing she wouldn't be able to convince Jocelyn, she let the matter drop. After all, the matter wasn't settled yet, and they still had to get Victoria's approval. They could talk again once that hurdle was cleared. However, Jocelyn was still furious. When she returned to Gracewood Women's Academy, she ranted to Hailey and the others about how Thomas had the nerve to consider marrying her. She spared no effort in ridiculing him.

Seeing the humor in the situation, Hailey spread the story to the other students. Some laughed along, but others, who revered Thomas for his bravery in the war and his heroic status in Starhaven, believed such words were an insult to a man of his stature. They felt he shouldn't be mocked or belittled in such a way.

The two sides quickly fell into an argument.

Of course, some of the other students were indifferent, simply enjoying the spectacle.

But the argument grew fiercer, and soon the young women began hurling books, paper, and quills at each other, turning the room into chaos.

By the time Athena stormed in with a ruler in hand, Jocelyn had already struck another young woman across the face.

The young woman who had been slapped was Courtney Prince, Zoey's daughter. Thomas had once been her uncle by marriage.

Initially, Courtney had kept silent

during the argument, as her mom had warned her repeatedly not to cause trouble at Gracewood Women's Academy. As the insults grew sharper and more venomous, Courtney could no longer stay quiet. She stood up to defend her former uncle, saying that if Jocelyn disliked him, she could simply reject the proposal. There was no need for her to talk nonsense here.

What really set Jocelyn off, though, wasn't just the comment but Courtney's next words.

With a glance in her direction, Courtney added, "I haven't heard anything about your families talking about an engagement. Maybe you've been spreading rumors yourself? How could General Farrell possibly have any interest in you?"

Jocelyn was furious at those words. In her mind, only she had the right to look down on that old man. But now, Courtney was implying that Thomas wouldn't ever consider her as a marriage partner—that was a serious insult. Without thinking, Jocelyn slapped Courtney hard across the face with her uninjured hand.

When Athena entered, it was to this scene. She stormed in, grabbed Jocelyn's hand firmly, and said

sternly, "How dare you strike another student? Such behavior is disgraceful, not only to your family but also to Gracewood Women's

Academy itself!"

Jocelyn, still stinging from the previous punishment, was afraid of Athena. But she also felt aggrieved, her eyes welling with tears. "She provoked me first! She started it! I didn't do anything

to her!" Athena turned to look at Courtney. Seeing the fresh scratch on her delicate, pale cheek where Jocelyn's nails had caught her, Athena's anger only deepened.

"Even if it's just the servants in the

house, there's no reason to slap anyone like that. If her words

offended you, you should have gone to a teacher. Gracewood Women's Academy is a place of learning, not

violence. This will be dealt with severely."

Chapter 1180

The mention of "severe punishment" made Hailey and the others shrink back in fear. They stepped away, trying to put some distance between themselves and Jocelyn.

Jocelyn felt nothing but resentment, her emotions swirling in a mixture of frustration and injustice.

"I didn't do it on purpose," she sobbed, "but she brought it upon herself! Her aunt made such a fool of herself, yet she still stepped in to defend that old man, Thomas Farrell! Doesn't she feel ashamed?"

Courtney, who hadn't cried when slapped, now let her tears fall at Jocelyn's words. She turned away and buried her face in a fellow student's shoulder, crying openly.

The teachers were soon called in to handle the matter. Even Carissa was summoned.

The students who had been part of the argument were now nervous, worried that they also might face punishment. The tension that had once been thick between the two groups had evaporated, leaving behind no trace of hostility. Once the full story was known, Rosalind's usually calm expression hardened with disapproval.

"She has caused trouble time and time again, and now she's resorted to violence. It seems she's not here to learn but to cause disruption. I suggest we expel her from the academy before she damages our reputation."

Jocelyn had already been disinterested in staying at the academy, and she was now deeply insulted. To be expelled was far worse than simply leaving on her own terms. Besides, Kylie had specifically asked her to stay at the academy-she still had things to accomplish. How could she be thrown out now?

In a burst of frustration, she turned on Rosalind, the one who had first suggested her expulsion.

"I know why you want me gone. You once proposed to Thomas, and he rejected you. Now he's interested in me, and you're jealous and bitter. You want to drive me out for your own selfish reasons!"

Catherine frowned. "Is this how the Quintons are taught? To sling insults and resort to violence? Spreading rumors, causing trouble... You have no shame. I agree with the suggestion to expel her from the academy."

After a moment's pause, Catherine's tone softened slightly.

"But I suggest you withdraw from your studies on your own, before word spreads and it jeopardizes your future marriage prospects."

"I agree," Athena added, her tone firm.

As the one responsible for maintaining order, Athena knew these young women weren't here to study. They were here to stir trouble. She had already spared them once after their previous gossip and even disciplined them with the ruler for their mischief. But now, they had crossed the line by resorting to violence.

If word got out, wouldn't it make Gracewood Women's Academy seem like a lawless, disorderly place?

Kyle and Harriet both also agreed, which meant the decision to expel Jocelyn was unanimous.

Carissa nodded and turned to Jocelyn. "For the sake of your reputation, I suggest you withdraw from the academy on your own."

Carissa respected Catherine's opinion. Beyond that, being expelled would not only ruin Jocelyn's future marriage prospects but also reflect poorly on the academy itself.

Jocelyn sobbed, "I won't withdraw! You're all picking on me! Isn't she also to blame in this matter? She insulted me!"

Carissa knew trying to reason with

her would be futile. "I will have both

of your families brought in so this

can be settled properly. As for whether the Earl of Silverstone's family will pursue the matter of your assault, that depends on Mrs.

Prince's decision."

With that, Carissa ordered someone to fetch both families.

Seeing this, Jocelyn turned to Hailey and Cassidy. "You have to help me! Tell them it was her who insulted me first! She said General Farrell wouldn't be interested in me-she was the one who slandered me first!" Hailey and Cassidy hesitated, unwilling to speak on her behalf, but they did plead for leniency.

"She knows she was wrong. Please, can you give her another chance, Headmistress?"

Their half-hearted plea was ignored by Carissa, who dismissed the students and directed Jocelyn and Courtney to be taken to the Elegance Grove courtyard, where they would wait for their parents to arrive.

Howard didn't come. Instead, it was

Vera who arrived. Knowing that

Oliver was away from the capital, Howard expected the Earl of Silverstone's family to send Zoey to handle the matter. Plus, since this involved the women's academy, Howard ultimately sent his wife in his place.

Originally, Vera had hoped to bring Marjorie along. However, Marjorie had claimed to be unwell and was unable to leave the house. Though Vera felt frustration rise within her, she knew better than to press the matter. With no other choice, she set out alone with a maid in tow.