

War Song 1201

Chapter 1201

As Carissa rode back to Hell Monarch Estate, the murmurs of the townsfolk reached her ears. Small groups gathered on street corners and market stalls, their conversations buzzing with the shocking events at Gracewood Women's Academy. The academy and Skye Embroidery had already drawn public attention-some admiring, some critical. But now, with a scandal of this magnitude, the entire city seemed to be in an uproar.

At the heart of it all was Rosalind, the royal chancellor's granddaughter. The jewel of high society, a young woman of golden pedigree-dishonored by a brutish laborer.

Who would marry her now?

"She was foolish," someone whispered. "She could have lived out her days as a sheltered noblewoman, but she chose to play teacher. Well, look where that got her! Her reputation is ruined forever."

Carissa deliberately slowed her horse, listening intently as she passed by, hoping-desperately for someone to acknowledge Rosalind's bravery, to speak of how she had shielded her students. But no such words came. Not a single voice praised her courage or sacrifice. Carissa's heart sank under the weight of it all.

She had faced her share of trials since becoming the commander of the Mystic Army, including several assassination attempts. Not every mission had gone perfectly, and even Skye Embroidery had its own challenges. Yet, none of it had discouraged her. She believed that many things could be accomplished slowly, as long as she did her best.

However, this was different.

This time, her spirit felt crushed.

This disaster shouldn't have happened.

Carissa had always been cautious. Why hadn't she been more alert? Was it because Rafael had left the capital, and the pain of parting had clouded her mind? Had her emotions taken control, making her unable to anticipate the possible dangers?

Or, even if she had foreseen them, she hadn't taken precautions.

She felt an overwhelming sense of self-blame.

After returning to the estate, Carissa sat alone in the conference hall for a long time before Jacob rushed in. He had gone to the Royal Citadel to inquire after hearing about the matter and hadn't expected Carissa to be back so soon. Upon arriving at the estate, he found her sitting alone in the conference hall in silence.

He had never seen Carissa in such a dejected state. She was slumped in the chair, her legs crossed and her back hunched forward.

Jacob quickly stepped forward and said, "Your Grace, what matters now is finding the mastermind behind this. You mustn't let this bring you down or blame yourself too much."

Carissa rubbed her face with both hands. "Jacob, I'm fine. Don't worry about me. I just need a moment to get myself together."

With that, she planted her feet firmly on the ground, her back straightened once more, and her tone became businesslike.

"Now, let's think this through. Who could be behind this?"

Jacob frowned. He didn't have any ideas at the moment. "The tactics used are vile-dirty to the core. And the cover-up with the murder? I can't immediately think of anyone who'd resort to something so extreme."

"I agree," Carissa said. "The methods.

are far too brutal. If this were about the workshop, I could list plenty of people with a motive. While the workshop may seem accepted by most there are plenty who secretly dislike it and see it as a challenge to traditional values. But the academy?"

She shook her head.

"Gracewood Women's Academy was founded under the queen dowager's directive, and so many noble

families and officials have sent their daughters there. Yes, Ms. Quinton was expelled, but could it really be them? Their family head isn't foolish enough to pick a fight with so many

influential households.

"If it was Madam Vera, a woman scheming this far just to set someone up and silence them, she would need help from capable people within the household. But the Quinton family's fourth branch doesn't have anyone like that." Jacob sometimes greatly admired Carissa's sharp mind. Even when her heart was in turmoil, she could still see the issue so clearly.

"Indeed, the likelihood of the Quinton

family being involved is small.

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They've just established new family rules and are acting with great discretion, quietly gathering influence to support the eldest prince. They would never do something like this and offend so many noble families and officials. There's no such thing as a perfect crime. If it were discovered, the Quinton family's powerful position would no longer stand tall and unshaken."

Carissa instinctively curled her legs, her expression slightly dazed.

"To be honest, I thought the Quinton family's fourth branch might seek revenge, but I expected it to be nothing more than petty trouble-maybe Ms. Quinton would hire a few people to come and insult us. I never imagined it would get this serious." "Indeed, most people wouldn't dare touch the academy," Jacob replied.

Chapter 1202

Victoria had long since stepped back from the affairs of court, but her keen interest in the Gracewood Women's Academy was well-known. After all, it had been established under her direct instructions. "Could it be," Carissa asked, "that this trouble stems from rivalries among the students' families?"

Jacob sighed heavily. "If that's the case, the possibilities are endless. But it's not impossible."

He elaborated, "Many households appear harmonious on the surface, but in reality, it's just a facade. Especially in households with concubines-no matter how elevated their status, a concubine would always be subordinate to the main wife. Except, of course, when the husband's favor tips the scales. In such cases, the rivalry between wife and concubine becomes intense, and all sorts of underhanded tactics are used."

Carissa nodded thoughtfully.

Jacob continued, "Imagine a scenario where both the main wife and a favored concubine have daughters. The wife's daughter secures a spot at the Gracewood Women's Academy, but the concubine's daughter does not perhaps because the academy limits its enrollment. The concubine might harbor enough resentment to tarnish the main wife's daughter's reputation, even if it means dragging others into the mud along with her.

"When someone's worldview is small, they fail to grasp the broader consequences of their actions. To them, it might all seem justified and done discreetly enough to avoid detection. After all, they've already gone as far as silencing people permanently." If that were the case, then the scope of the investigation would be too broad to cover.

Carissa rose from her chair and said, "We'll start by having the Royal Citadel investigate that foreman. Find out who he's been associating with and if he's worked for any particular family. After that, we'll decide what to do.

"As for public opinion, we should support Ms. Young. I'll change into formal attire and head to the palace to report to the queen dowager."

She smiled bitterly. "And to offer an apology."

Jacob nodded. "Alright."

As Carissa prepared to leave, Helen stepped forward, her white fur-lined cloak glowing softly in the lamplight. The intricate gemstones adorning her headpiece caught the light, enhancing her regal beauty.

"I'll accompany you," Helen declared firmly. "With me by your side, my sister won't be too hard on you. Rest assured, I'll protect you."

Carissa's heart swelled with gratitude as she looked at Helen, her voice sincere. "Thank you, Mother."

When they arrived at the palace, Victoria had yet to hear of the incident. Carissa had barely begun her explanation when Helen interjected, "Please don't scold her too harshly. This wasn't her fault. Rafael's absence has left her distracted her thoughts are with him. It's only natural she might have overlooked something."

Victoria had been poised to reprimand Carissa, but the words caught on the tip of her tongue after Helen spoke. She glanced at Helen, her expression gentle yet exasperated.

"Go and flaunt your charms to Lady Josephine. I'll have a word with Carissa myself."

"Then don't scold her," Helen said. "Everyone has their moments of distraction, especially when matters of the heart are involved."

Victoria was at a loss for words and waved her hand. "Go on now. Don't linger here."

Helen curtsied gracefully. "Very well, I'll take my leave."

Then, she turned and left with Gillian.

Carissa rose and bowed in respect, watching them leave. For a moment, she couldn't decide if Helen had

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come to help her or worsen her predicament. Still, Helen's lighthearted interruption had managed to lift the weight of the moment, even softening Victoria's previously severe demeanor.

Victoria asked, "Do you have any sense of who's behind this?"

Carissa shook her head. "Your Majesty, I've failed to discern the culprit. For someone to act against the academy-an institution founded under your command-it would either require audacious impudence or sheer ignorance."

Victoria's eyes darkened slightly, her tone carrying a chill. "Or perhaps arrogant foolishness."

Carissa's brow furrowed. "You seem to have an idea, Your Majesty. Who do you suspect?"

Victoria set her cup lid aside and gently blew across the surface of the steaming liquid.

"I have no specific suspects, but this matter has caused such a stir. The young lady from the Young family is so pitiful. I wonder if she can bear the weight of those rumors." "Yes, I worry about her too," Carissa said, her voice filled with sorrow.

Victoria took a sip of coffee. Seeing Carissa's downcast expression, she smiled and asked, "What's this? You look like a withered plant, all drooping and lifeless. This isn't like you. Haven't you always managed to get through even the toughest situations? If we can't find out the truth, then let's not focus on it for now. The fox will eventually reveal its tail. What matters now is doing everything we can to minimize the harm to the young lady from the Young family."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Carissa replied. "Before coming here, I'd already instructed Jacob to begin that work."

Victoria gave a satisfied nod. "Good. I will also see to it that gifts of commendation are sent to her-recognition for her courage and quick thinking in protecting the students."

The most vicious rumors were often directed at a woman's chastity. While Victoria's commendation wouldn't reverse the damage done, at least it would make those spreading rumors think twice before continuing.

Chapter 1203

By the time Carissa returned to her residence, she had barely settled in before Violet arrived in a rush and pulled her aside. "It's about the academy," Violet began, her expression tight with anger. "I fear this may be the work of the king and queen." Carissa blinked, stunned. "The king and queen? Where did you hear this?"

"Kevin told me," Violet explained. "He overheard the king reprimanding the queen, accusing her of acting recklessly. She defended herself, saying that the king disliked the academy too and that her

actions were intended to alleviate his concerns-preventing you from winning over the noblewomen of the capital." The words struck Carissa like a blow, leaving her frozen as an icy chill swept through her.

Violet said, "You need to stay calm. You can't let Kevin's name be revealed. If anyone finds out he spoke of this, his future will be ruined."

Carissa sank into a chair, her mind spinning. She had entertained bold speculations before, but never had she dared to point suspicion toward the king.

She had suspected Kylie, of course that much seemed plausible. But even then, it felt irrational.

Kylie was supposed to be focused on paving the way for Connor. Why would she risk offending the noble families in such a reckless way? The plan had been executed with care, but even so, anyone could foresee its flaws. What if the foreman hadn't died? What if he had confided in someone else before his demise?

And then, there was Kevin's report-it illuminated something even more chilling. The king evidently didn't like the academy either, but his anger with Kylie wasn't over her targeting it.

No, he was upset about the method she had used.

He disapproved of the strategy, not the goal.

At that moment, Carissa felt a chill in her heart. She found it hard to accept Salvador's intentions. He was the mighty king, and he was still relying on Rafael to run errands, even sending him to Lunvale during the New Year. Now, Salvador was wary of her for being the headmistress of the academy and forming ties with the noblewomen?

What was even harder for Carissa to accept was that Kylie had resorted to such methods to deal with the academy.

Leaving aside her status as the nation's mother, Kylie was still a woman. There were so many innocent young women in the academy-what would have happened if Claire hadn't been there? How many young women's reputations could have been tarnished? Would some have had their clothes stripped off or even been assaulted?

What was Kylie trying to achieve with such madness? Was it the same reason as Salvador's-not wanting Carissa to associate with too many powerful circles?

If the whole matter was meant to target Carissa, then why not just come for her directly? Why harm the innocent?

Kylie cared nothing for the purity of those young women.

Violet's voice shook with fury. "It's monstrous. If something terrible had actually happened, how would those girls go on with their lives? She's a woman herself-how could she do something so cruel to other women?!"

Carissa's throat tightened. That was what hurt the most.

She had established Skye Embroidery and Gracewood Women's Academy not for personal glory or wealth, but to give women like herself a chance to stand tall-to live without bowing to the crushing weight of patriarchal expectations.

As the queen and a woman, Kylie should have advocated for and supported them.

Yet, she was the one who dealt the poisonous blow.

Carissa ground her teeth harshly. "If it weren't for Kevin's position, I'd storm the palace and confront her myself!"

Violet cast her a wary look. "She's the queen, and you're a princess consort. You know you can't just barge in and demand answers from her."

"To hell with titles!" Carissa snapped. "I don't care if she's the queen and I'm a princess consort-calling her out to her face would be worth it if it gave me even a shred of relief!"

Violet had originally wanted to say

that this was the Carissa she remembered, the one who would settle scores on the spot. In the end, she held her tongue. After all, for the sake of the bigger picture, Carissa had endured the grudge of her family's destruction.

It turned out that, with time, people truly could get used to bearing such things.

Violet held back as well. "Don't sell out Kevin. This time, the king is angry. Aside from Derek, he's the one most involved outside. So, for now, it's best to pretend it wasn't her doing."

She hadn't expected Kevin to be so righteous. It wasn't the first time he had shown such loyalty. He was someone who cared deeply about his future, and when she had first taken him in, she had looked down on him. Now, though, he seemed to have grown on her in every way.

Chapter 1204

As the year drew to a close, the common folk were busy preparing for the New Year, with every household caught up in the bustle.

But where there was activity, there was an opportunity for gossip, and rumors quickly spread. Victoria's commendation of Rosalind had little effect. Instead, some started to whisper that Victoria's personal approval might mean there was more to the story than just Rosalind being taken advantage of. This line of thinking slowly became the dominant one, as if someone were deliberately pushing things in that direction.

Even someone from Hell Monarch Estate stepped forward to speak on the matter. Witnesses who had been present at the academy also spoke up, explaining that Rosalind had been trying to protect the students and had been accidentally touched by the assailant in the process.

But the public wasn't interested in truth or justice. They preferred stories of disgrace, tales that brought the mighty low.

The more illustrious Rosalind's reputation had once been-her celebrated beauty, her impeccable lineage, her unmatched talents-the more vicious the slander against her became.

Old gossip was dredged up from the past, embellished and twisted into new narratives.

Some claimed she was aloof and arrogant, looking down on those who didn't meet her high standards. They even brought up the incident at Eleanor's banquet, claiming that Rosalind had deliberately misidentified a painting. It wasn't by the famed artist Kyle, but she insisted it was. And

since Trevor doted on his granddaughter, he followed along with her mistake, claiming the painting was Kyle's.

People familiar with the incident said that Kyle's insignia wasn't even on the painting. Everyone present at the time could barely contain their laughter, but they held back out of respect, choosing not to expose her mistake.

Some claimed that all her poems and artwork were plagiarized, that none of it was really her work. It was all part of Trevor's plan to build her reputation, hoping to marry her off to the most sought-after man in the realm, the Hell Monarch. But in the end, her hopes were shattered-Rafael would rather marry a woman who was once divorced than her.

Rosalind then settled for second best, hoping to marry the Farrell family's eleventh son, Thomas. Luckily, Thomas wasn't fooled. He saw through her and turned down the match.

These rumors spread everywhere. Even though Rosalind stayed confined to the estate and Trevor had strictly ordered the servants not to mention it, there were still people setting up tables outside the gate, eager to gossip and watch the drama unfold.

When servants from the estate tried to disperse them, one dramatic individual deliberately fell to the ground, crying out that the royal chancellor's household was bullying commoners and acting above the law.

In the end, they couldn't chase the people away, but they couldn't let them stay either.

Trevor's wife, Mildred, was already in poor health. Now, with all the commotion, she fell ill and had to stay in bed.

Soon, Sebastian personally came to Highstone Estate with his medicine box in hand.

When he saw the people outside still setting up their tables and harshly gossiping about Rosalind, Sebastian's temper flared. He slammed his medicine box onto the table grabbed the storyteller by the collar, and delivered a sharp slap, the sound echoing through the air.

Slap!

Sebastian rarely resorted to hitting anyone, especially not slapping, because he knew his own flaw. He had an unrelenting streak of perfectionism, and even in anger, his hand instinctively sought the offender's lips with unnerving accuracy.

The storyteller's lips split from the

repeated strikes, blood trickling

down as the thick emerald ring on Sebastian's hand was stained red. Though the ring was heavy and solid, the storyteller's teeth remained miraculously intact—a testament to his supposed "iron jaws."

Staggering, the storyteller clutched his mouth, his attempts to cry out stifled by the searing pain. He

wanted to shout, but he stopped when he saw it was the renowned physician Sebastian who had struck him. Blood oozed between his fingers, and every effort to speak felt like his lips were being sliced with a knife.

Several men, clearly allies of the storyteller, stepped forward, ready to defend him. But Sebastian opened his medicine chest and pulled out a small bottle. Unscrewing the lid, he held it up.

"Come," he said. "Let's see who's brave enough to test my latest poison."

A sharp, acrid stench wafted from the bottle, and the mere mention of poison sent everyone into a panic. Onlookers recoiled, their bravado evaporating in an instant.

And with Sebastian's reputation, who would dare to offend him?

It didn't take long before the crowd dispersed, scattering like leaves in a gust of wind. Even the storyteller's allies, pale-faced and trembling, hoisted him onto their shoulders and bolted. They knew they couldn't afford to offend Sebastian. The Young family members thanked Sebastian profusely.

Sebastian turned to look at Trevor and said, "You care about reputation and appearances, but I don't. It was Lady Carissa who asked me to come. She made the right choice in calling me."

Indeed, it had been Carissa who summoned Sebastian.

In all of the capital, no one else held the kind of sway Sebastian did across every level of society. The aristocracy revered him, martial artists respected him, and people from all walks of life bowed to him.

After all, he was a legendary renowned physician.

In a crisis, he was nothing short of a lifesaver, a true miracle worker.

Chapter 1205

The banishment of the storyteller from the gates barely marked the end of one problem before another arrived on their doorstep.

Matchmakers began appearing in turn, each eager to arrange a marriage for Rosalind. The prospects they presented were enough to make Rosalind's parents' blood boil. These were men so far beneath their daughter's station that even a passing glance in their direction would be enough to provoke a disgusted sneer.

It wasn't a matter of low status or humble origins-it was their disgraceful behavior. Some had long ago fathered illegitimate children from concubines, while others spent their days drowning in gambling halls, addicted to the thrill of the dice and cards, regardless of how deeply they sank into debt. Some were regulars at brothels, and others kept secret mistresses on the side.

These were the kinds of men who usually wouldn't dare approach the family for a marriage proposal. Yet now, they paraded forward, puffing out their chests as if offering Rosalind a great favor. They acted as if she had no other choice but to accept them, as if she were somehow indebted to them for their benevolent interest.

Trevor's fury was beyond measure. He stormed through the house, broom in hand, driving the matchmakers out with such force that the scandal only grew. The gossip was relentless. People in the city couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all.

"They act like she has options! If someone's willing to marry her, it'll only be because her ancestors accumulated some good luck for their family."

"She's been sullied by that brutish man. Does she still think she has any worth left?"

"She's doomed to never marry. Let's see who would want her. She might as well shave her head and become a nun. At least then she doesn't embarrass other women."

The remarks came from all corners-some from men, some from women. Whether they spoke out of cruelty or personal spite, there was no sympathy.

In the whole situation, Jocelyn was the happiest because she hated Rosalind. Kylie had asked her to make things difficult for Rosalind before, so she had already made Rosalind her enemy.

When Jocelyn heard of Rosalind's misfortune, she wasted no time in seeking out her close friend, Cassidy. She thought they might gossip about the scandal together, perhaps enjoy some mutual satisfaction in seeing Rosalind's downfall.

To her surprise, Cassidy kept avoiding the topic, changing the subject several times, and looked completely distracted and out of sorts.

Jocelyn became upset. "What's wrong with you? Aren't you happy to hear that Rosalind's reputation is ruined? You've hated her for so long!"

Cassidy instinctively denied it. "I never hated her."

"What do you mean by that?" Jocelyn said, staring at her. "You were the one who used to torment her the most, not like Hailey, who was always too afraid to act."

Cassidy blinked, taken aback by the words. As the memories of how she had treated Rosalind flooded her mind, her eyes welled up with tears.

"Was I really that cruel?" she asked, her voice trembling. "I didn't know. I never realized how monstrous and vicious I must have seemed."

Jocelyn jumped up, indignant. "What do you mean by that? Are you saying that I'm cruel and vicious too?"

Cassidy quickly covered her face with her hands, sobbing uncontrollably. It took a long while before she could speak again, her words coming out in gasps.

"Ms. Young was trying to protect me when that man grabbed her. If it hadn't been for her, I would have been the one assaulted. The people would have been talking about me now if that had happened. I might not even be here right now. if that happened. I could have been sent to a nunnery already."

Jocelyn was caught off guard by Cassidy's confession and froze. After a long pause, she slowly sank into a chair, turning her head as though trying to make sense of it. "She...did something like that?" "It's true," Cassidy sobbed. "A lot of people saw it. Hailey saw it too. If you don't believe me, you can ask her."

Her voice broke, her eyes red and swollen with regret.

"But she's a bad person!" Jocelyn said, dazed.

Kylie didn't like Rosalind, so she must be someone bad.

"She's not a bad person. She saved me." Cassidy wiped away her tears, revealing red, swollen eyes. Her tears clung to her lashes, and more spilled from her eyes. "Why do you think she's a bad person?" "..."

Jocelyn opened her mouth but couldn't find the words. How could someone so bad save someone else? She was so confused.

But Kylie wasn't wrong about the

academy. Gracewood Women's Academy shouldn't exist, and it was no place for women to be. They shouldn't be flaunting themselves in an academy like that. If a woman wanted to learn, she should have a tutor come to her home.

Jocelyn couldn't help but feel that her cousin had a point.

Still, even though she had been forced to leave the academy, there had been moments of joy there. The company of so many others, learning together-it had been

somewhat fun. But waking up early

for classes had been exhausting.

When she was expelled, she was furious and hated the academy. But was her real anger actually because she had been kicked out?

"Courtney almost faced the same fate," Cassidy added, her voice still shaky. "It was Ms. Wardell who saved her."

Chapter 1206

Jocelyn didn't say a word, but her face had gone deathly pale.

She still harbored resentment toward Courtney, but who could blame her? Courtney had spoken up for Thomas. The mess with those families was so filthy and disgusting to hear about.

The Farrell family's household was in disarray, and such vile things happened in an estate that large—wasn't it right to speak of them?

Jocelyn had acted impulsively when she slapped Courtney, but Courtney had brought it upon herself. She shouldn't have defended Thomas. A good woman needed to stay away from people like that and situations like those.

The two of them sat in silence, Cassidy occasionally sniffing as Jocelyn remained quiet.

Her mind was a jumbled mess, running through so many thoughts. At last, she sighed softly and said, "Actually, going back to the academy wouldn't be so bad. But the queen doesn't like the academy."

Ultimately, Jocelyn was just a sheltered girl. She was unable to keep secrets and was unaware of the gravity of some matters. And so, she shared them with Cassidy.

Cassidy paused her sobbing, looking at her in confusion. "The queen doesn't like it? But the academy was established by the queen dowager's instructions..."

"Maybe it's because Lady Carissa is the headmistress," Jocelyn said slowly. "I remember when I went to the palace with my aunt, I overheard the queen talking to her. The king originally wanted to take Lady Carissa as a consort, so the queen never liked her. So naturally, she wouldn't like the academy or the workshop that Lady Carissa started."

She then pressed a finger to her lips. "You can't tell anyone, okay? This is a secret."

Cassidy nodded quickly, her expression solemn. "I know. I won't tell anyone."

Then, she lowered her head and began crying again. "How could this happen? Why would those people barge in and just...grab people like that?"

"Yeah..." Jocelyn murmured in agreement, but her expression suddenly changed as if a thought had struck her. Her eyes widened in fear.

"What's wrong?" Cassidy asked quickly, noticing the change in her friend's face.

Jocelyn was frozen, struck as if by lightning. She stared at Cassidy, her lips trembling.

"Nothing... I'm fine. It's just...terrifying. If something like that happened, if they grabbed me my life would be ruined."

Cassidy nodded solemnly. "Yeah, it's really terrifying."

In the end, Jocelyn left in a daze. But before she departed, it seemed as though she realized something and warned Cassidy not to speak of their conversation to anyone. Cassidy promised, "Don't worry, I won't tell."

But a girl's "I won't tell" was nothing more than a spoken assurance. As soon as Jocelyn was gone, Cassidy hurried off to find her mom.

Winifred was quick-witted, and after only a few words, she understood the full implications. She sighed deeply.

"You can't speak of this to anyone else, do you understand? There will be consequences. If it weren't for Ms. Young protecting you, you'd be the one ruined. Tomorrow, you will accompany me to Highstone Estate and thank Ms. Young."

"I understand. Cassidy lowered her head, sinking into her mom's embrace. I truly regret how I treated Ms. Young. I always went against her. I even said she was chasing after General Farrell, and he didn't want her."

Winifred slapped her daughter sharply on the back of the head. "How can you say such things? Don't you understand the importance of respecting your teachers? Never speak to that girl from the Quinton family again!" "No, I can't do that. Jocelyn's my good friend. She didn't mean it. It was the queen who made her do it," Cassidy protested.

Winifred froze, her hair standing on end, and she quickly silenced the conversation.

The Quinton family was at the height of their power. Kylie was the current queen, and the eldest prince was likely to become the crown prince soon. Even if the Xavier family had ties with the Quinton family, they dared not say a word beyond what was necessary.

The labor foreman at the docks had been silenced, and that example loomed as a warning. Even if the Xavier family knew something, they had no choice but to keep their lips sealed.

Chapter 1207

The rumors surrounding Rosalind didn't cease. Jacob had investigated and confirmed that someone was orchestrating the spread of these malicious tales. Long-buried incidents were being resurrected and falsely linked to her and the academy, whether or not they actually had any connection. Attacking Rosalind was, in essence, attacking Trevor as well. By extension, it also tarnished the reputation of Gracewood Women's Academy.

Trevor and Gerald had long been respected figures in academic circles. But now, because of this affair, Trevor had fallen from grace, while Gerald was now the one being lauded.

Meanwhile, no one was mentioning Malcolm's affair with his mistress anymore.

Despite all the attention on the Quinton family, it didn't help them. The larger they became, the more they attracted attention. The Quinton family needed to act swiftly to suppress the rumors.

Jacob discovered they were trying to control the narrative, but it wasn't working. So, they had no choice but to refocus the conversation on the women's academy and Rosalind, spreading all sorts of negative rumors about her marriage prospects.

Jacob could barely contain his anger. A woman as pure as Rosalind was being dragged through the mud by them.

The suitors knocking at the door were becoming more numerous. At first, some had genuinely wanted to marry her, even though they were unworthy men with questionable morals. Soon after, those who came were simply there to humiliate her. A group of misfits, unable to win her hand, started saying strange and rude things. Even though they couldn't get into the house, they stood outside, claiming they would be kind enough to marry her.

Jacob had his people make note of the names of these suitors, planning to investigate and punish them later. However, he soon realized that another group was also keeping track of them.

When he reported this back, Carissa was curious about who was behind it. So, she sent Claire to inquire and learned that it was people from the Farrell family-Thomas' men.

Carissa was surprised. Although the year-end was approaching, Thomas wouldn't be back until the 27th or the 28th of December. How did he know about this?

Had he recorded these names to exact revenge for Rosalind?

She told Jacob to hold off for now and wait to see what Thomas would do next.

Thomas returned on the 25th of December. The moment he stepped back into the estate, he set the entire household into motion, directing everyone to buy everything in sight.

Alice was absolutely thrilled. The entire family jumped into action, running all over town from every direction. For the next two days, they scarcely left the Golden Tower.

The young heir of the Golden Tower, Nathaniel, had given orders that anything purchased by the Farrell family would be at a 20% discount. If something was in stock, it was given immediately. If not, the craftsmen worked through the night to finish it.

As for Thomas, he had a list of

names and set out with a dozen

men to track each of them down. He didn't do it to make things difficult for them-he simply instructed that they be at Highstone Estate on the 28th of the month. Anyone who failed to show up would suffer the consequences.

On the 28th, the snow had stopped, and the sky was clear.

The air was alive with the sound of drums and trumpets. The

procession moved from the Farrell family's residence to Highstone Estate. Colorful flowers were thrown every few steps, scattering the petals across the ground and

covering the dirty snow along the path.

Thomas rode at the head of the procession, dressed in a deep sky-blue tunic embroidered with mythical beasts. A black-and-white fox fur cloak draped over his shoulders. His tanned skin carried a certain boldness, different from the fair complexions of other noble sons in the capital. The contrast made his sharp features even more striking.

His eyes were steady, his purpose clear.

Behind him rode a group of young men from his family, while Alice and Opal, along with a few other ladies of the household, sat comfortably in the carriage.

Curious citizens gathered along the route, whispering among themselves as they watched the procession. Thomas was clearly going to propose marriage, but to which family?

"It must be the Quinton family. I've heard rumors that the Farrell family wants to propose to one of the Quinton family's daughters, the one from the fourth branch," one person speculated.

"I don't think so. I heard the Quinton family doesn't think much of General Farrell," another corrected.

"No, that's not it! You heard it wrongly. It's the Farrell family who doesn't think much of the Quinton family."

"Ridiculous. The Farrell family wouldn't look down on the Quinton family! How could they compare? So many people dream of marrying into the Quinton family."

"You can say whatever you want, but this is what I've heard. Sure, the Quinton family has immense power, but I admire General Farrell. He doesn't care for politics, and he's only focused on protecting the kingdom." "But his household is a mess, didn't you hear?" someone added.

"So what? That has nothing to do with him. Don't forget, he was on the battlefield fighting for the nation during that time."

The murmurs followed the procession until it reached Highstone Estate, where it came to a stop.

The crowd fell silent in shock.

What? Thomas was here to propose to someone at Highstone Estate?

Chapter 1208

Those who had once caused a scene at Highstone Estate now stood in a row outside the gates. Their heads were lowered, and fear was clear in their eyes. Ahead of them stood a group of burly men, their fists so massive they looked like they could crush skulls with a single blow.

When Thomas dismounted, his cold gaze swept over their faces, and a thin, chilling smile escaped his lips. The formidable aura he exuded was enough to make the men's legs weak with dread. One by one, they huddled closer together, too afraid to meet Thomas's frosty stare. Trevor had ordered the main gates to be opened. When Mildred heard that the Farrell family had come to propose marriage, she suddenly felt her health improve by half. She immediately ordered hot water to be brought for a bath, calling for her servants to prepare her clothes and makeup, eager to meet with them in person.

Rosalind, however, had no idea what was happening. For the past few days, her granddad had insisted that she remain in Amber Hall. He had also forbidden any of the servants from passing on the rumors circulating outside to her.

On the surface, she appeared calm-reading books, admiring the snow, and sipping coffee. But deep down, she was struggling. She thought she could handle it with grace. But when the rumors came crashing down on her like an unrelenting tide, they caught her completely off guard. Luckily, while she was hurt, she didn't crumble.

Her resilience came from the countless books she had read. Through their pages, she had glimpsed so many lives-stories of struggle and strength. She had learned that in this vast and complex world, everyone had their own difficult path to walk.

She knew that no one's journey was ever a straight path, and hardships were inevitable. But she also knew that after the trials, happiness would come just as difficult moments would eventually pass.

She comforted herself, telling herself that as long as she didn't care about the rumors, they wouldn't hurt her.

Moreover, she had long ago resigned herself to the possibility of never marrying, so it didn't matter.

It really didn't matter.

The warmth from the silver charcoal stove filled the room. With practiced hands, she prepared coffee, her movements smooth and serene. As she heard the distant sound of drums and trumpets, she paused for a moment, then gave a faint, bitter smile. It seemed likely they were trying to draw attention with more than just storytelling by the gate-they had brought out the drums to lure in a crowd.

"Ms. Rosalind!" Her maid, Josie, rushed into the room, her beautiful eyes sparkling with excitement. "General Farrell has come to propose! He brought Mrs. Murray as a matchmaker, and the gifts-oh, there are so many of them! Anyone who didn't know better would think they were here for the wedding already!"

The cup crashed onto the table, and Rosalind's pale hand trembled slightly. "General Farrell?"

"General Thomas Farrell!" Josie was practically bouncing with excitement, knowing better than anyone what was in her mistress' heart. Rosalind had never truly let go of Thomas.

Rosalind took a deep breath. "How could this be?"

"It's true! Mr. Trevor even opened the main gates to welcome him! I swear it's no mistake." Josie's voice was thick with emotion, her eyes misting.

Rosalind stood up, ready to run

outside, but stopped short at the doorway. Taking a deep breath, she stepped back and returned to her seat, her heart pounding so hard it felt like it might leap out of her

chest.

She couldn't go out—not yet. Not unless her grandfather summoned her first.

Days of irregular meals had left her looking a little pale, but now, with her emotions surging, a flush crept up her cheeks. It was the kind of red that called to mind autumn winds brushing through a maple grove—vivid and breathtaking, spreading inch by inch.

After a moment, she steadied herself, her lips curling into a faint, bittersweet smile.

Thomas was a good man—truly a good man. He knew of the rumors attacking her and had come to shield and protect her. She was deeply moved and incredibly

grateful. The warmth of his kindness

spread through her like a comforting

fire on a cold night.

Yet, she couldn't accept it.

She felt unworthy of accepting him. Back when his assignment was still uncertain—whether he had to be sent to the Southern Frontier or Victory Pass—she couldn't bring herself to leave her family behind. So, she didn't have the right to still be in love with him.

Because she had let go of him back then, she now felt she didn't deserve to accept his kindness.

Rosalind's thoughts were a tangled mess, but amidst all the confusion, the clearest feeling was gratitude. His arrival felt like a hero descending from the heavens, rescuing her from a dire situation.

It was the kind of scene that countless women had dreamed of, and now it was unfolding in her own life.

Chapter 1209

About an hour later, Trevor sent someone to escort Rosalind.

Rosalind watched as Josie picked out the most delicate, exquisite clothes for her, pairing them with carefully matched jewelry. After much thought, Rosalind decided to simply go as she was.

She wore a white gown paired with a soft apricot-yellow cloak. The outfit was simple and unassuming, as though she were about to take a casual stroll in the garden, rather than attending a formal gathering or discussing matters of her future. When she reached the main hall of the outer courtyard, she saw a crowd of people, the scene quite grand.

Then she saw him.

His gaze met hers, deep and piercing, yet tinged with restraint.

She couldn't meet his eyes for long, her heart thundering in her chest, cheeks flushed with heat.

But the etiquette was ingrained in her, and she forced herself to approach each person, making her way forward. When Alice saw her, a deep sense of joy filled her heart. She immediately took Rosalind's hand and said warmly, "Child, I know these days have been hard on you."

The kindness of an elder brought Rosalind to the brink of tears. She fought to keep her composure, her throat tight as she forced the words out, "Thank you, Mrs. Farrell. It's nothing, truly. A little hardship is nothing."

Natalie, the prime minister's wife, felt a pang of sorrow at Rosalind's state. How could such a talented, graceful young woman be reduced to the subject of such gossip?

She said softly, "My dear, I'm here today as a matchmaker. Your grandparents wish to know your opinion, and I ask you now-do you consent to marry Thomas Farrell?"

Rosalind clutched her handkerchief, trying to appear calm and composed. For some reason, the feelings of frustration she had previously held back suddenly rushed to the surface. She almost lost her composure and cried right then and there, her throat choking up as she couldn't say whether she agreed or disagreed.

Everyone was waiting for her answer, but she couldn't find the words.

Thomas stood up and walked over to her, then nodded respectfully and said, "Ms. Young, may we speak privately for a moment?"

Rosalind didn't dare look at him, only nodding slightly and murmuring in response.

Thomas smiled gently. "Alright. Please have your maid remain nearby, and we'll talk for a moment."

The main hall was separated by a screen, and though they could have spoken there, the soundproofing wasn't great. So, they moved to the side hall instead.

Josie trailed behind them, puzzled by why her mistress hadn't given her answer right away. She walked ahead, not daring to turn back to look at them.

Rosalind and Thomas walked side by side, him taking the position on the edge to block the wind. She stayed just behind him, to the right. Only then did she dare to look up at his tall, imposing figure ahead of her.

His cloak billowed, shielding her from the wind that might have reached her otherwise. To her, his back was like a towering mountain, sturdy and protective, offering a sense of safety that enveloped her completely.

It didn't matter what the outcome or whatever their paths would eventually be. At that moment, she felt an overwhelming warmth and happiness-a warmth that she would carry with her for the rest of

her life. When they reached the side hall, Josie stood outside the door, leaving them to speak in private inside.

Thomas looked at her, his gaze

sincere, and there was a touch of passion in it. "Originally, our families discussed this, but at the time, I wasn't very enthusiastic. First, it was because I hadn't settled my affairs. Second, because I thought wasn't worthy of you."

He paused for a moment, then added, "Even now, I still feel unworthy of you."

His hands gripped the armrests, his nervousness apparent, and his face flushed with rare embarrassment.

"But I want to try... I know it might seem like I'm taking advantage of the situation, and if you don't agree, I'll understand. But if you do, I promise I'll cherish you every single day I live." Rosalind blinked, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, her lashes heavy with them. "But back then, I was so selfish. And now, my reputation is ruined. Don't you despise me?"

He shook his head, his words coming more easily now, each one heartfelt.

"You weren't selfish, not at all. On

the contrary admire you. You're not impulsive; you think things through You're calm and steady, always considering your family, honoring your parents and grandparents, and never forgetting the care they gave you.

"I respect that deeply. Perhaps it was the moment you turned me down that I realized I truly liked you. At the time, I didn't think I was worthy of you, and I didn't dare to push for it. But now, I'll be staying in the capital. You wouldn't have to follow me far away or leave your family. Though I can't guarantee I'll never leave the city-I'll have to go to war if it comes to that-I can

promise you that when I'm by your side, I'll treat you well."

He said a lot of "thoughts" and "buts" because he knew there were many uncertainties ahead. But what he was sure of was his feelings for her.

At this moment, he was opening his heart and letting her know how he felt.

Chapter 1210

Josie listened from where she stood at the door and couldn't hold back her tears. They fell in a steady stream, one after another.

She knew better than anyone the kind of days Rosalind had endured, how deeply tormented her heart must have been. Now, Thomas had made a grand gesture, complete with drums and trumpets, and even enlisted Natalie to act as a matchmaker. If this all worked out, it would surely slap the faces of so many people outside.

But why hadn't Rosalind agreed yet?

Josie almost wanted to turn around and give the answer on Rosalind's behalf.

Rosalind sniffed. "If I don't agree today, you'll become a laughingstock, General Farrell."

Thomas chuckled softly. "I don't care about that. Let them mock me all they want. What does it matter to me? I'm a man-let them come at me. You're a young woman who has heroically saved your students at the academy. You shouldn't have to bear the weight of all those rumors."

At those words, Rosalind seemed to truly realize something.

Thomas had made a grand show of coming to Highstone Estate. Was it because he was thinking that if his proposal didn't work out, it would shift all the attention onto him and help her out?

Thomas stood up, still smiling. "Take your time, Ms. Young. No need to rush your answer. Whenever you've made up your mind, just send someone to inform me."

Suddenly, Rosalind jumped to her feet. "General Farrell, I agree!"

As soon as the words left her lips, her cheeks felt like they were on fire, burning with heat. She quickly turned her face away, and her voice unintentionally laced with a teasing hint.

"I... I have no objection. I'll go with what Grandpa and Grandma want."

With that, her face still flushed bright red, she turned and hurried off.

Thomas stood still, watching her leave. A warmth spread through his gaze, and a sigh of relief escaped him. His joy, which had been bubbling under the surface, now began to show in the way his eyes shone.

No one had expected that this matter would end with a union between the Farrell and Young families. Both households were positively beaming, smiles wide and uncontainable.

For Alice, this wasn't just about her affection for Rosalind-it also solved a long-standing worry. She deeply cared for her son and wanted someone around him who could truly understand and support him.

After the scandal between Viola and

Silas came to light, she couldn't even

begin to describe how difficult things had been. The gossip about the three of them was relentless. Despite Thomas being the victim, the rumors still attacked him and the Farrell family. People blamed the Farrell family's lack of proper discipline and the inner chamber's instability for the whole mess.

But now, the opinions of others mattered little. Her son was marrying the woman he had wanted. That was all that mattered to Alice.

When it came time to express gratitude to the matchmaker, Alice squeezed Natalie's hand, her voice thick with emotion.

"I'm sure you'll find it laughable, but every time I suggested a marriage, he would always brush it off, acting like he had no interest. When I called him home to meet someone, he would claim the army kept him too busy. But I knew, deep down, it wasn't about being busy-it was because he didn't want to marry. I thought he had no desire for marriage at all, but then I heard from his servant that he couldn't forget Ms. Young. I'm just so glad that

everything turned out well in the end.

Thank the heavens!"

Natalie was also pleased. Helping to arrange this marriage felt like a good deed. She couldn't help but think back to when she had tried to matchmake for Barrett and Viola, only for it to end so badly.

That situation had always weighed on her conscience.

So when Alice came to ask for her help, Natalie hesitated at first. After all, the last time she played matchmaker, it didn't turn out well.

But Alice had reassured her, explaining that the success or failure of a marriage wasn't the responsibility of the matchmaker. Was the matchmaker supposed to oversee their entire marriage? If things went wrong, it was on them-not anyone else.

When Natalie thought about Thomas and Rosalind-both of them good and worthy people-she felt certain that she should help once again.

Alice was eager. She planned to have the official engagement set for after the New Year.

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From this moment on, the wedding preparations were officially underway. Fortunately, she had been thinking about Thomas' marriage for some time. Whenever she saw something suitable, she would buy it, intending to use it as part of the engagement gifts. Now, there wasn't much left to do. Plus, she had bought a lot of things with the family in the days leading up to the

proposal, so there would be no

problem finalizing the engagement

after the New Year.

When their horoscopes were compared and found to be a perfect match, both families were overjoyed.

In an unexpected turn, Rosalind also decided to do something a bit unconventional-she had the skilled embroiderers of Skye Embroidery make her wedding dress.

Of course, some spoke ill of this. Although the workshop was filled with skilled embroiderers, they were all women who had been cast aside by their husbands. How could a wedding dress be made by such people?

But Rosalind insisted, and both Alice and Thomas agreed with her.

After all, they had already faced the gossip of the entire city, so why not face it boldly? They would go on with their lives, showing the world that their marriage would be a peaceful, joyful one. Let the whispers continue; they would live happily, and let others envy them.