

War Song 1191

Chapter 1191

Randall remained silent for quite some time. His hands were underneath the table, gripping tightly. The cold was biting, yet his palms were damp with sweat. He knew he had to make a choice.

When he first became a warden at the Supreme Court, he had spent countless hours pondering over decisions, uncertain of what the right course of action was. In the end, it was Matthew who noticed his restless thoughts and told him not to worry. "Focus only on what's in front of you," Matthew had said.

Since Randall didn't think about it, he didn't have any answers.

Now, faced with Rafael's piercing question, Randall stared blankly at him for a long moment. The weight of the prince's gaze left his mind in a fog.

Almost instinctively, he said, "There are soldiers in Lunvale, though I don't know how many."

"How do you know this?" Rafael asked.

After mentioning the soldiers in Lunvale, Randall's heart skipped a beat. Yet, strangely, it steadied soon after. Making a choice didn't feel as difficult as he had imagined.

With newfound calm, he continued, "I overheard talk of it in the study when we were in Valken. The room had two levels. I always stayed upstairs, reading for hours on end. Occasionally, I'd hear them talking downstairs. Though it was just one floor between us, the study was large, and much of what was said was unclear.

"But Lunvale came up several times. They also mentioned Stonebridge County, Grantham County, Fenrose County, and Larkspur County, along with other places I can't recall. Once, I overheard them speaking of sending supplies to Lunvale." Rafael frowned.

Something didn't add up.

How could Yuvan support troops in multiple places? How vast was his power?

Raising an army wasn't as simple as opening a shop in a town. Once troops were stationed, the entire system had to be in place. Connections in the local government had to be made, and a steady supply of food, weapons, and other resources had to be ensured. From what Rafael knew, Yuvan didn't have the strength or finances to pull that off.

Putting aside Stonebridge County and Grantham County, Fenrose County and Larkspur County were closer to Nanyara, which was at least a thousand miles away from Ebonflow. If a rebellion happened, how much support could those soldiers give Yuvan? And how many obstacles would there be along the way when sending help?

"Did they mention sending supplies anywhere else besides Lunvale?" Rafael asked.

"I couldn't really hear them," Randall replied. "But it's unlikely they'd bring up other places if they weren't important."

That made sense.

"What else did they mention?" Rafael asked.

Randall paused for a moment, thinking carefully before shaking his head. "I can't remember. There might have been more, or there might not."

"Think hard. Is there anything else? For example, anyone they were particularly close with?"

"Most of their dealings were through letters or arranged meetings outside. Horizon Estate only served as a place for discussions. My dad is cautious-he fears there are spies from the capital hidden within the estate."

Randall stopped for a moment, then

added, "Actually, in Valken, my dad's

reputation is good. Though my mom died miserably at Verdant Monastery, everyone in Valken knows he sent her to many renowned physicians and spent vast sums on her treatment. When he married Lady Molly, he claimed it was my mom's wish whenever anybody asked."

Rafael was already aware of this.

Yuvan had spent 20 years carefully crafting his reputation, no doubt investing considerable amounts of money and effort into it. He was obsessed with his public image and highly sensitive to criticism, unable to bear anyone speaking ill of him. No doubt he was shameless and deeply vain.

These details weren't surprising. But there were some things that puzzled Rafael.

In the capital, all of Yuvan's connections were made through Eleanor, and the daughters of Henry's concubines all entered prestigious families. Their

involvement seemed to be aimed

at creating chaos within noble

households, leaving the nobles too preoccupied to deal with matters

elsewhere.

The methods Yuvan used weren't exactly the cleanest, so how had he managed to expand his forces so far and wide?

Who, among all this, was helping him behind the scenes? That person might just be the one pulling the strings.

Rafael pulled out a list and handed it to Randall. "Have you seen any of these people at Horizon Estate? Or observed any dealings between your dad and them?"

Randall took the list and examined it carefully. After a moment, he pointed to one name.

"Before we returned to the capital, General Tiberius came once to borrow money from my dad."

Rafael raised an eyebrow. "What about the other names on the list? Have you ever seen them?"

"I've met some of them during festivals and such. But they were just casual exchanges, nothing of note. My dad would sometimes complain that someone had sent too little as a gift and would overcompensate with a larger return gift. "Honestly, I never understood my dad's schemes. It wasn't until the past year or two, and especially after Aunt... I mean, Eleanor's rebellion came to light, that I began to piece things together," Randall replied.

Rafael regarded him silently. Years under the same roof, and it was something concerning his dad, yet still, Randall hadn't known. And from his expression, it didn't look like he was pretending either.

It was hard to decide whether to call him naive or just plain dense.

Chapter 1192

As Randall walked out of the hall, his head was held high, his gaze unwavering, and his step filled with renewed purpose. No longer was he the slumped, defeated figure he had been earlier.

It was all because of one last thing Rafael had said to him.

"Matthew mentioned to me that you've handled your warden duties well. After a year or so of experience, I'll see about promoting you."

At that moment, Randall's eyes had burned with unshed tears.

Aside from Avis, no one had ever acknowledged his abilities. No one had ever truly praised him.

Avis would praise him, of course, but those praises had always been laced with consolation. He had never been good at studies or martial arts. She would assure him that, in time, he would amount to something. But that was just comfort, not real recognition.

Now, for the first time, Randall had been truly recognized. He didn't even care whether that recognition was sincere or watered down. At that moment, the feeling was too overwhelming, too wonderful, for him to question it. He didn't want to dwell on whether it was genuine or not.

If he could continue on this path, he would give everything he had to make it happen.

From a young age, he had never been Yuvan's favorite. Born to a concubine, he was raised by Avis, but his father still looked down on him for his lowly, illegitimate bloodline.

He had overheard the servants gossiping about it. Yuvan had once ordered Randall's biological mom to drink medicine to avoid getting pregnant, but she had still conceived. When she found out, the plan had been to have a physician induce a miscarriage.

But Avis had fought fiercely to protect him and sent the concubine away to a remote estate. She hid the concubine until after Randall's birth, when Avis made a grand public display of bringing him back.

Avis had known how much her husband cared about appearances. By making such a spectacle of bringing Randall back to the estate, she forced Yuvan to acknowledge him. Once that happened, his pride wouldn't allow him to let the boy die. That was when Avis began to fall out of favor with Yuvan.

The servants said she was foolish. Perhaps they were right-she had fought so hard for a worthless son.

As Randall recalled these memories, his steps grew lighter. He shouldn't feel burdened by betraying such a dad, and he certainly shouldn't feel guilty. The guilt, he realized, should have been for failing to care for his mom when she was sent to Verdant Monastery. He should hate the man who was called his dad-not just for how he treated him, but for what he did to Avis-sending her a divorce edict just before her death, complaining she hadn't died quickly enough.

Randall's heart remained heavy, but it was still lighter than before.

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The lamps in the meeting hall of Hell Monarch Estate were not extinguished that night. They burned through until dawn.

From Randall, they had learned more than just the situation in Lunvale. However, the information he shared had been limited. Aside from Grantham County, Larkspur County, and Fenrose County there were still other places they didn't know about yet.

The confusion that lingered in everyone's mind was the same as Rafael's confusion today.

Yuvan truly didn't have the ability to expand across so many areas. Now that Rafael had a clearer sense of him, he didn't seem like a man with particularly deep schemes. If not for Wayne, it was doubtful that Yuvan would have achieved even this

much.

But was Wayne really his ally?

It seemed more like a case of Yuvan thinking he was the hunter, but there was another person waiting to catch him off guard and take advantage of the situation.

Jacob took a quill and traced the

locations Randall had mentioned,

linking them together. Rafael stood off to the side, observing. These places

regions, struggling with taxes that were never paid, and places that

were mostly impoverished

needed regular government relief to

survive.

An idea sparked in Rafael's mind-fragments of a puzzle began to shift, but the pieces didn't quite fit together yet.

It seemed Lunvale would have to be investigated further. Once they understood more about it, the other things might become clearer as well.

After wrapping up matters at work and the estate, and ensuring everything was in order, Rafael prepared to leave.

This was the first time since his marriage to Carissa that he wouldn't be spending New Year's Eve with her. He hated the thought of leaving her.

In their room, they talked for quite a while, before sharing more words in the main hall. And even when they reached the door, he still couldn't bring himself to let go of her hand.

"I'll be back soon. But even then, I won't make it in time for New Year's. Be sure to eat your meals on time, don't let your stomach suffer. It's cold outside, so bundle up when you go out-don't catch a chill."

He repeated the same words again and again, and by the time they reached the door, Helen, who had come to see her son off, was rolling her eyes.

"How many times are you going to repeat yourself? You just said that inside, didn't you? Do you think she's deaf, or are you just forgetting what you've already said?"

With a mom who had a temperament that marred the atmosphere. Rafael couldn't help but wonder if this was the consequence of his past neglect toward her.

Chapter 1193

Carissa had her own list of reminders for Rafael-to be careful on the road, to stay alert, and most importantly, if he came across any "pretty flowers" along the way, to look but not bring them back. The hint of jealousy in her tone made Rafael's heart soar with joy. As he swung himself onto his horse, he flashed a grin and swore his loyalty.

"I won't even spare a glance," he promised.

However, Travis looked puzzled for a moment, then asked, "What flowers could you possibly find on the road in the middle of winter? Even if there are any, they're likely being well-tended by someone. How could anyone just pick them? You can look, but why wouldn't you look?"

His confusion made both Jacob and Kyle chuckle.

Violet snorted and teased, "Poor fool, stop talking! You're completely missing the point. You're talking about one thing when they're talking about something completely different." Travis

scratched his chin, deep in thought. He still couldn't understand it, even when Dylan called out for departure.

As soon as Rafael was on his horse, Helen turned and headed back into the house. The cold wind at the gate was unbearable, making her shiver. It was enough to see her son get on his horse. There was no need to stand there in the wind, especially since he wasn't even looking back at her.

Jacob, Lily, and Carissa's other attendants also followed Helen back in. Carissa and Violet remained, watching as the group rode slowly away.

Violet nudged Carissa's shoulder lightly. "Are you going to miss him?"

"A little," Carissa admitted, her gaze lingering until they were out of sight.

A wave of emptiness washed over her.

Though she and Rafael were both busy after their marriage, they had spent nearly every night together, and at least one moment of the day could always be theirs. Now, it would be two months stretched ahead with no chance of seeing him. "Two months... feels so long," she lamented with a sigh.

Violet tilted her head. "Long? It's only two months, not two years."

She wrapped an arm around Carissa's shoulders as they walked back inside. "You should enjoy your freedom while it lasts. It's rare to not have him around. Do what you want-I'm planning to take you out to eat, drink, and be merry."

Oblivious to her friend's mood, she continued, "I heard from Isaac that there are a few nice places in the capital. I've always wanted to check them out, but with His Highness around I didn't think it was

appropriate to ask you to come. Now's the perfect time-he won't be back for at least two months, so we have plenty of time to explore."

"What restaurants are you talking about that wouldn't be appropriate to visit when Raf is around? Are they better than Glimmering Tower?" Carissa waved her hand

dismissively. "Never mind, I'm not

really in the mood to eat."

"It's not that!" Violet's radiant face broke into a mysterious smile. "It's a gentlemen's retreat, a place with male courtesans. We'll dress as men..."

Carissa suddenly stopped in her tracks. "You've been there? Did Isaac take you? Where is he?"

Violet shook her head. "He didn't take me, he just told me about it. Aren't you curious about this place?"

"I'm not curious, and I don't want to go," Carissa replied sharply. "Why is Isaac telling you about such things?"

"To broaden my horizons. When we travel the world, we should learn as much as we can," Violet said with a mischievous grin.

She couldn't help but wonder if she was the only one intrigued. She had heard of a gentlemen's retreat, a place for men, but it was full of men as well. The thought of men with men wasn't that enough to make Carissa curious?

Violet had heard of it, but had never seen it.

"Cari, it's so unfair. Men can go to places like gentlemen's retreats or entertainment parlors. There's no place like that where women can go openly," Violet said. Carissa stood with her hands behind her back, her posture carrying an air of melancholy as she sighed.

"Who says it isn't unfair?" She dropped her hands and straightened up, her tone serious. "Even if there were such places, I wouldn't go. I'm married now. I have a husband."

"I don't have a husband," Violet said, her voice gleaming with excitement. "I could go and have some fun."

Carissa assumed her friend was joking, but little did she know, Violet wasn't just playing around. That very night, she insisted Isaac accompany her to a gentlemen's retreat.

When Violet returned, she rushed into Carissa's room, still in her men's clothes, her entire body smelling of alcohol. The stench was enough to make Carissa want to throw her out immediately.

But Violet grabbed Carissa's shoulder, swaying unsteadily as she spoke with a serious expression, saying, "Do you know who I saw there? You'll never guess. If you can guess, I'll make Isaac do something ridiculous."

Chapter 1194

Carissa gently helped Violet to a chaise lounge, settling her down. "Thank Isaac for me, but I won't guess. Just tell me who did you see?"

"Victor!" Violet's eyes went wide, possibly from the alcohol, though it could have been from the sheer shock of what she was about to say. "Yes, it was Victor, the Sandoria marshal. And not just one, there were several Victors." "Several Victors, or several people who looked like Victor?" Carissa pressed her hand to Violet's forehead. "How much did you drink to get this drunk?"

"Victor..." Violet mumbled, her head growing still, as though the name had locked her into place. "But not as old as Victor."

"You mean people who looked like Victor? Sandorians?"

Carissa's mind started racing. Sandoria and Starhaven hadn't had much interaction, and for a Sandorian to make it to Starhaven let alone to the capital-seemed impossible. Even harder to think they could settle here.

"Yes... Sandorians. How could there be Sandorians in the capital? They were... they're hiding in the gentlemen's retreat. Why doesn't anyone talk about the guests at the gentlemen's retreat? I saw them those guests surely saw them too," said Violet, her words slurring as she tried to get them out.

Carissa's heart skipped a beat.

Of course, the guests of the gentlemen's retreat wouldn't talk about it. To speak of it would be to admit they had gone there. But the real question was when had the Sandorians come to the capital? It was no wonder no one had discovered them. They had been hiding in a gentlemen's retreat.

Though there were a few gentlemen's retreats in the city, they operated discreetly. Sigmund had strictly outlawed them and monitored them closely. After Salvador ascended the throne, such matters were barely addressed.

Though there were no restrictions, they weren't actively promoted either. The people were a bit more open-minded compared to Sigmund's time, but homosexuality was still frowned upon by society. No one would openly talk about it, and since no one mentioned it, no one paid attention. Everything seemed fine, and no one would think to look in places like a gentlemen's retreat.

Violet's head suddenly tilted to the side, and before Carissa could react, she was fast asleep, unable to answer any more questions.

Carissa sighed, calling for Lulu to help tend to Violet. Then, turning on her heel, she rushed out to find Isaac. She knew well that he had a remarkable tolerance for alcohol and wouldn't have gotten drunk so easily.

"Yes, I took her there on purpose. I noticed them a few days ago," Isaac said, his voice clear and sharp.

Having splashed water on his face, his hair was slightly damp and sticking to his temples, but he appeared fully awake and alert.

Isaac wiped his hands with a handkerchief and gestured for Carissa to sit. "I had planned to bring you along, but since you didn't want to go, I took Violet instead. After all, she's been to the battlefield and has seen Sandorians before."

Sandorians were tall, with prominent

noses and distinct eye colors. But some Sandorians were of average height, with eyes nearly identical to Starhaven people. Only their noses were slightly higher and their eyes more piercing, giving them a stronger presence, though not so

different from Starhaven natives at a

glance.

The ones in the gentlemen's retreat were like that-strikingly handsome, but with a touch of feminine air. So, not everyone who went there would necessarily guess they were Sandorians.

"Why didn't you explain the situation to me, then?" Carissa asked, frowning. "If you had told me the truth, I would've gone."

Isaac glanced at her. "That wouldn't have worked. It had to be Violet who invited you. If I asked you to come, word would get back to Meadow Ridge, and Sage Adrian and Sage Everett would never forgive me!" Carissa was speechless.

Seriously? That was the reason?!

"How did you find out?" Carissa eyed him. "You didn't go to those places to drink again, did you? You said you wouldn't go."

"What are you talking about? It's just a lively place for drinking, not a place of ill repute. I just went there for the drinks, not to do anything else," Isaac said confidently.

Carissa raised an eyebrow. "Would you say that to Sage Everett?"

Isaac shot her a sideways glance. "If

you don't tell him, he won't know. I came to the capital on Sage Adrian's orders with an important task to complete. What's wrong with

drinking a little? Now, enough

Let's talk about the gentlemen's

this.

retreat. But if you go and tell on me, I'll deal with you later."

They sat down, and Isaac continued, "The reason got so drunk tonight was to investigate how many people from Sandoria are hiding there. I found seven, and that's just at one of the establishments. There are five such gentlemen's retreats in the capital."

Tonight, Isaac had picked a handsome young man to sit with him and have a drink. To protect Violet, he had been touched from head to toe by a stranger. Who could he complain to about the treatment he received? "Did you learn if they have any martial arts skills?" Carissa asked.

Isaac nodded without hesitation. "Yes. Every single one of them knows how to fight."

Chapter 1195

Carissa went to Jacob with the news.

He was clearly taken aback before instinctively asking, "How did the Sandorians get into the capital, and why are they staying here?"

"That's exactly what we need to figure out. We'll need to check out the remaining gentlemen's retreats and find their owners. If they're allowing Sandorians to be patrons there, they must know more than they're letting on," Carissa replied. What they needed to uncover was when the Sandorians arrived, who brought them, and what their purpose was in the capital.

Carissa decided to personally investigate the remaining gentlemen's retreats, and of course, she took Violet and Isaac along. Over several days, they visited the five gentlemen's retreats. Of the five, three were hiding Sandorians, with a total of 15 people. By their breathing and movements, it was clear that all 15 were skilled in martial arts.

Though they didn't all look entirely like typical Sandorians, they resembled average Southern Frontier people. It was evident they had been carefully selected for their roles.

If the lighting had been a little dimmer, one might not have noticed. Their Stellish accent was flawless, with particularly precise pronunciation, which probably explained why no one suspected anything. The same person owned all three gentlemen's retreats-the Marquis of Glandale, Fabian Schmitt.

After discussing their next move, Carissa and the others decided not to act too hastily. Instead, they quietly sent people to keep an eye on the gentlemen's retreats and observe the Sandorians' intentions.

As for Fabian himself, Jacob launched a fresh investigation into him.

Fabian was known to indulge in male companionship, though that didn't mean he wasn't interested in women—he was married, with children and a harem. Hailey was his youngest daughter.

This was a surprise to everyone, as the Marquis of Glandale's household was so discreet. Apart from a few incidents involving Hailey and Jocelyn causing a stir at Gracewood Women's Academy, they hadn't caused any scandals. The family's reserved nature was such that it was easy to forget they even existed.

Who could have guessed that behind the Marquis of Glandale's unobtrusive demeanor, he had established three gentlemen's retreats, harboring a total of 15 Sandorians?

After visiting gentlemen's retreats several times, Carissa began to notice the patrons. Many powerful figures from court and the sons of noble families frequented these establishments for drink and pleasure.

That evening, Carissa encountered someone she never imagined she'd see in such a place, not even in her wildest dreams.

Gerald Quinton, the royal tutor of the previous king!

He was being helped upstairs, and he was disguised with makeup that made his face pale and white. His once-grand appearance now looked frail and sickly, which under the dim light, gave off a creepy vibe. Dressed in the lavish silks of an old wealthy gentleman, he lacked the ethereal grace he once possessed. His usual scholarly demeanor was nowhere to be found.

In that disguise, Carissa almost didn't recognize him. If it weren't for the emerald pendant with the Quinton family crest hanging from his waist, she would never have believed it. That night, she had a nightmare of Gerald being

no'

surrounded by a group of handsome men, and she woke up terrified.

The next day, she was still shaken.

After a quick wash and freshen-up, she decided to visit Gracewood Women's Academy. It was a special day-exam results were being announced, and students who had excelled would receive rewards. Afterward, the school would be closed for the holidays until the eighth of January.

Without Jocelyn's disruptive presence, the atmosphere at the academy was far more peaceful. While the young women still formed cliques and made fun of each other's appearances and clothing, the malice that once filled the air had significantly lessened. However, just as the award ceremony was concluding, chaos erupted. A group of men burst into the academy, rushing toward the students. Screams filled the air as everyone scattered in panic.

Today, it was Claire's turn to be on

guard duty. She had just finished using the restroom when she saw middle-aged man reaching for Courtney. Without hesitation, she sprinted toward him, landing a punch square in his face. Grabbing him by the collar, she hurled him out of the building.

When she turned back, she saw Courtney frozen in terror, her face pale and her feet seemingly rooted to the ground, unable to move.

Chapter 1196

The screams from the hall grew louder and more frantic. As she sprinted toward the noise, Claire shouted, "Don't run around-find somewhere to hide!" Inside the hall, both Catherine and Harriet were visibly shaken, frantically shielding the students behind them.

Rosalind and Athena gripped sticks in their hands, desperately striking at the men who had charged in, trying to keep them away from the young women. However, Rosalind was no match for their strength. As she saw one man move toward Cassidy, who screamed in terror, she swung her stick with all her might. But the blow didn't knock him down. Instead, he grinned and lunged toward her.

By the time Claire arrived, Rosalind was already in the man's arms, who was leaning in to kiss her. Rosalind struggled violently, pushing against him with all her strength, but she was no match for him. She scratched at his face, trying to stop him from kissing her. Seeing this, Claire's temper flared. She seized the man by the back of his coat and threw him hard to the ground. With a swift kick to his stomach, he writhed in pain, rolling around on the floor.

Claire snatched Athena's stick from her and began to swing it wildly. The men scattered, cowering and clutching their heads in an attempt to protect themselves.

The man who had dared to assault Rosalind was knocked to the ground, the stick landing across his legs with a sickening crack, followed by a sharp, painful scream.

At that very moment, the carriages of the students' families began to arrive. When the onlookers saw the chaos, their faces went pale.

"What's happened? What's going on here?" someone cried. "How did these men get in?"

The shout caused a rush of people to crowd into the hall, only to be met with the sight of a man lying on the floor, while the students stood frozen in fear.

When the students saw their parents, they rushed toward them in a panic, sobbing.

"Dad! Mom! It's awful! They broke in and grabbed Ms. Young!"

Everyone's eyes turned to Rosalind. She was pale, her hair disheveled, and her hairpins askew. Despite Athena's efforts to hold her steady, Rosalind's entire body was trembling uncontrollably.

Catherine, seasoned and quick-witted, understood the gravity of the situation. She knew that if word of this event spread, Rosalind's reputation would be irreparably damaged. Worse still, the entire school would be ruined.

Stepping forward, she said, "Thanks to Ms. Claire's quick action, no one was harmed. Ms. Young was holding a stick to protect the students..."

But her voice lacked conviction. One by one, the young women rushed to their parents, eager to recount what they had witnessed.

None of the young women had ever

encountered such a scene before. They were terrified, speaking in frantic tones, making the situation seem far more severe than it had been. Some claimed they had nearly been grabbed by the intruders. Others said their sleeves had been tugged. A few said they owed their safety to Rosalind, whose swift intervention had kept the attackers from reaching them.

Catherine and Harriet tried to explain the events, but their words fell on deaf ears. The parents, incensed, pressed forward, demanding answers. Why had the gate been left open? How had the intruders gotten inside?

The angered crowd forced the teachers to step back.

"Everyone, please, calm down!" came the voice of Zoey, who had just arrived.

Disregarding any formalities, she rushed into the hall and shouted, "This was clearly a targeted attack on the school! They've apprehended one of the men, and he will be taken to the authorities for investigation. Thankfully, no harm was done to the students-only a fright. No young lady was assaulted. I ask you all not to spread rumors that might harm the young ladies' reputations."

Zoey was the Earl of Silverstone's wife, and her words silenced many of the voices in the room. However, whispers still rippled through the servants and onlookers. Claire grabbed the man by the collar and hoisted him to his feet. Without a moment's hesitation, she slapped him twice across the face.

"Who sent you?" she demanded fiercely.

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The man's eyes were bloodshot. Instead of retreating, he seemed unfazed by the blows and his broken feet. His hands reached toward Claire's face, a vile grin on his lips as he muttered, "Pretty girl, let me hold you for a moment."

Fury surged through Claire's chest. She punched him hard in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. He bent over, clutching his belly, but his lewd expression remained. This spectacle only served to further enrage the parents.

"This is outrageous! How dare he?" Winifred shouted angrily, clutching her daughter Cassidy to her chest. The young woman was visibly shaken, trembling in her mom's arms.

"He looks drugged! Just look at his eyes-they're completely unnatural! After all that, he still dares to behave like this!" Winifred continued, her voice rising.

"How could such a scoundrel have made it inside? Is no one guarding this school? This matter cannot be swept under the rug. We demand answers. This incident cannot be ignored. We must have an explanation!"

Chapter 1197

It was at this moment that Carissa arrived. From outside, she could already tell something was wrong. Some people were stuck outside, unable to get in, but they were busy gossiping and trying to figure out what was going on.

Once inside, Carissa quickly took in the scene, her eyes darting over the group of people and hearing their angry accusations. She understood what had happened at once.

The moment she appeared, the parents surged toward her, asking how they should proceed. Though none dared directly question her, the tone of their words clearly showed their demand for an explanation.

Their words were firm but lacked the earlier harshness.

Carissa's face remained composed, though inside, a storm of anger brewed. She couldn't believe that on the last day before the holiday, something like this had happened.

The academy gates were supposed to be open today to allow the students to take their belongings home. Since most of the students came from noble families, the servants were always under strict orders. There was no reason to expect any trouble.

Yet, the intruders had seized the opportunity. With the gates opening and parents on their way, they slipped in unnoticed, giving them the perfect chance to cause chaos. They managed to force their way in and, at the same time, create a situation where the young women could have been assaulted, igniting the fury of everyone present.

This was a direct attack on Gracewood Women's Academy.

"I will make sure everyone receives a full explanation," Carissa said.

"Your Grace, how will you explain this situation? Who would believe it when we say our daughters were not harmed?" one of the parents demanded.

"That's right! So many men burst in, and there were so many witnesses. Even if nothing happened, it will be said that something did," someone else added.

"Why didn't the academy have more guards in place?" someone else questioned.

Seeing Carissa being cornered, Rosalind wiped her tears and stood up, her voice ringing out.

"Please don't worry, everyone. None of the students were harmed. The intruders only managed to grab me. No one else was touched."

A stunned silence followed her words.

No one had expected Rosalind to take the blame for what happened.

Even if she had indeed been held by the intruder, it would have been better to conceal such a thing. How could she admit it openly in front of everyone?

With so many people around and so many mouths to speak, Rosalind's admission would surely ruin her reputation once the word got out.

Catherine quickly responded, "You weren't really grabbed. Don't speak such nonsense. The intruder didn't succeed."

But Rosalind raised her voice, resolute. "The intruder really did manage to hold me in his arms, but thankfully, no harm came to the students. Everyone is fine. Please don't worry."

A hushed silence fell over the room.

Some cast mocking looks her way,

while others regarded her with pity. A few understood her reasoning-she was trying to protect the students. As Trevor's daughter, if the blame fell on her alone, the gossip outside would focus only on her and wouldn't drag the other

young women into it.

The story would now be that an intruder had come into the academy and tried to assault Rosalind, rather than the original fact that the assailants had intended to violate all the students present.

Carissa watched Rosalind with a heavy heart. If only she had arrived sooner, maybe this would never have happened.

Claire was filled with guilt. She had been in the restroom. Had she been present, she could have intercepted the intruders the moment they charged in. She could have driven them into a corner, forced them to the ground, or expelled them from the premises through the back doors.

Carissa turned to Claire and said, "Bring me a basin of cold water."

It didn't take long for Carissa to notice the peculiar red in the man's eyes-something had been done to him. It was clear now that he had been drugged, making him fearless in his brazen actions.

A basin of cold water was soon

brought, and Carissa poured it over

the man. His body shook violently, curling inward as he tried to regain control. His eyes, though glazed with confusion, were still hungrily scanning the young women around him, his gaze fixed on their faces and chests.

He appeared to be in his forties, his face rough and sunburned, with stubble lining his chin. His clothes were simple, nothing remarkable about them, and his complexion was raw from exposure to the elements. Though not tall, he was stocky, the build of a laborer accustomed to hard work.

Chapter 1198

Carissa remained composed as she directed the students and their families out of the hall. She no longer bothered with asking them to keep the incident quiet-it was clear they couldn't.

Once they were cleared out, she instructed Claire to bring in Ivy and someone from the Royal Citadel. The man needed to be restrained and interrogated, and it was obvious he had been drugged. Carissa wanted Ivy to determine what substance had been used. The few who had managed to escape were soon captured by Max and his men, all brought back under guard.

The others, though somewhat more aware, still seemed dazed. Their eyes, glazed and hungry, followed Carissa and Claire with an unsettling intensity.

Carissa walked over and gave Rosalind a comforting hug.

Rosalind had already calmed down and reassured her in return, "It's alright, I'm fine."

"You foolish girl," Catherine said, her voice heavy with sorrow as she sighed. "You shouldn't have said that. You've ruined your reputation. How are you fine?"

Rosalind's face was pale, and she smiled shakily. "Don't worry about me, Mrs. Ashford. I never intended to marry. My reputation was just a burden. Now that it's gone, I can move more freely."

"You say that, but you've taken the burden upon yourself. The public, the rumors... Oh! Humanity has both kindness and cruelty. I fear I can't even predict what they'll say about you. As for your grandparents, how will I explain this to them?"

Catherine had known Mildred for many years. Though they weren't the closest of friends, they had always shared a respectful bond. When Rosalind took the position at the academy, Catherine had assured Mildred that she would look after her granddaughter. Never did she imagine such a calamity would unfold.

Given Mildred's frail state, this news was likely to worsen her condition.

Everyone gathered around to offer their comfort. Athena, though resolute in her decision never to marry, couldn't help but feel for Rosalind. She was young, beautiful, with a sharp mind and an excellent family background-surely she could have found a worthy match. Athena believed marriage could bring happiness. All her life, she had only one wish to marry the man she loved. Sadly, that chance was gone. Her young love had gone to the battlefield and never returned.

Seeing the concern in everyone's eyes, Rosalind quickly smiled, trying to ease their worries. "Really, it's nothing. Life is full of challenges-this is just a small thing."

Deep down, they all knew Rosalind

wasn't as calm as she made herself appear. It was clear that she was only comforting them, hiding the hurt beneath her calm facade. She must be struggling inside, all while feeling the need to try to console everyone else.

Catherine fell silent and led the others out to attend to the academy's affairs, leaving Carissa and the Garrison Unit to handle the rest of the matter.

Once they were alone, Carissa gently

took Rosalind's hand and guided her into a quieter room. She carefully adjusted the young woman's

disheveled hair, speaking softly

"I'm

sorry you were late. You shouldn't have had to endure this."

Now that it was just the two of them, Rosalind's tears finally fell. She had been terrified. The courage she had shown when swinging the stick was born from the need to protect her students. But in the aftermath, as she thought of the men rushing

toward her, the fear set in. Her heart raced as she recalled their

threatening advances.

"I'm sorry for showing you such an embarrassing sight," Rosalind said. "Just a little chaos is enough to shake me. Those who go to war must be truly fearless."

She managed a weak laugh, but the tears still clung to her fair, clean face.

"You were very brave," Carissa said gently. "Claire told me you protected Ms. Xavier—if you hadn't, she would have been the one they assaulted."

She reached into her pocket for a handkerchief and dabbed at Rosalind's tears. "I truly admire you. Despite everything Ms. Xavier and Ms. Quinton said about you, you forgave them and moved on."

"Ah, they're just children, easily swayed into doing foolish things. I wouldn't hold it against them. Besides, as their teacher, it's my duty to protect them."

Her words were calm and selfless, though she seemed to forget she was only a few years older than them.

Chapter 1199

Carissa felt an overwhelming sense of guilt deep in her heart. For the past few days, with everything going on at the gentlemen's retreats, she had been out late at night, barely giving any thought to the matters at Gracewood Women's Academy. Kyle had warned her earlier to be extra cautious with the academy. Had she sent even just one more person, none of this would have happened.

The Royal Citadel had been swift to respond. Anthony himself led the investigation, which showed just how seriously the Royal Citadel took this matter.

Six men were captured, all tightly bound. After a few hard slaps, everyone was awake except for the one who had assaulted Rosalind.

After revealing their identities, it turned out that all six were laborers from the docks. They worked long hours unloading cargo and carrying heavy sacks of copper coins, barely earning enough to survive each month.

The night before, their foreman had gathered them for a meeting. Nine men sat down to eat and drink, and the foreman told them about a job that would pay fifty silver coins once completed. The task itself seemed simple-sneak into Gracewood Women's Academy, cause a little commotion, and then slip out through the back door.

The men, accustomed to tough work at the docks, were no strangers to trouble. However, they knew something didn't sit right with this "easy" job. Still, the promise of fifty silver coins was hard to resist. It would take them over two years of hard labor to earn that much. Who wouldn't be tempted by such an offer?

Everyone was tempted, but two of the men declined. The foreman himself naturally opted out. He was only in charge of passing on the message. The remaining six, after some hesitation, accepted the offer.

Before they set off this morning, the foreman gave them a glass of wine to steady their nerves. After all, none of them had ever done anything this wrong before, and they were all nervous about what was to come.

One man, named Hank Carter, drank the entire glass. Normally timid, he had a sick dad at home and a wife who had just given birth to their third child. He desperately needed the money, so he gulped down the drink to gather the courage to go through with it. The others sipped at their drinks lightly, but none of them seemed as affected as Hank.

Hank was the one who had assaulted Rosalind and had both his legs broken by Claire.

By the time Ivy arrived, all the interrogations had been completed, and a thorough examination revealed something even more troubling-all six men had been poisoned by aphrodisiacs of varying degrees.

It seemed the foreman's instructions had not simply been to cause a disturbance he had intended for the men to assault the students, even go so far as to violate them.

Anthony immediately dispatched

men to apprehend the foreman.

When they reached the dock,

however they only found his body. It

was said that he had drunk too

much and fallen into the sea. When someone managed to fish him out, he was already dead.

The officers questioned the dock workers about anyone the foreman might have been in contact with recently or if any unusual visitors had come looking for him. But no one knew anything, and the workers didn't know of anyone the foreman had made dealings with.

As for the cause of his fall, the dock workers explained that the foreman often drank, and falling into the sea wasn't a first. The only difference this time was that no one had noticed him in time. Everyone had been busy, and by the time someone saw him in the water and tried to

help, it was already too late.

It seemed like a tragic accident.

With everyone so busy, if someone had come to pick up their goods and accidentally knocked him into the water, no one would have noticed.

When the officers returned with the news, the six men, already shaken from the events, trembled even more at hearing that their employer was dead. They were also chilly from the earlier splash of cold water.

Anthony was experienced in handling cases. He immediately suspected that there was someone else pulling the strings-someone with a clear motive against the academy.

But identifying the mastermind wasn't going to be easy. The man who had been responsible for making contact was dead, leaving the trail cold.

Anthony took Carissa aside and explained the situation, asking if she had any suspicions about who might be behind the plot.

At first, Carissa thought it could be someone from the Quinton family's fourth branch seeking revenge for what had happened to Jocelyn. But with the matter escalating to the point of silencing people, she began to doubt this theory. For now, she had no solid answers. She had suspicions, but the pieces didn't yet fit together.

Anthony sighed.

"For now, the only thing we can do is take these men back and let the law decide their fate. Since the trail's gone cold, there's nothing more we can do on our end. If you suspect someone, you might want to look into it yourself."

Chapter 1200

The remaining men were trembling with fear, scrambling in panic. Especially Hank, the one who had harassed Rosalind he was sobbing uncontrollably. Dragging his broken legs, he knelt on the ground as if he didn't even feel the pain, repeatedly pleading with Carissa "I was wrong! I was greedy, but I won't ever do it again! Please spare me, my lord! I have an elderly parent who's ill and a newborn daughter at home. If I'm locked up, what will happen to my family?"

and

Anthony.

His cries were piercing and filled with despair.

However, Anthony didn't waver and firmly ordered, "Take them away!"

People who did bad things might have tragic backstories, but that was no excuse for breaking the law.

Those who worked in law enforcement saw this kind of thing all the time, but in the end, the law was the law.

As the culprits were dragged away, the academy fell into a heavy silence. The oppressive stillness blanketed the room as the women gathered in the hall, each caught in her own thoughts.

Claire added more coal to the brazier to warm up the room, as Rosalind's trembling shoulders showed no signs of easing.

Present in the room were Catherine, Harriet, Athena, Rosalind, and Carissa, who held the honorary position of headmistress. Claire, serving as a temporary guard, stood near the door. A few older maids, servants, and the cook-who had all been in the rear courtyard during the commotion-remained away from the central gathering.

At Carissa's instruction, Claire went to speak to the staff, firmly instructing them to keep their lips sealed about the incident. While it was impossible to contain the news entirely, Carissa wanted to ensure it didn't spread unnecessarily from within the academy walls.

Carissa herself took a deep breath, pulling herself from her guilt-stricken thoughts. Lingerin in remorse wouldn't solve the problems at hand. The situation involved not just the academy but also the daughters of noble and official families. The academy owed their families a proper explanation.

Rosalind, the sole victim in this tragedy, hadn't excused herself to rest. She remained seated with the others, determined to help devise a solution with everyone else.

Carissa's initial plan had been to send the others home while she returned to her estate to consult with Jacob. She wanted his advice on how to navigate the fallout, and how to minimize the damage to the academy's reputation.

However, everyone insisted on staying, partly to comfort Rosalind and partly to help in any way they could to quell the rumors that were bound to spread like wildfire.

There was no need to guess how deeply this incident had hurt Rosalind-everyone already knew. By tomorrow, she would likely be the target of endless gossip and cruel words.

No one would care about the truth-that she was a victim. The only thing people would discuss was that a man had laid hands on her, tarnishing her reputation beyond repair. Whether this world consumed people in general was debatable, but it undeniably devoured women. No one present would argue otherwise.

Rosalind said, "I didn't think much at

that moment. The crowd was in

chaos, and the servants who should have acted hesitated. They were likely worried stepping in would bring trouble to their own families. So they stood by and did nothing.

"With things as they were, I couldn't let my students be dragged into this scandal. I'm the royal chancellor's granddaughter. Besides, it was true I was assaulted. So, a few unkind words won't hurt me. Please don't look so grim."

She tried to lighten the mood with a jest. "The way you're all looking at me, I feel like I'm on my deathbed rather than just the subject of gossip."

The room filled with tentative laughter, though the sound was tinged with sadness. The women's smiles were thin, and the heartbreak in their gazes was unmistakable.

Carissa took it upon herself to escort Rosalind home, knowing she needed to report this matter personally to Trevor.

By the time they arrived at the Young family's residence, Highstone Estate, word had already reached him. After he finished listening, he laughed heartily.

"My granddaughter is truly brave and resolute! She's done well-exceptionally well!"

Carissa knew Trevor valued his reputation highly. She thought he would be furious and heartbroken over Rosalind being assaulted, so she planned to explain and

apologize. However, he seemed so carefree, as if he didn't take it

seriously at all.

For a moment, Carissa almost believed him.

That was, until she noticed the subtle redness in his eyes as he looked at Rosalind. It was clear Trevor truly cared for his beloved granddaughter, and he wasn't as indifferent as he appeared.