

## War Song 1211

### Chapter 1211

With the situation settled positively, Carissa finally had the time to deal with the troublemakers stirring up trouble.

Thomas had merely invited those troublemakers to be present when he came to propose. He hadn't resorted to any underhanded tactics, nor would Carissa. Everything was done properly and by the book.

She instructed Max to bring everyone back, then had them punished with the charges of spreading rumors and causing chaos. Either they would pay fines or face corporal punishment-everyone on Jacob's list was held accountable.

As for the Quinton family, they had also mobilized their people to deflect attention with the intent to harm Rosalind. So, Carissa handed over the evidence she had gathered to Meredith, who in turn passed it to Irvin, her father-in-law and the Oversight Minister. Before the court recess, he submitted an official complaint about the Quinton family.

Though Malcolm claimed to know nothing about the matter, Salvador still imposed a fine of six months' salary, withholding even the end-of-year rewards.

When Derek delivered the rewards to Hell Monarch Estate, Carissa personally received him and invited him for coffee.

Ryan had already been brought back from the academy, and Carissa led him out to greet Derek.

Ryan had grown quite a bit this year. He resembled his father more and more. After attending the academy, he had become much more composed, polite, and well-mannered.

Derek looked at him with great satisfaction. "Wonderful. Not only do you look good, but you're learning well, too."

"Mr. Derek, please have some coffee," Ryan said politely, taking the plate of pastries from Lulu and serving it himself. "These are the spiced fruit cakes I like the most. Please have more. Lily says they're good for warming the stomach."

"How wonderful!" Derek smiled, his eyes narrowing into slits. He ate a piece of cake and took a sip of coffee, then gently asked Ryan, "Are you going to your uncle's place this year, or staying at Hell Monarch Estate for the New Year?" Ryan answered brightly, "I had planned to go to the palace with Aunt Carissa, but she said it's better to go to my uncle's. My grandparents have been missing me."

Derek smiled. "Lord Ryan, you're truly a devoted child."

Derek's smile had a touch of sadness and tenderness. After chatting with Ryan for a while, Carissa sent him off.

"Are you hoping to keep him away from Prince Connor, Your Grace?" Derek asked.

Carissa nodded. "You're right, Mr. Walker. Prince Connor has been reprimanded because of Ryan. The palace banquet is lively and festive, so it's best to avoid anything that would ruin the atmosphere."

"The queen is under house arrest," Derek said softly. "She won't be attending the palace banquet this year. They're telling everyone it's because she caught a cold."

Carissa asked, "Is the house arrest because of the Gracewood Women's Academy matter? Did the queen dowager order it?"

"The queen dowager didn't issue any formal orders," Derek replied. "She simply invited the king for a meal. After the king had dined, he sent word to Everspring Palace, telling the queen to remain indoors until after the New Year."

Carissa understood. Victoria rarely

punished the consorts. She and the king seemed to share an unspoken understanding-many things didn't need to be said aloud. If the king was called to dine with his mother, he would comprehend her intentions without her needing to say a word.

Victoria rarely summoned Salvador to her table. More often than not, it was Salvador who would visit her, demonstrating his devotion to his mom.

There was one question Carissa needed an answer to, so she dismissed the others and spoke privately with Derek.

"Mr. Walker, could you tell me was the trouble at Gracewood Women's Academy the king's decision, or the queen's?"

She knew she had phrased it wrong.

From what Kevin had said, Salvador didn't seem to have much regard for Gracewood Women's Academy. But she wanted to know who was behind such a vicious act-whether it was Salvador or Kylie, as there was a difference.

If it had been Salvador's will, with his immense power on the throne, nothing could endure without his consent.

But if it was Kylie's doing, Carissa believed the academy could survive, even if it faced some turmoil for a while. Derek thought for a moment, carefully choosing his words.

"The women's academy was the queen dowager's idea. His Majesty has always been dutiful, and he

would never wish to destroy it. Oset

course, His Majesty also likes

keep a firm grip on many things and people, which is the only way he can feel assured."

At those words, Carissa understood.

Salvador had likely intended to create obstacles for the women's academy, keeping it lukewarm and under strict control, from its student body to its curriculum. But this incident's aim was different-it was to destroy the academy and ruin Rosalind.

That meant it was Kylie's doing.

Chapter 1212

After seeing Derek off, Carissa exchanged a few words with Jacob before joining Violet and Isaac to roast sweet potatoes by the fire.

Jacob had taken charge of the matters at the gentlemen's retreat and would keep an eye on things.

The two of them were discussing Gerald's situation.

Violet shook her head, clearly still in disbelief. "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it."

Isaac, who had traveled widely, was equally stunned. "I've seen all sorts of things, but nothing like this. A man of his age, with such a high position-why would he go to such a place?"

From what they had observed, Gerald's visit to the gentlemen's retreat hadn't involved anything truly scandalous he had simply called for a few courtesans, had a drink, listened to some music, and perhaps enjoyed a bit of light touch.

Gerald had been Sigmund's teacher. Sigmund, who was known for his disdain for anything related to male attractions-so much so that it bordered on revulsion.

As Sigmund's mentor, Gerald had naturally assisted him in governing the kingdom after he ascended to the throne. Given the cautious and humble nature of the Quinton family in their earlier years, one would expect Gerald to share Sigmund's aversion to such things.

But now, in his later years, it was as if something had been lifted from him. He no longer cared, recklessly venturing into the gentlemen's retreat without a second thought.

Carissa sat down, picking up a sweet potato and tossing it between her hands. Isaac reached over, took it from her, and gently blew on it before rubbing it between his palms to peel it. He handed her the peeled potato.

"Hurry and eat. It'll warm you up."

Carissa smiled and thanked him, taking a bite of the soft, sweet flesh. The warmth and sweetness filled her mouth, and she blew on it a couple of times before swallowing.

Violet, watching the exchange, raised an eyebrow and glanced at Isaac in surprise. "You're quite thoughtful, aren't you?"

Isaac shrugged nonchalantly. "It's nothing. I can peel one for you, too."

He pinched another potato between his fingers and began peeling it. After a moment, he handed half of it to Violet. "Here, eat."

Violet hesitated for a second before accepting it. "I could've peeled it myself, but since you've done it, I'll take it. Thanks."

"If someone else peels it for you, just eat. Everyone can peel some potatoes, you know?" Isaac shot her a look. "You're always nosy and talk too much."

Violet chuckled softly. "I have a senior guild member too, but he's not as thoughtful as yours."

"Your senior guild member is afraid of you," Isaac remarked, wiping his hands. "He agrees with everything you say. After all, the entire Inferno Guild relies on your money." He turned to Carissa. "How's the sweet potato? Is it good?"

"It's delicious, Carissa replied, already finishing half of it. She slowly peeled the rest. "You were

talking about Lord Gerald earlier

right? About how it's hard to

understand why he would risk going to such a place at his

"Don't you find it strange?" Violet asked as she ate.

"If it was just to find a courtesan, yes, it's odd. But the Quinton family has no reason to associate with those Sandorians. There's no need for it."

"Isn't that obvious, then?" Violet retorted. "He did go looking for a courtesan."

Carissa replied, "Everyone needs

some sort of indulgence, don't they?

He's a royal tutor, a man of strict morals, but he's been bound by those rules for decades. Now that he's older and sees things more clearly, why not live a little more freely?"

She set the potato skin aside and sighed. "What worries me more is that tomorrow's New Year's Eve banquet at the palace. Lord Gerald should be invited, and when I see him, it'll feel...strange, to say the least."

Violet nodded in agreement,

especially given how Gerald always maintained his scholarly, dignified

air. That posture, so practiced for e

decades, could not erase the image of him being helped upstairs, nor the sickly pallor on his face or the way his eyes had shamelessly surveyed everything around him.

Violet placed a hand on her stomach. "The sweet potato's a bit too rich for me. My stomach's upset."

Carissa glanced at Isaac, smiling. "Isaac, we always thought you were partial to men's company."

"Just because I went to the gentlemen's retreat?" Isaac didn't seem bothered in the least, giving her a sharp look. "So what if I am? Does it matter?"

Carissa thought for a moment. "Sage Everett wouldn't allow it. You'd probably be punished severely."

Having been punished the most during his youth, Isaac had a deep fear of Everett. His carefree expression faded as he became serious.

"I don't prefer men's company. Don't speak of such things in front of Sage Everett, Kyle, or Rafael especially not in front of him. Sage Everett is his mentor, and you never know what they talk about."

Chapter 1213

Violet interjected from the side, "Actually, I think you like both men and women."

"Flattering as always, but I like neither. Thank you." Isaac stretched lazily. "You two can keep roasting the sweet potatoes and chat."

He stood up, his movements usually carefree. Sometimes he walked with a languid grace, other times, he took long strides. But now, feeling two eyes on his back, he straightened his posture, adopting a military stance as he walked out.

"By the way, Bun and Thia were supposed to come for the New Year. They sent a letter before, but we haven't seen them yet, so they might not come after all," Violet recalled, turning to Carissa.

"Will their mentor even let them leave for the New Year?" Carissa asked.

"They haven't shown up, so it's probably because their master won't let them. Maybe they'll come after the holiday," Violet added, tending to the fire. The newly added silver-charcoal pieces began to glow, and the red embers slowly spread from the side. "When you said we were short on people, I sent them a message."

"It would be wonderful if Thia could come," Carissa said, resting her head on Violet's shoulder. A weariness flashed across her face. "This year feels exhausting. I always feel like I'm running out of energy. Every day, when I wake up, there's something new to deal with." "Then take this New Year to rest," Violet said, her voice filled with concern.

"But during the New Year, the Mystic Army is the busiest," Carissa replied after a moment of thought. "Busy is good, though. At least it means when I lie down at night, I won't have time to think about Raf."

Violet was intrigued and asked, "What does it feel like to miss someone?"

"Missing someone is bearable. Waiting for them is the hardest," Carissa sighed, pressing her fingers to her temples. She tilted her head slightly, the line of her jaw particularly sharp.

"Honestly, before he left, I didn't think I would miss him so much. But at night, he just pops into my mind and takes up so much space. I can't get rid of him. His nerve knows no bounds."

Violet shivered involuntarily. "That's so cheesy. I can hardly believe you just said that."

Carissa smiled sweetly but with a touch of frustration. "Alright, enough about him. The queen's under house arrest. It's obvious the issue with the academy was her doing. Ruining someone's reputation, silencing them... The king will likely leave her in the cold for a while. Appointing the crown prince probably won't happen anytime soon."

"The king's mind isn't even on that matter," Violet replied. "He only wants to get rid of anyone with rebellious thoughts."

"Too bad the queen's too blinded by her narrow view to see things clearly. She keeps saying that naming a crown prince is the most important thing, but it's only truly important if the king believes so."

Violet stretched out her hands to warm them by the fire, her eyes flashing with anger. "Too bad we can't get revenge for what happened at the academy. She's locked away in the inner palace, and we can't exactly sneak in and slap her."

"True, I'd love to slap her," Carissa sighed lightly. The difference between ideals and reality was stark. Even if they managed to sneak into the palace, it would be easy to get caught.

Sneaking into the palace was a grave offense. It wasn't worth it just to slap Kylie a couple of times.

"It's so unfair," Violet fumed. "Just because she's the queen, everything she does goes unpunished. Even if the king knows, all he does is confine her."

Carissa stared at the glowing coals crackling in the fire. "Because the king doesn't really want the women's academy to succeed."

"Why does it bother them so much for women to study?"



Carissa's voice was calm, though tinged with frustration. "They fear that if women gain too much knowledge, they'll start questioning whether some things are truly just, like the obedience and virtues they claim that women should follow."

To Salvador, the Women's Academy could exist; however, what they taught must stay within certain boundaries.

"But why, then, do they occasionally select talented women from the capital? Doesn't that encourage women to study?"

"Yes, but they also say women who lack talent are virtuous. They want a wife who's modest and gentle, someone who embodies virtue. With the pressure of marriage hanging over them, which noble family would truly invest in educating a talented woman?"

Violet seemed to understand, a dawning realization in her eyes. "So, the reason Gracewood Women's Academy has so many students is because the queen dowager ordered for it to be established. They're just doing it to show her some respect."

"Exactly," Carissa nodded. "It's all

about following the crowd. Everyone's going, so if someone doesn't go, it would seem

disrespectful to the queen dowager. The parents don't expect their daughters to actually learn anything. They just go for the sake of going."

Carissa was also concerned. After the trouble with the women's academy, many students would probably not return next year.

In the end, nothing was more important than a clean reputation.

Chapter 1214

On New Year's Eve, Ryan wore a bright red woolen cloak, its edges lined with soft white fur, a thick hood atop his head. His lively, cheerful demeanor matched his outfit as he eagerly waited for the Klein family's carriage to arrive.

Jacob had already prepared many gifts, many of which Ryan had personally chosen.

The night before, Frederick had come over from Northwatch Estate to deliver the account books. Ryan had stayed up all night, carefully reviewing them. Jacob told him there was no rush to go through them, and then went to ask Carissa for some leniency. Carissa told him it would be good for Ryan to learn how to manage the accounts sooner rather than later-after all, he would need to take charge of everything in Northwatch Estate eventually.

While Ryan examined the books, his study partner Evan stayed by his side. However, Evan was heading home to celebrate the New Year and wouldn't be accompanying him to Highcrest Estate.

Carissa's greatest joy was that Ryan, though meticulous and steady beyond his years, still possessed a childlike innocence. Perhaps some of it was a mask. After all, he had endured many hardships-but even if it was, that was fine. Sometimes in life, one had to play the fool to get ahead.

Though Ryan was eager to visit the Klein family's household for the holiday, Rafael wasn't around this year, and Carissa was going to spend the New Year alone. He took her hand.

"I'll be back by the second day of the New Year. I won't stay too long. I'll come back to keep you company, Aunt Carissa."

Carissa gave his nose a playful tap. "Stay a little longer. I'll be busy, and I'll be fine without you hanging around."

"I'll be here too, Ryan. So, don't worry. Visit your uncle and his family and have fun," Violet added with a smile, draping her arm over Carissa's shoulder.

"Right, Aunt Violet and Mr. Isaac will be around." Ryan looked at Violet and Isaac, then at Jacob, Lulu, and the others. "And there are so many other people around. Now I can relax."

He stood there, hands behind his back, with a smile that made him look like a little grown-up.

Seeing him like this reminded Carissa of her second brother, and a pang of bittersweet longing tugged at her heart. If only Nathan and Yvette could see how clever and well-behaved Ryan was! They would be so proud.

Soon, the Klein family arrived, bringing with them carriages full of gifts. For the past two or three years, it had been like a gift exchange between the two families-one cartload of presents after another, with each return gift matching the value of the last. This left Carissa reluctant to pick anything too extravagant. Most of the gifts she chose were simple and practical.

However, the gifts from Helen were a different story-those could be anything she wanted. As for the return gift, Helen had specific requests-no gold or silver jewelry, no fine silks, just delicious pastries and dishes.

Helen's reasoning was clear-she was subtly supporting the Klein family.

She was upfront with Carissa and Violet about her intentions and said, "I'm rewarding them to show them that Ryan has powerful backing. Not everyone in that vast household is kind to him. With me looking out for him, even those who don't like him will have to keep it to themselves."

It was a reasonable argument, and Carissa could not disagree. She could only express her gratitude profusely. Helen waved her hand dismissively. "My favor to Ryan has nothing to do with you. No need to thank me."

Gillian privately praised Helen for her kindness, calling her very benevolent.

Helen, however, shot her a sharp glance. "What do you know? I do love Ryan, but I'm doing this not only for him but also for Carissa. Though no one dared openly cross me in the palace, how many people secretly tripped me up? How many times did I suffer in silence?

"But now, with Carissa as my daughter-in-law, Josephine and Dakota respect me completely. They know the rules. Normally, my sister wouldn't intervene in small matters, but Carissa is different. If anyone dares to wrong me even a little, Carissa will make sure they pay for it."

Gillian kept smiling and agreed. "Yes, of course."

Once the Klein family had taken Ryan with them, Carissa began preparing to bathe and change her clothes, as she needed to head to the palace.

On this day every year, the formalities were endless and tedious. In the past, the dull rituals never seemed like much when she went with Rafael.

But now, thinking of going alone...

It was yet another day of missing him.

## Chapter 1215

Before the palace banquet, Carissa sat with Victoria, spent time with Grace, sat with Penelope, and then took a walk in the Royal Garden with several grand princesses, including Kiera and Meredith.

Today, Meredith wore a bright red embroidered gown with a white dove pattern. With her powdered face and rouge, she looked even more noble. Holding a fan to cover her face, she smiled and said, "I heard that after the formal complaint about the Quinton family was submitted, Lord Gerald quickly gathered the family and severely punished the fourth branch, saying that all this trouble was caused by them."

As Victoria's daughter, Meredith held a respected position among the royal family. The other princesses always followed her lead. When Meredith spoke of the Quinton family, everyone else agreed. Even Henrietta laughed along.

Henrietta was Josephine's daughter and a granddaughter of the Quinton family. However, she had long since distanced herself from the family. Her husband Vance advised that, given the immense power of the Quinton family, it was best for both princesses and princes to maintain some distance and avoid forming too many alliances with them.

The Quinton family's influence was so great that it could lead to undesirable consequences, so keeping a proper distance was wise.

People often said that Vance was a "kept man," managing the estate and shops for Henrietta. However, Henrietta knew her husband was capable and sharp. He just chose not to show it, as he preferred a quiet and stable life.

Today, Sylvia was in the spotlight. Since Kylie was confined to her quarters, Sylvia stayed by Salvador's side as he oversaw the ceremony for the celebrations today. Afterward, she joined the others to chat and watch the performance.

Grace also brought the second prince with her, while the third prince went off to play for a while before returning to watch the show with her. Although the third prince wasn't Grace's biological son,

he was very attached to her. At a young age, he only knew how to act cute and make everyone laugh.

In contrast, the second prince, though young, was already displaying a calm and respectful demeanor. He greeted the ladies before quietly sitting by Grace, pouring a drink for her with great care. Everyone praised him for his maturity.

Because Kylie was confined to her quarters, Connor didn't attend to watch the performance. It was said that he had offended his teacher and was being punished with extra assignments. Salvador had ordered that Connor finish his punishment before the palace banquet. Salvador didn't have many new concubines in his palace, and the few that were there had a hard time standing out. He was different from Sigmund, who liked to take the daughters of officials as wives and use the harem to secure his rule. As the current king, it was clear Salvador didn't prefer that approach.

While watching the play, a noblewoman came over to greet the consorts. Carissa had never seen her before, but from a distance, she could tell that this woman was exceptionally beautiful, with skin as smooth and fair as snow.

From Meredith, Carissa learned that

the woman's name was Jeanette Todd. She had only been in the palace for three months and came from a modest background-her dad was a sixth-ranked official. She had entered the palace as a

lower-ranking concubine, but after spending a night with Salvador, she was immediately promoted to a higher-ranking concubine.

Carissa didn't feel the need to comment on the matter. The affairs of the harem were not her concerns, so she turned her attention back to the performance.

Jeanette was stunning, but in a

gentle, non-threatening way. Her beauty was entirely different from that of Sylvia, whose allure was bold and fiery something that ignited a man's desire to conquer. On the other hand, Jeanette's beauty was gentle and demure, the sort that invoked a man's protective instincts. Salvador was clearly quite fond of her.

Because of her humble and obedient demeanor, the other concubines had no ill feelings toward her. They likely understood Salvador's nature-he never grew too attached to one woman. As time passed, even the women who had once enjoyed his

favor often found themselves

drifting into the background.

Jeanette's promotion to a higher-ranking concubine was therefore seen by most as a way for Salvador to show his affection-nothing more.

Of course, the lower-ranking concubines didn't share the same view. Behind closed doors, they were fiercely competitive with Jeanette, fighting for Salvador's favor. Meanwhile, the higher-ranking concubines watched with detached amusement, enjoying the drama as they fought it out.

Though Jeanette appeared delicate and weak, she was far from foolish. With her family's lack of influence, she had wisely decided to seek out a powerful ally. And now, her sights were set on Carissa, hoping to form a bond that would serve as her shield in the palace.

She sat next to Carissa, offering a bashful smile. "I've heard for a while that you're as brave as a man, and today I see it's true, Your Grace."

She really didn't seem good at conversation. After just one sentence, her face turned red.

Carissa smiled politely and nodded. "You flatter me, Lady Jeanette."

Brave as a man? Was Jeanette talking about her appearance? It must have been about her looks. What else could it be, with only her appearance visible?

Carissa found it odd, but since she didn't want to interact too much with the palace concubines, she decided to acknowledge the comment and leave it at that.

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Little did Carissa know, Jeanette would keep talking to her throughout the performance. Sometimes, she even giggled and playfully nudged Carissa, as if they were very close and familiar with each other.

Their interaction caught the attention of the other concubines nearby. A few of them even leaned in, casting curious glances several times.

Though people would call it interacting, in reality, Carissa only occasionally agreed or nodded, giving a smile to be polite.

However, others didn't see it that way. After the performance, both Meredith and Kiera pulled Carissa aside with puzzled expressions. "You and Jeanette know each other?"

Carissa shook her head. "We've never met before today."

"Then why does it seem like you two are so familiar with each other?" Kiera's confusion deepened.

Meredith noticed something was off and frowned. "Stay away from her in the future. Her intentions aren't sincere."

Carissa had already gathered that much. But at the time, everyone was watching the performance. Leaving abruptly would have been rude and disruptive to Salvador's and Victoria's enjoyment. Still, Carissa didn't think Jeanette was foolish-though she certainly wasn't all that clever either.

As the performance had ended, Carissa felt a sense of relief. However, when she caught the cold glances from Sylvia, Penelope, and the other concubines, she knew the mood had shifted. They hadn't said anything, but their eyes spoke volumes-sharp, calculating, and no longer friendly.

Though Carissa rarely involved herself in the intrigues of the harem, she had spent enough time observing the women to understand their temperaments. They could tolerate a new favorite, but if someone reached too far-if they became too ambitious-that was something they couldn't ignore.

Also, Jeanette acted without fully understanding things. Kylie hated Carissa the most. By trying to get close to her, Jeanette had effectively become a thorn in Kylie's side.

As the banquet began, Carissa saw Gerald.

She had spent the entire time walking in the Royal Garden, not wanting to see him, though she knew it was inevitable.

Rafael wasn't in the capital, while she was the Hell Monarch's princess consort and the commander of the Mystic Army. Her position meant that she was seated directly across from him, and there was no way to avoid the encounter.

Gerald was Sigmund's tutor, and Trevor had also once taught Sigmund. Later, he became Salvador's teacher. Both of them had been invited to the palace banquet, which was only natural given their esteemed positions.

The long banquet table was soon

filled with dishes. Salvador raised his cup in a toast, thanking the heavens and his teachers. Carissa noticed that Gerald had a serious expression and the air of a scholar, but what kept coming to her mind was the scene of him at the gentlemen's retreat.

That image alone made her stomach turn.

To make matters worse, Gerald kept glancing at her because of the matter with the women's academy, and all Carissa could do was bury her head in her food.

The dinner felt like an eternity to her.

Once the banquet finally ended, Carissa exchanged pleasantries with Victoria and quickly made her way out of the palace. This year, without Rafael in the capital, she didn't see the need to linger. She wanted to return to the estate with Helen as soon as possible. As she reached the eastern gates, she saw Gerald again. He was being helped into his carriage. Upon noticing Carissa, he raised a hand to signal for the attendants to help him stand.

Carissa considered pretending not to see him, but Gerald spoke first. "Lady Helen, Lady Carissa, returning so early?"

She forced a smile and replied, "Yes, Lord Quinton. Are you leaving so soon as well?"



"Your Grace," Gerald said instead of answering, his tone adopting a lecturing quality. "I have a few words I wish to share with you."

Carissa stood at a respectful distance, her head lowered as protocol dictated. "Please go ahead, Lord Quinton."

Gerald said seriously, "Teaching and

guiding others is a good thing, but one must never overstep their role or pretend to know what they don't. Your Grace, you're a woman who wields a sword, not a quill. The

position of headmistress The Bet

should be

held by someone with the necessary abilities. The recent troubles with the women's academy, with you at the center of them, are the

consequences of overestimating your capacity. I hope you take this lesson to heart."

Gerald spoke from his position of authority, his status as a royal tutor lending weight to his words. Carissa knew that despite the frustration she felt, she had to accept his criticism. Even if she disagreed, it was a matter of propriety not to voice her objections.

After finishing his lecture, Gerald made to turn and enter the carriage, but then Carissa called out, "Lord Quinton, please wait."

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Gerald was slightly startled. He turned to look at Carissa, his expression showing a hint of displeasure.

"Do you think I'm wrong, Your Grace? Or do you believe you are capable of teaching and spreading knowledge yourself?" Helen reached out, gently tugging on Carissa's sleeve, a silent plea for her to avoid any further argument with Gerald.

Helen loved Sigmund, so she had great respect for Gerald, who was once his tutor. In fact, she had once considered having Rafael marry one of the Quinton family's daughters. Ultimately, Kiera had married Logan, which fulfilled Helen's wish. Moreover, Helen felt that even though Gerald spoke to Carissa in a reprimanding tone, it was still advice from an elder to a youngster. Carissa should accept it humbly.

To be honest, she felt a bit uncomfortable, especially with Gerald's somewhat mocking tone. Wasn't he implying that Carissa lacked education? Even so, Helen chose to overlook it. After all, Gerald was a royal tutor, and age demanded respect. Carissa lifted her chin and met his gaze directly. "Lord Quinton, you're mistaken. While I do not possess the skill to teach and guide others the way you do, I do have the intention to protect Gracewood Women's Academy.

"My fault lies in not understanding the depths of malice in some people. To destroy the academy, they would go as far as ruining the reputation of so many students. You should not be directing your condemnation at me, but at those who sought to sabotage Gracewood Women's Academy.

"As for teaching, we have specialists for that. Are you suggesting that every teacher at the academy is a fraud? Not to mention my senior guild member Kyle, or the respectable Mrs. Ashford and Mrs. Wright-aren't they all virtuous and capable?"

Gerald's expression darkened. "I was only offering a few words of advice for your own good, yet you respond with sharp words and excuses. The women's academy is exactly what it is an academy for women, and there is a difference from regular academies. "Even with the title of an academy, it should focus on teaching proper conduct and virtue. Mr. Spencer may be talented in painting, but that does not make him fit to teach such matters. If you want to push this further, then I believe this women's academy should not even exist." "Lord Quinton, you should take that up with the queen dowager. Tonight, you'll have the chance to see her. Why not bring it up with her?" Carissa shot back.

Her respect for him had completely vanished when she saw him at the gentlemen's retreat.

Gerald's lips curled into a sharp, almost mocking smile. His voice took on a sarcastic tone. "Ah, no wonder you're so bold. You're relying on the queen dowager's support. Well then, I apologize for offending you Please, forgive me, Your Grace."

After saying that, he put on an air of not wanting to argue with a petty person. He turned around and signaled for his servant to help him into the carriage.

Carissa was initially very angry, but after hearing those words, she almost wanted to laugh. Some people thought their ideas were so elevated that anyone else's words were just nonsense, childish talk.

There was no point in arguing with someone like that.

Once they got into the carriage, Helen said with a hint of reproach, "Why bother arguing with him? Even if he's wrong, just listen and don't respond. His words aren't as important as he thinks they are. Why waste your time?"

Carissa gave a small laugh and nodded. "You're right, Mother. I won't engage with him like that again."

Helen sighed, then added, "Honestly,

that man acts so high and mighty,

and his words are harsh. Just because he was King Sigmund's teacher and a learned scholar doesn't mean he should treat people like that. You're still a princess

consort! If he treats you like that, does that mean he considers

ordinary people mere ants?"

"He's used to being revered," Carissa replied. "Everyone around him worships him, and he believes his words are law. Of course, no one dares to contradict him."

Carissa knew well that Gerald also

opposed Skye Embroidery. To people like him, providing a refuge for discarded women went against tradition. Casting out a wife was meant to be a form of punishment, and the idea that she could find a safe place to live meant the punishment had lost its meaning.

Helen felt frustrated. She had always held the Quinton family in high regard and took pride in their connection, but now most of that admiration had faded. At least Kiera's husband, Logan, wasn't like that.

## Chapter 1218

Carissa returned home to find Jacob waiting for her with a letter from Rafael, a broad smile on his face.

"Prince Rafael's letter arrived after you've only just stepped out," he said, handing it to her.

Carissa's eyes lit up as she took the letter. She didn't open it immediately but instead asked, "Why aren't you spending the New Year with your family, Jacob?"

"I'm about to head back to celebrate with them," Jacob replied with a mischievous glint in his eyes, "but I wanted to make sure the letter was handed to you personally. I was also eager to see the look on your face when you read it. Plus, I'm curious what else His Highness might have said, beyond just personal matters."

Carissa couldn't hide her delight. "This is his first letter to me. I'll read it right away."

She knew there must be details about the investigation in the letter, so it would need to be reviewed by Jacob. As she opened the envelope, she found three sheets of paper: two addressed to her, and one detailing the investigation's findings.

She skimmed through the pages quickly, then handed the investigative report to Jacob while keeping the two letters for herself.

Jacob chuckled. "He wrote two full pages to you, and only one for the investigation. Looks like His Highness really had a rough time on this trip."

Feeling a bit embarrassed, Carissa urged, "Hurry up and read it. I just skimmed through and don't know the details yet."

Jacob immediately began reading. After finishing, he explained, "After arriving in Lunvale, they spent some time investigating and found a village entirely made up of young, able-bodied men. There were no elderly or children. The villagers farm as usual, but according to locals, this used to be an ordinary village with families, including the elderly, women, and children."

"A few years ago, a plague struck, killing many of the older residents and children. Gradually, outsiders started moving in. Over time, the village grew to what it is today. It's no longer just a village-it's grown to nearly five thousand people."

"Five thousand?" Carissa frowned, sensing something was off. Even a large village would typically have only a few hundred, or maybe just a thousand. "Does the village have any weapons?"

Jacob glanced back at the letter. "They haven't found any yet. The village is surrounded by mountains on three sides, with only one road leading in from the north. It's far from other settlements, and the entrance is guarded. His Highness is waiting for the right moment to slip inside and investigate further."

Carissa felt a knot of worry in her stomach. Rafael's group only had a few people, and they would be against a few thousand people. If these men were indeed the private army they had been looking for, Rafael and his group would be in grave danger.

Plus, the village was surrounded by mountains on three sides. If they were hiding weapons in the hills, it would be like searching for a needle in a haystack.

She had to admit the rebels had chosen a perfect location.

In the end, the only progress made was identifying this village.

After all, Rafael and his group had gone so far to investigate without revealing their identity, and they couldn't rely on local authorities to help. Instead, they had to check if those same officials were colluding with the Realm Defender and

whether there were deeper, tangled

connections involved.

Jacob went back to join his family's New Year's celebrations, while Carissa shut herself in her room. Even when someone came with a message from Violet, she ignored it. She sat by the light, focused solely on reading the letter Rafael had written to her.

In the letter, he mentioned how

much he wasn't used to her not being by his side. Maybe it was because the New Year was approaching, but seeing families out on the streets shopping for the holiday made him wish he could hold her hand and go shopping together.

He didn't forget to ask if she'd been eating and sleeping well, how his

mom was doing, and how Ryan was.

He also shared a lot about the things he encountered during the

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investigation. While some of it could have been shared with Jacob, it wasn't particularly important. He had already summarized the key points in the official report Carissa had passed on.

At the end of the letter, he wrote a few simple words: [I miss you. So very much.]

Carissa read the letter several times, her fingers gently brushing over those final words as she whispered, "I miss you so much too."

When they first got married, she didn't feel much for him in terms of romance. Even during his last mission to rescue the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team members, she hadn't missed him this deeply.

Day after day, his presence had become an inseparable part of her life. She couldn't even recall exactly when her feelings for him had changed or what had sparked it.

It wasn't like the grand, dramatic love stories one often heard about. It was more like a quiet stream, gently nourishing and sustaining their lives together.

And that was enough to make her feel safe and content.

Chapter 1219

Carissa couldn't reply to Rafael's letter, as they didn't have a permanent place where they were staying. All she could do was tuck her longing deep in her heart, waiting until he returned to tell him everything in person.

The New Year was a lively celebration, filled with visits and gatherings. Lulu practically wanted Carissa to try on every new outfit she had, knowing she would be back in her official attire once she returned to the Capital Guard headquarters. Every morning, Lulu would sit Carissa down in front of the vanity and try out different styles, making her look stunning each time. Even the prime minister's wife Natalie remarked how a woman didn't need to have pale skin to look beautiful. Carissa's skin wasn't pale. All the time she spent outdoors had taken away the delicate fairness of a sheltered woman. Instead, her sun-kissed tone carried a warm, healthy glow that made her stand out in her own unique way.

On the eighth day of the new year, Kylie was released from her house arrest. She summoned the ladies from both inside and outside the capital to the palace for an audience.

Not long after, rumors began to spread. It was said that the daughter of a certain family had been promised marriage to a relative of the Duke of Oakspire, but due to the scandal surrounding the women's academy, the engagement had been broken off. Thus, with the new semester approaching, many families found themselves debating whether they should send their daughters back to Gracewood Women's Academy. Some had already made their decision, going to Catherine to withdraw their daughters from the academy.

One withdrew, then two, and soon three...

In just a few days, more than half of the students had withdrawn.

Upon hearing this, Kylie invited the ladies into the palace to give them a lengthy lecture. She told them that a woman's reputation wasn't everything, and that marriage wasn't the most important thing. Instead, they should be like Carissa, independent and not reliant on men. Once Kylie said it, though, how could the noblewomen not have their doubts?

There was only one Carissa in Starhaven, and no one could imitate her. Didn't these ladies know their own daughters? Their daughters didn't have the skills to fight on a battlefield or lead troops. They would be scared to death just by seeing a cockroach. Without a good marriage, how would they survive in life?

Even so, there was some hesitation in everyone's hearts. After all, Victoria had personally ordered the creation of the women's academy. If they suddenly pulled out, would Victoria be upset?

Some of them requested an audience with Victoria, hoping to test the waters. They brought up the incident when troublemakers had broken into the academy, wanting to hear what she thought about it.

Little did they know, Victoria was furious. She said it was outrageous that something like this had happened right under the king's nose.

She also mentioned that if anyone was worried about their daughters' reputations, they should hold off on sending them to the academy. It would be better to wait until the academy was more established. And as for the tuition fees, they shouldn't be stingy with it if it was for the betterment of their

daughters.

With Victoria's words, the ladies acted as if they had received a royal edict. Nearly everyone who had sent their daughters to the academy decided to withdraw them.

Catherine herself came to speak with Carissa, sighing as she relayed the news. "I had hoped the queen dowager would put a stop to this, but it seems she agrees. Now only a few families have not yet withdrawn their daughters." The few holdouts were Courtney, Cassidy, and a few daughters of minor officials.

Carissa smiled and said, "They can withdraw, but tell them that once they've left, they can't return."

Catherine looked at her in surprise. "How can you still smile in this situation, Your Grace?"

"Why not? This is a good thing, isn't it? Let me ask you this, Mrs. Ashford. Were the students who were here previously truly eager to learn?" Carissa said.

Catherine thought for a moment. "Some of them were, but they were rather delicate."

Carissa shook her head. "It's not about being delicate. The truth is, most of them weren't really interested in learning. They were just drawn by your name and Kyle's reputation. Or perhaps it was to please the queen dowager.



"The purpose behind our academy

was to allow women from common families to have the chance to learn. Now that the daughters of noble families are no longer attending, isn't this the perfect opportunity to open the doors to those who truly need it? I had thought it would take much longer to make this shift, but with the queen dowager's words, it's all coming together sooner than expected."

Catherine suddenly realized something, and smiled brightly. "I can't believe I didn't see that before! Of course, daughters from noble and official families have always been taught to read and write. After all, they need to know the basics of women's virtues and rules. It's the common folk's daughters who are truly illiterate."

Violet, who had been listening from the side, looked confused and asked, "But isn't education expensive? Can ordinary families afford the tuition? Surely you won't just waive the fees?"

Carissa laughed and replied, "I wonder if the families who withdraw will even be bold enough to ask for their tuition fees back. The queen dowager herself said there was no need to be stingy about the tuition fee. I'm sure they won't dare to take it back, even if I offer it."

Chapter 1220

"But how long can they afford the tuition? And the daughters of ordinary families have to help out at home to make a living. Studying doesn't exactly bring in money," Violet asked.

Carissa thought for a moment. "That money's not insignificant. It should last a year or two. We can't waive the fees entirely, but we could lower them. Maybe offer half-day classes, so the girls can still help their families with work in the afternoon." She paused, considering the possibilities.

"And don't forget about the merchants. They won't be stingy with their money. The constraints of rules and propriety are less strict for them."

Violet nodded. "That's true. Unless they're from a noble family or are royal merchants, ordinary merchants often let their women handle business affairs."

"Even ordinary families might send their daughters. Partly because of Mr. Spencer's reputation, but also because many can't afford to send their sons to school. If their daughters can attend an academy with low tuition, it's worth it, even if it's just so their daughters can help teach their brothers to read and write when they return," Catherine added.

Carissa nodded, agreeing with the point. Inwardly, though, she couldn't help but admire Victoria for turning the situation to her advantage.

Kylie didn't want Carissa to associate too much with the noble families. After her house arrest was lifted, she summoned the noblewomen for a meeting. The whole idea of withdrawing from the academy was her suggestion.

Did Kylie really think Victoria didn't see through her plans?

To avoid Salvador's criticism, Kylie pretended to advise against it after some had already withdrawn. In reality, she was only pushing others to follow suit. Kylie thought she had won, but this was exactly what Victoria and Carissa had intended all along.

In the end, it worked out. Everyone got what they wanted, and everyone was satisfied.

Still, Salvador probably won't be too pleased. After all, it was such a good opportunity.

The news of Gracewood Women's Academy accepting students from ordinary families eventually reached Kylie's ears. She laughed so hard that she lost her composure.

When the laughter subsided, she turned to Lydia.

"Only Carissa would have the audacity to do something as absurd as accepting commoners. If the queen dowager hears about this, she's bound to be disappointed in her!"

"Why wait for someone else to deliver the news? I'll go straight to the queen dowager myself before Carissa enters the palace and spins her tale, charming Her Majesty into agreeing with her. That would ruin everything."

After she finished speaking, her thoughts shifted.

Lydia considered the situation for a

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moment and said, "Your Majesty, I think it's best if you refrain from intervening. You've done what needed to be done. If you speak now it will only seem like overstepping and might even raise His Majesty's suspicions. Kylie shook her head. "I can't continue pretending to be blind and mute. This whole academy affair-if His Majesty suspects me, it's only a matter of house arrest. That shows he recognizes the validity of my actions, but he has to maintain appearances for Her Majesty's sake."

"The house arrest was only because His Majesty had no evidence," Lydia insisted. "If he truly had proof, who knows what might have happened? Your Majesty, I believe it's wise to remain discreet for now." Kylie refused to back down, giving orders for her maids to do her hair and makeup. "If I keep being too discreet, even the most scheming women will start acting boldly in front of me."

"Lady Jeanette is no real threat. She has no powerful backing, and she's not well-liked in the palace. She's a nobody," Lydia said.

"But she has His Majesty's favor, and that's enough," Kylie replied, her frustration evident.

Though there hadn't been many new concubines in recent years, there were still some that entered the palace. Even so, Salvador's attention to Jeanette was unlike anything she had seen. "And haven't you heard? On New Year's Eve, Jeanette and Carissa were chatting and laughing together for an hour. I suspect Jeanette was sent to the palace by Carissa herself."

"Your Majesty, with the Quinton

family and the eldest prince, your position is unshakeable," Lydia continued, trying to persuade her. "As for His Majesty's affection, it's better not to expect too much and spare yourself the heartache."

Kylie's smile turned bitter. "Not expect? Lydia, a person's heart doesn't always follow their own will. The king is my husband. How could I not desire his love?" She sighed.

"Enough of this! Help me with my hair. I need to see Her Majesty."