

War Song 1181

Chapter 1181

with a few comforting words. Then, without delay, she headed to Elegance Grove to express her gratitude to Catherine.

Zoey arrived with Jane in tow. When she heard her daughter had been struck, she rushed to check on her. Courtney's face was swollen and there was a thin scratch across it. But seeing that Catherine had already treated the wound, Zoey quickly reassured her daughter. The two mothers, Vera and Zoey, took their seats. Carissa spoke first, explaining the situation clearly. Once everything was laid out, she sent for Jocelyn and Courtney to join them, accompanied by several students as witnesses to make it easier for the two women. Vera's face darkened. She was upset with Jocelyn for being so unwise and for bringing such a matter to the academy. But more so, she seethed at Courtney's words-how could she say that Thomas had no interest in her daughter? If word of it got out, such rumors could ruin her daughter's reputation!

question

them.

But in the end, it was Jocelyn who had struck someone. That was not the same as a simple argument. She had no choice but to lower her head and offer Zoey a half-hearted apology.

"Although the girls were only quarreling, it was wrong for my daughter to hurt anyone. Please, don't hold it against her, Mrs. Prince," said Vera.

Zoey glanced at Jocelyn, who still wore an expression of resentment and grievance. Anyone unfamiliar with the situation might think she was the one who had been harmed.

"She's already of age. She's not a child anymore and must take responsibility for her actions. If she struck someone, then it is her responsibility to apologize. After that, whether or not I choose to forgive her is my business," Zoey replied coolly.

Vera assessed the situation. No matter what, the Earl of Silverstone's family had to show the Quinton family a certain level of respect. Clearly, Carissa also wanted them to resolve this matter peacefully and didn't want the situation to escalate. That was why she had called Zoey and Vera here.

Vera had already given in, but she didn't expect Zoey to be so rude, making her look bad in front of everyone. There were other students around, all of whom would definitely talk about it when they went home.

Vera stood up straighter. If they wanted to make a big deal out of it, then she would make sure to handle it properly.

Even though she already knew the details, she still kept her composure and asked the students what exactly had happened. What had caused the argument? How had it escalated to the point of a fight? The students, not daring to side with Jocelyn's friends in front of the headmistress, simply repeated the story as it happened, giving an honest account of everything.

Vera latched onto Courtney's words, letting out a sharp laugh. "Oh? How thoughtful of you to speak up for General Farrell, Ms. Prince. But if you were going to defend him, why go as far as saying that he has no interest in my daughter? If such words get out, what will become of her reputation? Your choice of words was reckless, Ms. Prince. If we're to consider expulsion, then both of them should go."

She gave Courtney a cold glance, then added, "And as for the issues involving the Farrell family and your aunt how dare you even speak about that? Don't you have any shame?"

Courtney's voice was hoarse as she replied, "She brought it up first; I didn't start it! Why is it that she can speak, but I can't respond?"

"You're so sharp-tongued," Vera

taunted sarcastically, then turned to Zoey. "Mrs. Prince, you're the lady of the house and you run the Earl of Silverstone's household. Even with so much on your plate, you should still keep better control of your children. A young woman who argues with her elders like this won't be easy to marry off."

Her words were laced with a thinly veiled threat.

Vera was well-connected in their circle, so she obviously knew that Zoey was looking for a marriage match for Courtney. The phrase "won't be easy to marry off" was a veiled threat-if things got worse,

Vera might spread rumors, making it

harder for Courtney to marry.

Zoey was no fool and certainly picked up on the threat.

In the past, she might have cared. But with everything that had happened with Viola, the reputation of the Earl of Silvestone's family had already been tarnished. Zoey had nothing left to lose.

When a person stopped caring about everything, they might lose control or act irrationally, almost as if they'd gone crazy.

"Let's not stray from the matter at

hand, Mrs. Quinton. The

headmistress and the teachers are present, and the facts are clear. The argument between both parties was verbal. My daughter's words about General Farrell not favoring Ms. Quinton may have been blunt, but

they were likely the truth. You can't

expect your daughter to be so

perfect that everyone would like her.

"If Ms. Quinton found it insulting, she shouldn't have spoken about it at the academy. She was the first to mention it, so she cannot blame others for responding. Disagreement and debate are normal, but violence is not." Behind Zoey's calm demeanor, there was an unmistakable, almost manic intensity.

"I demand that your daughter apologize and be expelled. Those are my terms," she declared.

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Vera's expression grew darker. It was impossible that Zoey hadn't caught her veiled threat.

Her tone hardened as she said, "There's no need to escalate this matter so much. I'm fine with an apology, but expulsion is too extreme. It's just a petty altercation between children. Expelling someone over such a trivial matter would only make people think Gracewood Women's Academy is blowing things out of proportion.

"Mrs. Prince, if you won't think of your own daughter, at least consider the academy's reputation. If word gets out that my daughter was expelled over this, it will only damage the academy's standing."

Her earlier threat to Zoey had now subtly shifted to threatening the academy itself.

Carissa's smile was cold and dismissive. "If we don't expel Ms. Quinton for hitting another student, that will be what damages the academy's reputation. We invited you here to handle this matter with some dignity, Mrs. Quinton.

"Those who need to apologize and make amends should do so, and the situation should be explained so that both families don't hold grudges because of the children's actions. But the expulsion is non-negotiable. If you're unwilling to have your daughter leave voluntarily, I will take the responsibility of seeing that she's removed."

Vera dared not openly argue with Carissa.

So instead, she turned to the other teachers and asked, "All of you are supposed to be role models. Surely, you can overlook a small mistake from a student?"

Rosalind's response was unwavering, "I insist on her expulsion. It was only due to the intervention of Mrs. Ashford and Lady Carissa that Ms. Quinton was given the opportunity to leave with some dignity."

Catherine waved her hand. "Just have her withdrawn. Arguing further will only upset everyone."

Vera shot Rosalind a sharp glare. According to the students, it was Rosalind who first brought up the expulsion, while the others merely agreed.

Who didn't know about what happened between the Young family and the Farrell family? Any attempts to conceal it were futile.

Thomas truly didn't fancy Rosalind-after all, who in the Young family these days could hold things together? They were no longer as influential as they once were, and all they had left was their reputation.

The Quinton family controlled the Civil Department. If it hadn't been for Victoria's interference and Carissa's timely intervention, Thomas might have already sent a proposal of his own to the Quinton family for Jocelyn's hand in marriage.

Vera believed that the Farrell family's initial refusal was because Alice didn't understand the benefits of political connections. However, Thomas couldn't possibly be unaware of it. For a military officer to become a renowned general with great influence, they would need strong support from powerful officials in the court.

A strategic marriage alliance was the most practical way to secure such ties.

With this in mind, Vera let out a derisive laugh "You may be young, but you certainly carry yourself with authority, Ms. Young. Do you truly believe you're a respectable teacher? I suspect there's some jealousy and scheming between the girls involved here. Fine, if that's the case, my daughter will withdraw herself-no need for anyone to expel her."

Since Carissa had already made it clear that the expulsion was final, withdrawing voluntarily would at least preserve some dignity.

Vera stood, pulling Jocelyn by the arm. "We're leaving!"

Jocelyn stumbled as her mother yanked her, tears welling in her eyes. "Mom, if I have to withdraw, then so should Courtney! Why should I be the only one?"

Vera shot a cold glance at Zoey and replied, "This is nothing more than a shoddy academy. We'll find you a proper tutor."

Zoey rose from her seat, her hand extending to block their way. "The expulsion is the academy's decision. But after hitting my daughter and failing to offer an apology, do you think you can just leave without consequences? It's not that simple." "Didn't she already apologize earlier? Why are you so stubborn?" Vera snapped, her temper flaring.

Zoey turned to look at the mother

and daughter her gaze firm. "You never apologized, and neither did

she. You can't brush this off as et

small quarrel between girls. My daughter was struck, and you think you can simply walk away without an apology?"

Zoey was determined to demand justice. If Courtney had been slapped and there was no apology, what would that teach everyone else? That they could do as they pleased without consequences?

Besides, this was a good chance to teach Courtney a lesson. When one was in the right and the other party was being unreasonable, one shouldn't back down, not even an inch.

"I won't apologize! She insulted me first!" Jocelyn said, sobbing.

Well aware of her daughter's stubborn nature, Vera wasn't surprised. She would never give in so easily.

Attempting a softer approach, Vera turned to Zoey and asked, "You're really not going to let this go, are you? You won't even show any respect to the Quinton family?"

"My daughter was struck. No

amount of respect matters now. Besides, you don't even speak for the Quinton family. If you want me to show respect for the Quinton family, you should have the family head come here and speak to me," Zoey responded coldly.

Furious, Vera snapped, "Why must you make this so difficult for everyone? My daughter is already leaving. What more do you want?"

"An apology!" Zoey demanded, her voice rising.

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Wrenching her arm free from her mother's grip, Jocelyn shouted, "I won't apologize! What are you going to do about it? If you're so bold, why don't you hit me back?"

She thrust her tear-streaked face toward Zoey, her cheeks flushed, as if bearing a heavy injustice.

Naturally, Zoey would never strike her, but a cold laugh escaped her lips. "Very well. In that case, I'll go to the Quinton family and ask Lord Gerald what kind of upbringing you've had there." She turned to Carissa. "Headmistress, it would be a great help if you could vouch for me when the time comes."

Carissa nodded. "If you go to see Lord Gerald, I will speak plainly."

Vera knew it would be disastrous if word of this reached Gerald. If he heard of it, their branch of the family would surely be reprimanded.

With that thought, she gritted her teeth and said to Jocelyn, "Apologize."

Tears streamed down Jocelyn's face as she stomped her foot. "Mom, I won't apologize! They're the ones bullying me and trying to kick me out of the academy! They should apologize to me!"

Vera glanced at Zoey and Carissa, who both looked cold, and immediately put on a stern face.

"If you've done something wrong, apologizing is the proper thing to do," she told her daughter.

Jocelyn felt she had already suffered enough these past few days. Now, not only was her mother not standing up for her, but she was also asking her to apologize.

She angrily threw her hands down, stomped her feet, and cried, "I won't apologize! Let them make a scene if they want to. I'd rather die than back down!"

With that, she turned and bolted for the door.

But with Carissa standing there, Jocelyn didn't get far. Within a few steps, she caught up to her and dragged the girl back toward Zoey.

Carissa turned to Zoey and said, "This incident occurred at Gracewood Women's Academy, so the academy bears some responsibility. Here's what we'll do. Since she's harmed Ms. Prince's reputation, we'll take it to the authorities. Whatever they decide, the academy will bear its share of the blame."

Zoey held Courtney's hand and replied solemnly, "If that's what you suggest, then we'll go to the authorities, Lady Carissa."

Jocelyn froze, her eyes wide with fear. "I don't want to go to the authorities!"

There was no way a well-bred young lady could be sent to the authorities. How would she ever show her face again?

"Then, hurry up and apologize! Get it over with so we can leave this wretched place!" Vera snapped, her voice rising in sharp anger.

Jocelyn fumed for a moment, then reluctantly walked up to Courtney and Zoey. She pursed her lips and muttered, "Sorry, I was wrong."

Her tone was still brimming with resentment, but Zoey had no desire to argue further.

She sighed and said flatly, "Enough. We can't afford to cross the Quinton family."

With other students present, Zoey's words were meant for them too.

The Quinton family had grown arrogant over the years, completely

unaware of how they were

perceived Even now, Kylie was boldly attempting to secure alliances through marriage to win over

military generals and strengthen

Connor's position.

If even a woman like Zoey could see it clearly, how could Salvador not suspect Kylie was trying to force his hand in declaring Connor as the crown prince? So, it was fine if things turned sour with the Quinton family.

Vera felt awkward hearing that, but didn't think much more about it and just grabbed Jocelyn and left.

Even Catherine couldn't help but furrow her brow. "What has become of the Quinton family's fourth branch?"

"The Quinton family is no longer what it once was," Athena replied.

There were other students present, so the conversation ended there.

Rosalind told the students to head back and prepare for class. She appeared unaffected, her expression still calm and gentle.

Carissa stayed behind for a brief conversation with Kyle, while Zoey stepped outside to soothe Courtney and explain the situation to her.

In Kyle's class, everyone behaved well, especially when he was teaching painting. His students' eagerness to learn was so encouraging to watch.

"Ms. Young works the hardest and

worries the most. Her class always has those troublemakers, but thankfully one's been sent away. With her gone, the others will be too scared to cause much trouble. Since the academy opened, Ms. Young has had to deal with a lot of gossip but she's handled it all. She's stronger than we thought, so you don't need to worry too much," said Kyle.

Carissa nodded in agreement. After exchanging a few more words, she stood up and said, "I'm going back with Madam Zoey. We need to talk on the way."

Kyle nodded slightly, his eyes showing some concern. "Go ahead."

After a pause, he stopped her and said, "Cari, choose a few women skilled in martial arts to come to the academy and keep an eye on things for a while. I'm worried something might happen."

Carissa understood what Kyle was

concerned about. She was worried too, but there weren't many women who knew martial arts. Alana and Leah were busy at Skye Embroidery and couldn't be reassigned, so she could only have Mabel, Claire, and the others take turns.

Carissa truly wished they could recruit more female students trained in martial arts.

Chapter 1184

Zoey sat beside Courtney on a stone bench in the garden. The courtyard was filled with flowers and shrubs, but their growth was sparse. In the cold of winter, the plants appeared even more withered and desolate. "Why did you defend your uncle... I mean, why did you speak up for General Farrell?"

Zoey gently dabbed her daughter's face with a handkerchief, pressing lightly around the bruise. Thankfully, there was no blood and it wasn't a deep wound. If it had been, Courtney's face could have been scarred. Yet, the palm print was still so clear, making Zoey's chest tighten with worry.

She was curious as to why her daughter had chosen to stand up for Thomas. Zoey had made sure to keep the household matters hidden from the children, especially when those matters grew messy. She thought she had kept things well-guarded, but recent rumors seemed to be affecting them. She wondered how much the children knew, or thought they knew, about the situation.

Courtney lifted her swollen cheek. Her eyes, though clear and pure, showed a maturity that didn't quite match her age.

"Mom, do you remember what Uncle Thomas gave me when he and Aunt Viola visited after their wedding?"

Zoey thought for a moment, then replied, "I remember. The maid gave you and Cedric a handful of gold coins and golden locks. They were quite generous."

Courtney shook her head, her gaze firm. "It was Mrs. Ashford's book of travels, Chronicles of the Mountains and Rivers. Uncle Thomas told me that in this world, few women get to leave their birthplace, unless they marry out. However, the world beyond is vast. "Even if we can't see it with our own eyes, we should know about the beauty of our kingdom. We should understand how wide the sky is, and how high it stretches. That way, we won't be narrow-minded or caught up in petty troubles. We won't sacrifice our own happiness just to please others."

Zoey paused, a little taken aback. Was that so?

Back then, Zoey had been more superficial. She had been focused on what gifts Thomas had brought to the Prince family, and whether Viola was being treated well by the Farrell family. She only paid attention to those things.

"Since Uncle Thomas came back, he hasn't caused any trouble for us or Aunt Viola. Mom, doesn't he feel wronged or angry? How can he let those things go so easily? Those things must have hurt him. He must have been upset.

"That's why when it comes to

marriage proposals, he's always so uninterested. His wounds still

haven't healed. Even though he's not my uncle anymore, I still care about him, still feel that, as a daughter of the Prince family, I owe him. So, I can't let Jocelyn speak ill of him."

Zoey stared at her daughter, stunned.

In her mind, Courtney had always been reserved.

rarely voiced her

opinions, and hardly ever spoke so much at once. Zoey had raised her according to the manners of a noble young lady, teaching her to keep her emotions in check and not let others see her true feelings.

Because showing emotions was like exposing a weakness, making it easy for others to take advantage of her.

In the past couple of years, Zoey actually regretted raising her daughter that way. To conceal one's emotions and to bottle them up-it was really just a way of enduring silently, like herself. It often felt like self-sacrifice. Now, more than ever, she wished her daughter would find her own voice, stand firm in her beliefs, and not be so restrained. She hoped she could live her life freely, without being bound by rules or others' expectations. Unexpectedly, it turned out Thomas had taught Courtney that lesson a long time ago.

Zoey felt both relieved and saddened, thinking that Viola had missed out on a good man.

Courtney continued, "Ms. Young said everyone only sees his achievements and admires his charm, but few understand the depth of his heart. He can do what others can't. Mom, Ms. Young must really like him." Zoey blinked, taken aback. "You've talked about him with Ms. Young? When was this?"

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"It was back when everyone was talking about Aunt Viola and Mr. Lewis, as well as criticizing Uncle Thomas. Ms. Young would always- sit alone at the end of the hallway looking lonely and quiet. When Ms. Wardell asked her about it, Ms. Young said she felt sorry for him but couldn't do anything to help. I overheard their conversation," Courtney said, gripping her mom's sleeve as she looked up at her.

Zoey drew her daughter into her arms, her breath heavy with a sigh. "I hope... I hope he finds happiness."

Rosalind was naturally a good woman, but Zoey didn't feel it was her place to intervene. She could only hope their fate would work out.

Chapter 1185

Carissa left the academy with Zoey. Instead of riding her own horse, she had someone lead it while she sat in Zoey's carriage. Carissa had two things to tell her.

First, she said, "Isaac selected some goods that weren't of the best quality and sold them. The money from the sales wasn't converted to banknotes, and it's all been stored in the cellar at Glimmering Tower."

"It's what the Earl of Silverstone's family owes him. He should feel free to spend it. I've put some aside as well, just in case," Zoey softly replied.

"He won't spend it. He doesn't need the money," Carissa said.

Then, she moved on to the second topic, explaining, "As for Celeste, His Majesty has confirmed her identity. He knows she's taken a woman from Lunvale as her godmother. As for the surname Spencer, it's from a branch of the Spencer family in Ebonflow. They do business in Lunvale as well.

"The person you found out she was conspiring with is likely from the Spencer family. It would be better if His Majesty moved against them. But if he doesn't, your family could become entangled in a more dangerous and difficult situation."

Carissa withheld key details, such as the investigation into the private army in Lunvale. These were things that couldn't be revealed.

She only offered this information to prepare Zoey. If Oliver changed his mind now, the Earl of Silverstone's family could still find a way to avoid the worst outcome. At most, they would lose their noble title, but that wouldn't be the worst case. It all depended on whether Zoey could manage to change Oliver's mind.

After hearing this, Zoey just nodded silently without saying anything.

With that, Carissa knew Zoey had done her best, but Oliver hadn't listened to her. She patted Zoey's hand but didn't offer any comforting words. She got off the carriage halfway and rode back to her residence.

Some things changed so gradually that people ended up accepting them without even realizing it.

For example, when Carissa used to ride through the streets in official attire, the common people would stare at her with all kinds of looks. But now, it seemed they'd gotten used to it, and some even greeted her with a smile. They had accepted such an unconventional princess consort, but still hadn't fully accepted such an unconventional woman.

The next evening, the matter of Jocelyn's expulsion reached

Malcolm's ears. However, neither Vera nor Jocelyn explained the full truth. They only said that several young women had argued about something and Carissa had stepped into settle it, resulting in Jocelyn being expelled.

Malcolm was usually a careful person, but in recent years, he had become arrogant and overconfident in the Quinton family's upbringing. He believed his relatives would never do anything out of line.

And when Jocelyn tearfully explained that she had argued with the other young ladies to protect his reputation, it stirred a deep sense of shame and indignation within him, making him lose all sense of reason.

His affair with a mistress, despite all his efforts to keep it quiet, always seemed to find its way into public gossip. It was a persistent thorn in his side that challenged his authority.

He believed Carissa was deliberately targeting him, since she had personally handled the arrangements for Henry's concubines and their children, which led Marjorie to discover his affair.

Lately, Marjorie had been cold and distant. She still managed the household, but was clearly less involved than before.

Because of these issues, he never doubted what Jocelyn and Vera said.

But the mother-daughter pair never expected him to seek out Carissa to defend them, since he would usually ignore these matters in the past. This time, they miscalculated by making Malcolm believe that Carissa wasn't targeting Jocelyn, but him.

Malcolm might not care enough to defend the fourth branch of his family, but he would go to great lengths to defend his own honor.

Thus, he made the second greatest

mistake of his life—he sent one of his former students to lodge a formal complaint against Carissa, accusing her of bias and of using her position as the headmistress of Gracewood Women's Academy to target the Quinton family

Though Malcolm didn't personally submit the petition, it was well known at court that the student was his.

At first, the women's academy

hadn't drawn much attention from the officials. Sending their daughters there was just a way to show

respect to the queen

since

she had decreed its establishment. It was more about showing respect to her than anything else

But now, one of Malcolm's students had lodged a formal complaint against Carissa, and it involved Gracewood Women's Academy. Oddly enough, people started seeing the academy in a new light.

Salvador completely ignored it, acting as if he hadn't heard. After a brief glance across the hall, he asked, "Is there anything else to report?"

His complete disregard was a direct slap in Malcolm's face. The court fell silent for a moment before other officials began to step forward to report their own matters.

Chapter 1186

Malcolm stood frozen in place, his face burning with a sharp sting, though no slap had been delivered. It was only then that he realized his recklessness-his impulsive actions had brought the matter of the students at Gracewood Women's Academy all the way to the royal

court.

With Salvador telling him to stay behind, he stood there, unmoving, until the court session ended.

Left alone in the king's private study, Malcolm was instructed to wait outside. The biting cold of the winter wind cut through him like a blade as he stood there for four full hours, not once being summoned in.

A swirl of emotions churned inside him, but the most prominent was anger. He was the king's father-in-law. Surely, even if his actions were misguided, Salvador should not have left him to suffer in the cold.

By the end of the four hours, his body was nearly frozen, stiff from the cold. Derek, noticing his distress, brought him a small warming stove. The faint warmth provided a small relief from the icy grip of winter.

Ian quickly entered the study, and after a brief exchange with the king, returned to stand before Malcolm.

"Lord Quinton, what are you doing here?" Ian asked, surprised.

Shivering, Malcolm forced out through clenched teeth, "Waiting to be summoned by His Majesty."

Ian's eyes widened. "His Majesty just ordered me to find you. He was wondering where you'd gone—he's been waiting for you! Please go in at once. His Majesty is growing impatient."

Malcolm barely managed a stiff nod of thanks before forcing his frozen limbs into motion and entering the study.

He greeted Salvador and took a seat like he usually did. However, he could sense the king's anger simmering beneath the surface. The four hours of waiting had been nothing more than a quiet reprimand. However, as it was regarding something trivial like Gracewood Women's Academy, Malcolm was upset and couldn't accept it.

The warmth of the room slowly returned feeling to his limbs, but before he could fully recover, Derek entered with a steaming cup of coffee and a set of investigation results.

Malcolm curiously picked up the documents. After reading them, his eyes widened in disbelief and his heart surged with fury.

Vera and Jocelyn had lied to him!

It all began with Jocelyn's claim that Thomas had asked to marry her. She had mocked him for being too old and trying to prey on a younger woman. The rumor had spread like wildfire, with the other students joining in the ridicule.

"Father, all the nobles and scholars in the capital are forming connections through marriage. Now, it seems like they've set their sights on General Farrell. It seemed that I was right to entrust him with so many responsibilities. After all, even you hold him in high regard," said Salvador, his voice breaking through Malcolm's thoughts.

His tone was calm, but there was a flicker of amusement as the king spoke.

Malcolm felt a cold sweat break out across his back, his limbs trembling as he fell to his knees.

"Your Majesty, I had no knowledge of this. I have never meddled in the marriages of the fourth branch of my family."

Salvador chuckled softly, adding,

"When it comes to marriage, it is down to the will of the parents and the matchmaker's words. As the head of the Quinton family, how can you not be involved in the marriages of your own kin? Hasn't this always been the case? I believe General Farrell is a fine match. If the two families can unite, it would open doors to both scholarly and military paths for the Quinton family. I would find that most pleasing."

Malcolm's knees trembled as he knelt. He knew better than anyone how suspicious the king could be. How had the Quinton family become so reckless without even realizing it?

For years, Malcolm had prided himself on being careful, keeping his family's actions tightly controlled, fearful of even the smallest slip that might give his enemies a foothold.

Yet now, it was not just a simple slip-it was about making Salvador mistakenly think the Quinton family had ambitions to help Connor take the throne, along with gaining control over the civil and military officials.

To the king, it looked as though the Quinton family, in alliance with the queen, was forcing him to appoint Connor as crown prince.

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At Everspring Palace, Kylie paced anxiously, her mind racing as she waited for news from her servants. Knowing Malcolm had been punished and left standing outside Salvador's study for four hours, she had sent someone to inquire as to the cause.

At last, the young chamberlain

returned, bowing low as he reported,

"Your Majesty, the rumors say that

Lord Quinton's student submitted a formal complaint against the headmistress of Gracewood

Women's Academy, Lady Carissa.

This displeased His Majesty."

"Is that all?" Kylie asked, her voice tightening with disbelief.

She knew Salvador wasn't fond of the women's academy. But then, she remembered that he had once considered bringing Carissa into the palace, which made this turn of events a little more plausible.

Could it be that in Salvador's eyes, the academy itself could be questioned, but not Carissa?

The young chamberlain continued, "Lord Quinton is still inside His Majesty's study. When I left, he had not yet been dismissed, but His Majesty had someone bring him coffee."

Kylie felt a slight relief-coffee was a sign that Salvador did not intend to punish her dad further.

Still, the academy had to be shut down. With Gracewood Women's Academy's recent troubles, including the expulsion of Jocelyn, it was imperative that it be shown to harbor corruption. If that were not

proven, the Quinton family name

would be tainted.

Her eyes narrowed coldly as a plan began to form in her mind. It was not a clever scheme, but it was a reliable and effective one that had always worked in the past. "Lydia, come here!" Kylie called, summoning her confidante to her side.

As she whispered a few instructions in her ear, Lydia listened carefully and nodded.

"I will go at once, Your Majesty."

"Find the people, but do not act in haste," Kylie cautioned. "We need to wait for the perfect moment."

Chapter 1187

Back at the Quinton family's residence, Malcolm summoned the members of the fourth branch and unleashed his fury upon them.

"Malcolm, we were only following Her Majesty's wishes," Vera said, looking aggrieved. "I had planned to propose the third son of the Marquis of Glandale for Jocelyn's marriage, but Her Majesty insisted that we needed military support." She revealed the situation where Kylie had nearly arranged the marriage between Jocelyn and Thomas but had been stopped by Victoria.

Her voice grew sharper, adding, "The Farrell family is too proud, don't you think? Do they think a Quinton family daughter isn't worthy of their son? They're looking down on us!"

"Why should the Farrell family think highly of the Quinton family?" Malcolm retorted sharply. "Have we ever considered the Farrell family's stature in the same light?"

Malcolm realized that somehow, his family had begun to expect respect and deference from everyone, as though they were untouchable.

The fear began to settle in.

Without realizing it, the Quinton family had become powerful in everyone's eyes, and the people in the Quinton family thought the same. Why did they think this? Naturally, it was because others had been supporting them.

Vera fell silent for a moment, her thoughts clearly swirling before she said, "But we are the Quinton family."

Shaken by this realization, Malcolm called a meeting with the entire family. He addressed them sternly, instructing them to be mindful of their actions and speech.

"We must avoid arrogance and presumptuousness," he commanded. "Be humble, be discreet, and never associate with those who might bring scandal upon us. We cannot afford the appearance of forming factions within the family or making private alliances for personal gain."

As for Malcolm's affair, it was only discussed among the women in the family. The men talked about how it shouldn't have happened, but in their hearts, they understood. Yes, men always tended to understand when other men made such mistakes because they didn't consider it a mistake in the first place.

So, the people in the family would follow his words today.

Malcolm felt especially uneasy. Before Connor showed any signs of being clumsy or arrogant, he thought there was no need to plan anything for him. Connor was the future king, and that position would always be his.

But Connor's mediocrity gradually became more apparent. It turned out that not only was he mediocre, but his character and morals were lacking as well. Salvador clearly knew this, so any attempts to scheme for Connor's benefit at this point would only make the king suspicious.

Fortunately, the prince was still young and could be properly guided. For now, the best course of action was to keep a low profile, bide their time, and focus on educating him.

That, Malcolm believed, was the wisest path forward.

However, when word of the situation reached Kylie, she was displeased. She believed Malcolm had grown too cautious. Now was the time to forge more connections, especially with military figures. The best move, in her eyes, was to build stronger ties with the Minister of Defense, Davis. She sent a message to her father, urging him to consider Connor's future more seriously.

Malcolm replied, calmly explaining that the prince's mediocrity was evident. His education was the only matter of importance at this stage-nothing else should be done that might risk displeasing Salvador.

Kylie was well aware of her son's limitations. Infact, it was because she knew that she felt a sense of

urgency Connor lacked thes

to secure his position through intellect or military prowess. He would only hold onto his place through the support of the older generation of officials.

Kylie could feel the urgency of the situation. Why didn't Malcolm feel the same? How could the Quinton family not feel it?

If Connor was not appointed as the crown prince, she feared that the Quinton family would fall from favor.

Kylie thought her father was short-sighted, only seeing the current power of the Quinton family and not considering what would happen later.

Lydia entered from outside the hall and quietly said, "Your Majesty, Lady Sylvia and Lady Grace gathered the other day and were talking about Ms. Jocelyn being expelled from the academy. Now, many people in the palace are discussing it, saying that the Quinton family is a prestigious scholarly family, so how could they have produced a daughter who was expelled from the academy?"

Kylie's eyes narrowed in displeasure. "Lady Sylvia grows more brazen with each passing day. She dares to spread rumors about my own family? It was Jocelyn who left the academy on her own. For them to say she was expelled is pure fabrication." Lydia hesitated before replying, "It doesn't matter what people say in the palace. What concerns me is that the noble families are starting to gossip. If this continues, Ms. Jocelyn's prospects for marriage could be ruined."

"Then, let her be," Kylie said sharply.

"If she can't marry General Farrell, there is no need for me to care about her. None of my relatives are of any help. They seem to be making alliances with noble families, but they're all focused on their own households and are unwilling to

support Connor."

Lydia knew exactly who Kylie was referring to-Adelaide, Kendrick's princess consort. Adelaide used to visit Kylie frequently, but ever since Kendrick's concubines gave birth to sons, she rarely came to the palace anymore. Now, she was focused on getting pregnant with a legitimate heir. Kylie had summoned her multiple times, but Adelaide found a way to avoid her summons each time, unwilling to help sway Kendrick to speak on Kylie's behalf in front of Salvador.

Chapter 1188

On the 15th of December, Salvador went to Everspring Palace.

With red-rimmed eyes, Kylie began to speak of Jocelyn's expulsion from Gracewood Women's Academy. Having already reprimanded the Quinton family over this matter, Salvador was displeased to hear Kylie bring it up again. Yet, he remained silent, not giving voice to his frustration. Sharp in her observations, Kylie noticed his irritation and quickly changed the subject, saying, "It seems the noble ladies and wives of the capital are all praising Carissa, calling her the ideal example for women."

Salvador gave her a half-smile, his eyes narrowed as he replied, "I find it strange that these noble women are praising someone else and not the kingdom's queen. After all, you are the mother of the nation, and before our marriage, you were widely regarded as a woman of great talent. You should be the one they hold up as the standard."

Kylie couldn't tell whether it was a compliment or a subtle rebuke. She wasn't sure if he was mocking her or genuinely voicing discontent. It was becoming increasingly difficult for her to understand Salvador's true feelings.

She gave a forced smile and offered him a cup of coffee, hesitating before speaking again.

"The Hell Monarch's princess consort truly is popular now. She's managed to establish both Gracewood Women's Academy and Skye Embroidery, and all the people who once criticized her are

now singing her praises. And with the Hell Monarch gaining Your Majesty's favor, I wonder if this is truly a good thing," she said.

Salvador furrowed his brow for a moment, but said nothing in response.

Seeing the slight tension in his expression, Kylie's heart eased just a little. It was clear that, despite everything, Salvador still feared their influence.

Rafael and Carissa had long received widespread praise, winning the admiration of officials and the acclaim of the common people. How could the king not feel threatened? The couple was recklessly expanding their influence, showing no regard for the king, and in the end, they were bound to reap the consequences of their actions.

For now, it was enough to watch as Carissa took a fall.

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Carissa had Claire, Mabel, and a few others take turns keeping an eye on Gracewood Women's Academy.

If the Quinton family acted like they used to, Carissa wouldn't have to worry. But now, each branch had its own agenda, and with Jocelyn being expelled, it was bound to enrage Kylie. Vera's behavior that day had been nothing short of shameless and unruly, so it was only wise to stay cautious.

Recently, Violet, Alana, and Leah had been quite busy, so Carissa hadn't spoken to them in a while. On this rare day when Violet came back early, Carissa took the chance to pull her along to offer their greetings to Helen.

Helen's chambers were warm and cozy. Upon seeing her daughter-in-law and Violet, she eagerly brought out the new gowns she had made, eager to try them on.

Both Carissa and Violet showered her with endless compliments, repeatedly saying how lovely the gowns looked on her.

"With the new year nearly upon us, the clothes and accessories all need to be properly prepared. I haven't seen either of you try on your new dresses. Why don't you bring them over and we can try them together?" Helen suggested.

"I haven't had a chance to see them myself, but I'll try them on for you to see in a few days," Carissa replied with a smile.

Her seasonal clothes were usually delivered to her room, where Lulu would fold them neatly. When it was time to wear them, they'd simply take them out and give them a quick press.

However, during the day, she mostly wore her official uniform, and after bathing at home, she changed into simple nightclothes. The new clothes she had tailored were really only for her days off.

She had already told Lily not to prepare too many new outfits, but the older woman had refused to listen.

"Even if you wear your official attire on the outside, you must wear proper clothes underneath them too!"

Carissa might give her instructions, but Lily had her own ways of doing things.

At this age, a young lady should have plenty of beautiful clothes-whether she wore them or not was another matter. After all, they weren't short on money.

Violet, who had once been obsessed

with beauty, now preferred simple and practical clothing, but still had a few new dresses made. She had bought the fabric herself and had the outfits made at the workshop, paying for the tailoring and embroidery.

They spent over an hour together, helping Helen choose accessories for her gowns before finally taking their leave.

The two close friends entered a room, sat down with their coffee, and continued their conversation.

"Has Lord Klein come looking for you?" Violet asked.

"Yes, he has," Carissa replied, recalling the visit from two days ago.

Ryan's uncle, who worked at the Royal Citadel, had specifically come to the Capital Guard headquarters to find her.

When they met, Anthony had sighed deeply and said, "There isn't enough evidence to convict the people she brought to us, so we had no choice but to release them in the end. Every time we release someone, Ms Spencer gets angrier. It's turning the entire Royal Citadel upside down."

Hearing Carissa recount his words, Violet smiled, though there was a trace of helplessness in her eyes. "There's no other way. When it comes to investigations, they are better at it than I am.

"I even forced the culprits I caught to confess, but without evidence-and with the victims refusing to admit they were harmed-those people would undoubtedly be released understand Lord Klein's difficulties, but at the time, I just couldn't contain my anger," said Violet.

Chapter 1189

Apart from being a mentor, Violet had formed a small team with Alana, Leah, and the others. Together, they had taken it upon themselves to track down rapists who had been causing trouble in the city.

At first, Violet had thought it would be a simple task: catch the culprits, force them to confess, and send them off to the authorities. But when they arrived at the authorities, the culprits claimed they had only confessed because they had been beaten up. Alana had quietly approached the young women who had been victimized, hoping they might speak up. But one by one, they denied that anything had happened. Some even turned them away as soon as they saw Alana or anyone from her group. Without any evidence to back up the claims of their crimes, the authorities had no choice but to release the culprits.

Violet's frustration grew with every failed attempt. At times, she was filled with a murderous urge, and the thought of dealing with the culprits in the same ruthless manner she would have previously crossed her mind. In the martial arts world, she would have simply taken care of it herself and walked away unscathed.

But now, she was not acting in the capacity of someone from the martial arts world. Rafael was part of the government, while Carissa controlled the Mystic Army. Violet couldn't afford to become a criminal.

Rounding up the men and sending them to the authorities was the most straightforward method Violet could think of, but it was undeniably clumsy and didn't seem to be working at all. She had worked tirelessly, only to have it all be in vain. They hadn't been able to send a single culprit to jail.

So, she couldn't hide the frustration and anger in her eyes.

As the two women chatted for a while, Carissa offered some words of comfort, "Don't be discouraged. At least you've made them pay for it with a beating. They know you're watching them now and won't dare repeat their actions."

"How is a beating enough? I want them to be brought to justice," Violet replied, her fist pressed against her temple as she tilted her head, clearly struggling with the situation.

Carissa sighed. "The young women who've been hurt are too afraid to speak out. They would rather bury the shame and keep it hidden."

"So, we just let those animals get away with it?" Violet asked, her voice tinged with frustration. "Is there really no other way?"

"Next time, if you can't find evidence, don't bother taking them to the authorities. Beat them harder. Break an arm or a leg, or make sure they won't be able to walk again," Carissa replied.

Violet's expression softened as she considered the idea. "That's actually not a bad plan."

"Did all of you investigate those culprits thoroughly?" Carissa asked.

Violet immediately nodded, assuring her, "Don't worry. We're being very thorough. We haven't unjustly accused anyone. It's just that the victims won't come forward, and the methods we're using aren't exactly legal. The authorities can't do anything about them."

She was feeling somewhat disheartened, having originally thought that once the culprits confessed, the authorities would handle it swiftly. She hadn't realized that they needed evidence and, even more crucially, the victims' testimonies.

Carissa didn't have any answers for her. The law had its strict processes which had to be followed.

The two women exchanged a look, their eyes filled with silent encouragement.

Rafael had stayed in the palace for a long time, and only left when the palace gates were about to close for the night. As he left, the snow had started to fall. By the time he arrived home, his cloak was heavy with soft, white snowflakes.

Carissa helped him remove his cloak, shaking the snow off. "Have you eaten? Why so late tonight?"

He stood by the fire, warming his hands. "I had dinner with His Majesty. He plans to have me quietly go to Lunvale in a few days."

Carissa was surprised. "He wants you to go personally? Why not send the Nightsteel Guard?"

"I've sent someone there already. They've made some discoveries, but they can't investigate further. The people they sent don't have much martial arts skills," Rafael replied.

Carissa understood

immediately the lack of skill or careful planning meant that rash probing could easily alert the target. If they were discovered and the

target quickly moved, any chance of progress would be lost.

"How many people are you taking? When are you leaving?" she asked.

It was the 15th of December now; it would be two weeks until the New Year's celebration.

"I'll speak with Randall tomorrow and see what he knows. I plan to leave in three days. I'll be taking Dylan, Travis, and a few of the household soldiers who've had proper martial arts training," Rafael replied. He wrapped his arms around her waist and gently added, "Don't worry. I'll be careful. Nothing will go wrong."

"Take Isaac with you," Carissa suggested.

Rafael frowned slightly. "He's been busy with the Ministry of Defense, working on the firearms project. Don't trouble him."

In fact, Isaac was not as ignorant as he claimed to be. He had been by Adrian's side for a while and had been working on firearms with him for a long time.

At first, Isaac had pretended that he

didn't understand anything, in

accordance with Adrian's

instructions. Adrian had told Isaac to

intervene less when he was in the

capital, and to let the people sort it out themselves after giving them the notebook.

However, when Isaac visited the Ministry of Defense and took a walk around, he couldn't stand it anymore and decided to take action. So, he was rarely in Hell Monarch Estate these days.

Chapter 1190

Aside from having household soldiers in Hell Monarch Estate, Rafael had not invested in developing a Shadow Guard or any such force. At most, there were a few skilled warriors who frequently went on official assignments, but they all had their duties to attend to and would only return every half month or so to report.

There were also spies, mostly used to gather intelligence on the enemy, but they were rarely used for private matters.

The lack of a larger force was due to several reasons.

Before Rafael had been stationed at the Southern Frontier, he had already earned his battle merits. During his time in the capital leading the Mystic Army, Sigmund had strictly forbidden him from establishing too many guards, particularly a Shadow Guard, which was considered a serious taboo.

Then, after Rafael went to the Southern Frontier, there was no time to think about such matters. Upon his eventual return to the capital, amidst Salvador's growing suspicions, any thoughts of increasing his forces were promptly abandoned.

Naturally, it was a calculated decision. The guard forces in the estate, as well as Rafael's household soldiers, could handle unexpected situations and ensure a safe retreat if necessary.

If the king sent him on an official mission, the Mystic Army could spare some men. But now, with a secret mission, Rafael couldn't use the Mystic Army—he had to rely on his own people.

"Would you like me to come with you?" Carissa asked.

"No need," Rafael replied, smiling as he gently ruffled her hair. "It's not dangerous. We're just gathering information. It's not like we're going to take any action. If it comes to that, we won't be going alone. Plus, with the year-end approaching, the Capital Guard and the Garrison Unit will be busy. It's better if you stay here and keep an eye on things."

Carissa remembered how hectic things would be for the Capital Guard and the Garrison Unit around New Year's, and how easy it was for things to go awry. With her public duties, she couldn't afford to leave the capital at this time.

Still, the thought of Rafael going with just a few men made her uneasy.

When Kyle heard the news the next day, he mentioned that Gracewood Women's Academy would be closing for the holidays in ten or so days. Since there were only a few days left until Rafael was setting off, Kyle suggested he accompany him on the trip, as it was unlikely the academy would urgently need him for the remaining days.

Carissa felt reassured that Kyle was going, but this matter still needed to be discussed with Catherine and the other teachers.

Of course, Kyle didn't reveal the true nature of the trip, only telling the teachers that he was planning to return to Meadow Ridge to spend New Year's in peace.

When he mentioned it to the other teachers, they all agreed. After all, he would still be around for the next three days. He could finish making the exam papers and explaining it to them before leaving. As for the painting and calligraphy classes, they could skip those and let him return to Meadow Ridge.

The plans were settled, and today, the exams were to take place.

The exams focused mainly on

essays and arithmetic, with painting and calligraphy as secondary subjects. For the essay section, students had significant freedom to express themselves without being restricted to formal styles or rigid formats. They could write on any topic, ranging from current events and societal critiques to lighthearted personal reflections or daily life anecdotes.

The main goal was to assess their writing skills, insight, and ability to recall what they had learned.

At the Supreme Court, Matthew led Randall to meet Rafael.

This was Randall's first time in the main hall of the Supreme Court, and he was struck by the orderliness and the imposing atmosphere. Rows of bookshelves stood tall, filled with countless case files. Some were locked away, while others were simply stacked.

The only familiar thing in the room

was the large volume of The Laws of Starhaven placed on a wooden stand to the right, for that was what Randall had been studying. Matthew had advised him to become

well-versed in that book, as it would be beneficial for his future

promotions. So, Randall would

thrown

himself into the task, reading late into the night. Each word he absorbed felt like a step forward in securing his future.

He deliberately set aside his personal identity, reminding himself that he was now a warden of the Supreme Court, with an official post. His task was to perform his duties well and aim for a promotion. He felt as though he could glimpse a future for himself.

But when Matthew came to him and said Rafael wanted to meet him, the world Randall had been building in his mind came crashing back to reality. He was still Yuvan's eldest son, borne by a concubine and raised by Avis-that was an irrefutable truth.

Randall bowed respectfully. "Greetings, Your Highness."

Since Carissa had scolded him, he no longer dared to leverage his family ties.

However, Rafael greeted him warmly with a smile. "There's no need for such formalities between family. Have a seat."

The lack of pressure from an authoritative figure eased Randall somewhat, though he still felt uneasy.

He sat down, trying to maintain composure. "Yes, Your Highness."

He had expected Rafael to chat with him for a while before getting to the main topic.

Instead, the moment he sat down, Rafael asked directly, "What do you know about the situation in Lunvale?"