

War Song 611

Chapter 611

After saying that, Carissa released her grip on Viola's arm. Viola stumbled back and collapsed into a chair, covering her face with her hands.

"If it's not you, then who? Who's trying to harm me? If it's not you, then who else could it be?"

Carissa found herself at a loss for words, grappling with frustration. She wasn't angry-Viola was simply too sheltered by her family and the Farrell family to think for herself.

To put it plainly, Viola was both selfish and foolish.

Sitting down, Carissa took a deep breath. Getting angry at someone like Viola was pointless. Logic might not work either, but it was worth a shot.

"Let me ask you something. What grudge do I have against you?"

Viola pulled out a handkerchief to dab at her tears, her eyes swollen and red. "Are you saying there's no grudge? You're Barrett's first wife, and we were married on the same day. You overshadowed me in terms of dowry, which made me looked down upon when I entered the Warren family." Carissa gripped the armrest of her chair, inhaling deeply before slowly exhaling. It was truly maddening.

"When have I ever compared dowries with you? If you wanted to measure yourself against me and lost, why is that my fault? Why would I be angry at you? What grudge is there between us? Why would I supposedly harm you on purpose? Can you please use your brain for a moment?"

"But you and Silas..."

Carissa raised a hand to interrupt. "I went to Arcane Sanctum to get medicine for Lady Leona. She's about to give birth. Silas is in charge of the sanctum's procurement, and he manages the medicine store. Since Sebastian wasn't around, I had to get the medicine from him. On that day, I did see you two acting suspiciously, but I didn't think much of it. I just assumed you were awkward because he's Thomas' cousin."

Viola sniffled, tears falling again. Her eyes and nose were red, and she looked utterly pathetic. Yet, she stubbornly retorted, "I don't believe you! Who else would go to such lengths to harm me?"

Carissa's temper flared, and she slammed her hand on the table. "Give me one good reason why I'd want to harm you."

The sudden outburst startled Viola, and her tears stopped flowing. She stared blankly at Carissa, then instinctively blurted out, "Because I married Barrett..."

Carissa snapped, "He's someone I don't want. I couldn't care less about who he marries."

Viola shook her head, disbelief etched across her features. "If you don't care, then why did you go to save him? You can't forget him."

"Because I'm the deputy

commander of the Mystic Army. I received word that there were

assassins lurking in the capital, and I went to track them down. I'm not so heartless that I could stand by and watch the people in Valor Estate get slaughtered. It's as simple as that."

"I don't believe you! With the way he and Aurora treated you, how can you still return kindness for cruelty?"

Carissa watched as Viola's crazed

expression began to fade, yet her stubbornness remained. Suddenly, Carissa decided to give up on the conversation. It was futile-there was no point in wasting her breath. She just needed to stall until someone from Valor Estate or Silverstone Estate came to take Viola away.

"Here's your chance: if you have any grievances against me, spit it all out now. That way, you won't come banging on my door to berate me later. I let you off the hook this time, but next time, I'll handle this properly and have you dealt with by the authorities." Viola gazed at Carissa's face, which was cold and almost dismissive, and felt humiliated. But as she replayed their past grievances in her mind, she realized there wasn't much to justify her anger.

After a long pause, Viola started to whimper, then broke into sobs. Eventually, she buried her face in her hands and cried openly.

Carissa pressed her fingers against her temples. She was initially indifferent, then grew increasingly impatient. Finally, she couldn't hold back anymore.

"Shut up! If you want to cry, go back to Valor Estate and cry there! Don't make a scene here. It's just not appropriate."

"You look down on me," Viola cried, her voice breaking. "Isn't it just because you're an esteemed princess consort?"

Carissa sneered. "I do look down on

you. What have you done that deserves respect? You think your status in the Warren family is low, so you're trying to cling to Thomas, the third-rank major general. But you're carrying Barrett's child. What kind of person would respect you?"

Viola glared at her with hatred, and Carissa met her gaze with icy resolve. Since Viola had come here to stir trouble, Carissa felt no obligation to play nice.

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Zoey arrived ahead of the Valor Estate party, accompanied by her maid and servants.

As she entered, she first greeted Helen. Upon seeing Yuvan's family present, Zoey's face paled. This was a significant blunder.

Guided by Lulu, Zoey stepped into the side hall and immediately offered her apologies to Carissa. "Lady Carissa, please forgive me. Viola's reckless behavior has offended both you and Lady Helen. I sincerely apologize on her behalf."

Carissa waved her hand dismissively. "Mrs. Prince, you've arrived at the right time. Please take her back with you. I've sent someone to Valor Estate, but I doubt anyone will come to Hell Monarch Estate from there now. It's best if you handle it." Viola raised her tear-streaked eyes to look at Zoey, who shot her a cold glare before turning back to Carissa. "Of course, I'll take her back now. I'll come to apologize in person another day."

Zoey stepped up to Viola, her expression icy. "Are you going to walk back on your own, or do I need to have someone escort you?"

Viola glanced at the burly servant standing behind Zoey. Despite Viola's indignation, she knew she had no choice but to stand up and follow.

Carissa said coolly, "This can't happen again. I won't be so lenient if it does."

Viola turned back, wanting to say something to salvage her dignity. But under Carissa's frosty gaze, the words died in her throat. When Zoey pushed her slightly, she stalked off in frustration.

Once they were outside, Zoey turned back to Carissa and bowed. "Lady Carissa, I truly apologize..."

"You were the one who did it, didn't you?" Carissa interrupted her. "You informed Thomas about her and Silas, right?"

Zoey nodded. "Yes, Your Grace. I'm sorry for dragging you into this."

Carissa understood Zoey's character, but hearing her admit it still impressed her. It took a strong sense of justice to separate personal ties from principle. Dealing with a sister-in-law like Viola was no small challenge.

"It's fine. We'll have coffee together another day. For now, take her back. Our estate enforces strict rules. The people in Hell Monarch Estate won't leak any of today's events. But there were guests in the main hall when she arrived. You noticed that too, right?" Zoey felt utterly exhausted. She never imagined Viola would suspect Carissa, or dare to burst into the royal residence like this.

"I truly have no idea why she thought you were the one who said anything, Your Grace. It's completely unfounded. Ultimately, it's still my fault for not managing the aftermath properly."

Carissa explained, "The other day

when she went to Arcane Sanctum,

she saw Silas and me together. It's likely she suspects that Silas

informed me, and then I told

Thomas. This isn't your fault

Prince. You didn't know we had that chance encounter at Arcane

Sanctum."

"Now it makes sense," Zoey sighed, her composure slipping as fatigue and helplessness surfaced on her face. "Of course, she's always been a bit brainless—just because she can think of something doesn't mean she can actually do it. I'm truly sorry to have involved you, Your Grace."

"That's enough formalities. You should take her back now." Carissa understood the weight of Zoey's exhaustion. She had once managed a troubled household like the Warren family, and knew how frustrating it could be to deal with unreasonable people.

"By the way," Carissa recalled,

needing to give one last piece of advice, "Prince Yuvan's family is outside. They've witnessed today's events, but they didn't actually hear anything. If anyone tries to use this situation to get close to you or for any other purpose... Well, to your discretion to handle."

leave it

"Thank you for the warning, Your Grace. I'll take my leave now." Zoey nodded, and exited.

As she stepped outside, Zoey felt there was more to Carissa's words than met the eye.

What did she mean? If Yuvan and his family hadn't noticed anything amiss and were merely there for the spectacle, why would they come calling?

Still, Zoey tucked that thought away, knowing it was wise to be cautious. Some things were better to prepare for, whether they were anticipated or not.

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As soon as Zoey left, Violet entered the room.

Carissa rubbed her temples. "Aren't you supposed to be out in the gardens with Lady Fiona?"

"I couldn't care less about her," Violet replied as she took a seat, her expression tense. "I had Lily and a few maids accompany her. She's not getting away from Lily's watchful eye." Violet then turned her gaze to Carissa. "So, what was that crazy woman doing here?" Carissa glanced outside to ensure no one was eavesdropping before recounting Viola's ridiculous antics.

By the time she finished, Violet was livid, her temper flaring. "She's carrying Barrett's child and still wants to cling to my godbrother? How shameless can she be?! Thankfully, her sister-in-law is sensible. If not, my god brother might have felt guilty enough to take her in!" "Calm down. There's no need to shout. Your godbrother knows the truth now, and will steer clear of Viola," Carissa reassured her.

"I've never seen someone so shameless," Violet huffed. "And there's another shameless one sitting outside. I can't stand the sight of her!"

Carissa knew Violet was referring to Molly. "That's her choice. Don't let it get to you. We just need to focus on our own lives."

"My cousin isn't foolish. Can't she see Yuvan's intentions?" Violet asked, crossing her arms.

"Maybe she sees them all too clearly, which is why she's so eager to marry him," Carissa suggested.

Violet widened her eyes in disbelief. "That can't be!"

"Who knows? Come on, you're still cousins, after all. Go out and face her. Once they settle down in the capital, we'll see them often. Besides, let's wait and hear what gossip circulates in a few days. They'll likely be singing praises for our family, especially since Prince Yuvan came to visit Raf. Do you think the king will be pleased to hear all this?"

Violet nodded, her expression contemplative. "No wonder they came here. After their exhausting journey back from the fief, they didn't even bother to settle in first before rushing to Hell Monarch Estate."

"By the way, has Carmen sent someone to invite them?" Carissa inquired.

"Yes, she has. They should be arriving soon," Violet replied.

"Good. Let her make an appearance in front of Prince Yuvan to show that our relationship is still solid. We'll see how things unfold from there."

Violet followed Carissa as they headed out. "Has Prince Rafael looked into it?"

Carissa nodded. "We've done our research. Carmen is generally trustworthy, but that's beside the point. We can't fully rely on her in this kind of arrangement. She won't completely trust us, either. We'll both keep our cards close to our chests."

Violet nodded in understanding. Just as they stepped outside, they saw Carmen enter, accompanied by Greta.

"Greetings, Lady Carissa, Ms. Spencer," Carmen greeted respectfully.

Carissa inclined her head slightly. "You're here."

"Yes, Ms. Spencer asked me to come," Carmen replied.

Violet interjected, "That's right, I invited her. The other day, I saw her blend dancing with swordsmanship, and I thought it was beautiful. So, I wanted to ask her to teach me a few moves. Ms. Lester, let's go this way." Greta tried to follow, but Carissa stopped her and asked, "Is your mistress getting married soon?"

"My mistress is not getting married soon and has not been betrothed either, Your Grace," Greta answered.

Carissa frowned slightly. "Alright. You're dismissed."

"Understood, Your Grace." Greta retreated a couple of steps before turning to rejoin Violet and Carmen, a smug smile creeping onto her face. It seemed the Hell Monarch must have mentioned Carmen. Otherwise, the Hell Monarch's princess consort wouldn't have

asked about her.

Fiona happened to be in the back courtyard and spotted Carmen and Violet walking together, engrossed in a lively discussion about swordsmanship and dance.

Seeing this, Fiona smiled softly and said to Lily beside her, "I'm feeling a bit tired. I think I'll head back to rest. It's probably about time for Prince Yuvan and Lady Molly to return home as well."

Lily smiled and said, "I was hoping to take you to see the fish, Lady Fiona. But since you're tired, let's head back."

Yuvan's family soon took their leave.

Throughout the encounter, Violet had not exchanged a single word with her cousin, which displeased Molly greatly. She had known Violet would be staying at Hell Monarch Estate when they entered the capital, and she hoped to foster a good relationship with Violet for easier access to the estate in the future.

Little did Molly expect that the stubborn girl would go out of her way to avoid her. It seemed that spending time training in the mountains had made Violet wild and unruly, and she had no sense of decorum at all.

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It was Rafael's day off, and he felt as though Yuvan had ruined half of it. Helen shared his sentiments, expressing her disdain for Yuvan's family and how they expected her to play host.

"I can't stand a heartless man like him," she fumed. "Though he and the late king were brothers, he's not an ounce like him. He tortured his legitimate wife to death—he truly is a despicable man!"

Gillian interjected gently, "They came all this way, and you're the only one with enough seniority to handle them properly. We can't have Prince Rafael or Lady Carissa dealing with them. After all, they're younger than Prince Yuvan. It wouldn't make sense for an elder to visit the younger

generation. Isn't it more fitting for you to step in? By doing so, you've helped Prince Rafael and Lady Carissa."

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"I know, but I'm just so angry. I want to slap Yuvan twice," Helen said, her expression darkening. "There are plenty of heartless men out there, but I've rarely encountered one who is both cruel and callous."

Gillian blinked. It wasn't exactly like Helen had met many men, though.

Meanwhile, Rafael returned to Orchid Hall with Carissa. "Let's change clothes and go out for a bit. We'll have dinner outside tonight."

"Where to?" Carissa asked.

Rafael replied, "I originally planned to take you out today, but they wasted half the day. Now we're left with only a few hours, and we can't go too far. Let's head to Richspire Peak to see the maple leaves. I've heard this year's are particularly vibrant." Given their busy schedules, they hardly had time to nurture their relationship. Today was a rare chance to enjoy each other's company without any other obligations.

Thomas had recommended a great spot, one that was serene and cool, away from the crowds. A half-day excursion in the autumn leaves would surely be better than staying in the estate.

Carissa tilted her head and considered it. "But Vivi's busy talking to Carmen and practicing her swordplay. Should we wait for her?"

"Wait for her? Why?" Rafael shook his head. "It'll just be the two of us. We're not taking any maids or guards, not even Lulu."

"Oh, I see. Then, when will we be back?" Carissa asked, her brow furrowing slightly. "I was hoping we could pick Ryan up together since he's going to be staying at the academy next month. Plus, Vivi might be upset if we went out without her."

Lulu and Pearl followed behind,

preparing to assist with their outfits.

At first, they were excited to

overhear the conversation. It was rare for Rafael to take some time off to enjoy an outing with Carissa. But as the conversation unfolded, their spirits dampened. It was clear

Rafael intended to be alone with her to strengthen their relationship and create some unforgettable memories.

Their mistress truly had no sense of romance whatsoever.

Rafael said, "Everything's arranged. Next weekend, I'll pick up Ryan with you. As for Violet and Carmen practicing swordplay, let's not disturb them. Come on, let's change into riding clothes. We need to set off quickly so we can return in time to catch the sunset."

Thomas had mentioned that watching the sun dip down from Richspire Peak's halfway point was a sight to behold. The summit seemed to glow with a golden light, inspiring a sense of peace that would wash away all worries. "Alright," Carissa conceded, but she felt a twinge of guilt. She usually went everywhere with Violet, and leaving her to deal with Carmen and Greta felt somewhat unjust.

Carissa hoped Violet didn't get too upset.

Just as they stepped out, still adjusting to their outfits, Luke entered with news. "Your Highness, Your Grace, Mr. Young and his wife have arrived."

"What? Mr. Young?" Rafael paused, momentarily taken aback. "Did they say what it was about?"

Luke shook his head. "They didn't mention anything, but I noticed they seemed troubled. I'm not sure if they're dealing with some sort of problem." Rafael frowned. "A problem? With their family? Why would they have trouble solving it?"

Trevor was the Royal Tutor, with connections that surpassed even Rafael's as the Hell Monarch.

Regardless, with distinguished guests arriving, their plans for the day-whether it was Richspire Peak or anywhere else were clearly off the table.

Rafael had been looking forward to

taking Carissa to Richspire Peak since he first heard about it from

Thomas After days of planning, iet

was disappointing to have to entertain Yuvan and now Trevor as well. All his planning had been in vain.

Seeing the disappointment in Rafael's eyes, Carissa finally understood, albeit a bit late, that he had been hoping for a fun outing together as a couple. She took his hand, offering reassurance. "Let's go see what's going on. If it's not anything serious, we might still make it to Richspire Peak," she suggested.

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"Huh?" "What?"

In the main hall, both Rafael and Carissa were taken aback by the words of Trevor's wife, Mildred. They exchanged glances that spoke volumes of their confusion. Neither of them knew how to respond.

"This matter really has to be entrusted to you, Prince Rafael, Lady Carissa," Mildred sighed, the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes crinkling.

Carissa said with a troubled look, "But shouldn't matchmaking be handled by a professional matchmaker? Or at least a government-appointed matchmaker, or someone of high moral standing? I'm still quite young. I really can't bear this heavy responsibility." Mildred sighed deeply again. "You may laugh at us for saying this, but my granddaughter has always been well-behaved and sensible, except when it comes to her marriage. I've secretly scouted several suitable matches for her in the past, but she hasn't liked any of them. She insists on marrying only that man. We've tried to persuade her repeatedly, but she refuses to listen. She's adamant about marrying him, and is even sulking with us over it. She won't hear a word from her mother.

"Seeing her so stubborn, we figured he's a decent man, so why not let her marry him? As long as she's happy, that's what matters. But when we sent a matchmaker to propose, he declined, claiming he didn't want to hold up our granddaughter. Reluctantly, we've come to seek your help. After all, you returned from the Southern Frontier together, and he respects you. I thought you would stand a chance if you tried to persuade him."

Trevor chimed in, "Honestly, whether this marriage can be arranged or not isn't the main concern. I just want to understand why he doesn't want our granddaughter. He says he's afraid of hindering her future, but I believe that's just an excuse. If it's about that, then wouldn't marrying anyone else be a delay as well? Don't you agree, Your Highness, Your Grace?"

Carissa parted her lips slightly, unsure of how to respond.

She knew the reason all too well. Thomas wasn't genuinely interested in marriage. He was merely spreading rumors so that Viola would move on.

However, she couldn't just say that to Trevor.

Carissa had a vivid memory of Rosalind from Eleanor's birthday banquet, where she had gifted the grand princess an orchid painting by Kyle. It was Rosalind who had confirmed its authenticity when others had claimed it was a fake.

Besides, Rosalind was known as the

most talented young woman in the capital, her reputation echoing throughout the city and even into

half of the kingdom. With such et

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prominent family background, wouldn't know her? If she decided to marry, every representative from the noble families would likely scramble to compete for her.

Yet, among all the refined young men and even the royal relatives, Rosalind only had eyes for Thomas, a man who had once been married. If Rosalind married him, she would essentially be a

second wife. If her feelings weren't well-thought-out and were instead impulsive, it would be disastrous for both Thomas and herself.

Leona had once declared her desire to marry Samuel at first sight, only to regret it soon after. Now, they had become nothing more than a resentful couple. Of course, Samuel couldn't be compared to Thomas—they were worlds apart.

Thomas was a hero now, but once married life began, that heroism would fade into the reality of everyday life. There was a risk that Rosalind might be idealizing Thomas and thought of him as perfect because of that. If she discovered his flaws after marriage and found him unsatisfactory, it could lead to trouble.

"Honestly, we just need an answer to help that foolish girl move on," Mildred pleaded with Carissa with hopeful eyes.

Rafael then asked, "Mr. Young, what do you think of this match? If Thomas agrees, will you truly consent to it?"

Trevor shrugged. "What good would

it do to disagree? Rosalind may seem gentle, but she's as stubborn as a hot iron rod—hard and scorching. She won't listen to

anyone. She's a sheltered young lady. What does she know about the world? Her knowledge is all obtained

through only books. Fortunately, Thomas is a good man, far better than many young nobles. If it can be arranged, we wouldn't oppose it."

"But this isn't his first marriage," Rafael insisted.

Trevor looked at him in surprise. "With all due respect, Your Highness, you're not Lady Carissa's first husband either. As a young man, you shouldn't be so rigid in your thinking."

Rafael felt momentarily stifled by the remark, but he was unable to argue against it.

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Rafael stole a glance at Carissa, relieved to see she wasn't angry. Turning away, he felt the urge to slap himself for even worrying. It was clear that Trevor truly adored his granddaughter. Rosalind seemed to be Trevor's youngest grandchild. As the baby of the family, it made sense she would be the most cherished.

"Are you two in a hurry? Today, we "

"Yes, we're in a hurry! That girl is practically in tears!" Trevor rubbed his knees anxiously, eager for them to seek out Thomas immediately. "She may be stubborn, but if the Farrell family gives her an answer she believes, she'll be able to let it go. She won't cling to it forever."

Mildred nodded in agreement. "Exactly. Right now, all they've said is that they don't want to hold my granddaughter's life up. Rosalind thinks they're just making excuses. If they're not interested, they should just say so. She's the kind of person who needs honesty." Hearing this, Rafael's heart sank. It was clear he wouldn't be taking his wife to see the sunset at Richspire Peak today.

He hid his disappointment, and said, "Alright then, I'll send someone to invite Thomas here. Do you want to be present or not?"

"We won't be present. We'd prefer you and Lady Carissa to handle this privately. If I'm there, he might just stick to saying he doesn't want to hold up our granddaughter," Trevor replied.

Carissa stood to see them off. "Then I'll see you both out."

"No need for that," Mildred replied. "We'll leave this matter to you and Prince Rafael. It would be best if you could get an answer after speaking to him, so we can all rest easy tonight. My husband hasn't slept well for the last two nights."

"Alright, I understand," Rafael reluctantly replied as Luke and Jacob guided the elderly couple out. He turned to Carissa with a lamenting look. "Looks like we won't make it to Richspire Peak today."

Carissa smiled sweetly. "You can go next time you have a day off."

"The next time off I have, we'll be picking up Ryan."

"There's plenty of time ahead. There's no rush," Carissa reassured him, realizing she might not fully understand the nuances of romance. If their relationship were based solely on mutual respect, she was more than capable of that. But if they wanted something deeper, she could learn. All she needed was time.

Actually, back when he went to Sandoria to rescue the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team members, Violet had asked if she missed Rafael. Carissa wasn't sure if she did. She had definitely thought about him, but more than that, she was worried about whether the rescue would go smoothly and if he would be in danger.

Violet had told her that she had changed. In the past, she loved everyone, but now she was afraid of loving someone. Love meant caring, and caring meant worrying about loss. "Carissa, you're not brave anymore. You could even say you've become cowardly," Violet had said.

Rafael already sent someone to summon Thomas as Carissa mulled over these thoughts in her mind.

Meeting with Thomas didn't require

a change of clothes. The

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streamlined riding outfit at least conveyed that he had used part of his day off for Thomas' sake, and he hoped the man wouldn't beat around the bushes-Rafael just needed a straightforward answer to relay.

Carissa glanced at Rafael and gave him a heads-up. "Thomas probably doesn't really want to get married. He's just letting it be known to dissuade Viola."

Rafael replied, "That's true, but he really should have a wife by his side. Life is much better with a spouse."

"Everyone has different ideas about that. We can't force him into it."

Rafael nodded, his eyes suddenly taking on a pitiful look. "I didn't mean anything by saying this wouldn't be Thomas' first marriage. I swear, I wasn't trying to imply anything." Carissa smiled knowingly. "I understand. You were just stating facts. I'm sure Thomas won't mind."

Rafael studied her for a moment. "What about you? Do you mind me saying it?"

"Why would I? It's not like I-" Carissa began, then suddenly paused.

Well, she wasn't exactly a first-time bride, either. "As long as you don't mind, then it's fine. I have no reason to feel upset. I'm the one benefiting here."

Rafael chuckled, his eyes twinkling with warmth. "I don't mind at all if you're benefiting."

"What kind of wolfish words are

these?" Violet exclaimed as she entered the room just in time to catch Rafael's remark. She took a step back, looking mockingly alarmed. "Should I leave?"

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Carissa laughed, and said, "What's the rush? Your godbrother will be here soon. There's someone interested in him who wants to know his feelings, but he's already turned her down. This time, they're inviting him to clarify whether he's truly not interested or if he just has no plans to marry."

Violet's eyes brightened, and she hurried inside. "Really? Which girl has such good taste to fancy my godbrother? Come on, spill it!"

"The granddaughter of Mr. Young, Rosalind." Carissa shushed her quickly. "Don't spread this around. It might not lead anywhere."

"It's her?" Violet shot up from her seat, shock written all over her face. "Is my godbrother out of his mind? Rosalind Young! Why did he refuse? She's such a catch-gracious, loyal, talented, and stunning. Families would be fighting over her!" "Keep it down," Carissa snapped, shooting her a glare.

Violet sat back down, a huge grin on her face. "I'm just so excited! But does Ms. Young really like him? It couldn't be just a passing fancy, could it?"

"That's what worries me. I suspect your godbrother..." Carissa paused, then added, "By the way, you haven't made it official with Thomas' mother, and here you are calling him godbrother. Doesn't that seem a bit inappropriate?"

Violet waved her hand dismissively. "In the martial world, there's no such thing as inappropriate! We're just waiting for the right moment, you know? I've even gone to pay my respects to my godmother. You should have seen her face-she was so happy to have me as her goddaughter!"

"But you already have brothers. Why must you insist on calling Thomas your godbrother?"

Carissa was puzzled. Violet had never truly been interested in anyone, as she had high standards. The only reason they shared this bond was that they had grown up together.

Violet swung her feet back and forth in her chair. "It's about finding a connection."

She wouldn't admit it, but she longed for the kind of respectful brothers that Carissa had one or many would do.

Before long, Thomas arrived.

The people who went to get him were efficient, and Thomas had grown accustomed to a brisk pace. He never lingered when it came to business.

However, he hadn't anticipated that Rafael would summon him regarding his marriage.

He had no immediate plans to wed, preferring to let things settle before addressing such matters. He laid his intentions bare, leaving nothing unsaid, hoping it would dissuade Violet from holding on to any notions.

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As Violet heard this, she remarked, "But as long as you don't marry, she won't really let go of that hope."

Thomas replied, "Yes, but she already came to my family's residence to see me. I had the maid pass along a message, so she understands now and won't be a bother. My marriage plans can be put on hold for a while." "Right. She caused a scene at the estate, thinking I was the one who spilled the beans," Carissa said.

Thomas froze. "How could she think it was you?"

Carissa explained the whole situation, and by the time she finished, Thomas' brow was still deeply furrowed. He stared blankly for a long moment.

"I can't believe she'd act like this. She's pregnant! Even if she doesn't think of herself, she should be considering her child," he said.

"Let's not talk about her," Violet said,

looking at Thomas. "Thomas, Ms. Young is truly a good woman and worth your consideration. You can't avoid marriage forever. My godmother is counting on

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you to

settle down and start a family."

Thomas smiled at his godsister. "You don't need to worry about my marriage. I know Ms. Young is good, but she's too good for me. I don't deserve her."

Carissa chimed in, "Whether you're

worthy or not is for others to say. If she believes she's a match for you, then that's all that matters. But it's hard to tell if she's just caught up in a moment or genuinely wants to marry you. Let me ask you this-if she truly meant it, would you really consider it?"

Thomas said, "Actually, Mr. Young has already sent a matchmaker to inquire. Mom was over the moon. She was practically itching to exchange the wedding contracts and pick a date. I had to stop

her." Violet could easily picture that scene, and chuckled softly. "Any family would react just like her."

Rafael remained quiet. When it came to marriage, one should marry the woman they truly desired. Since he found out Carissa was marrying someone else, he hadn't thought of marrying at all. For him, these matters couldn't be forced. He felt a twinge of impatience.

"Why don't you come up with a better excuse? It would be easier for me to explain things to Mr. Young. He said Ms. Young wouldn't cling stubbornly to you if she got an answer she could accept," he suggested.

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Thomas laughed bitterly. "The rumors about my marriage intentions were spread on my orders. I can't now turn around and say it was to put an end to Viola's hopes and that I have no plans to marry at all. That would just make me look like a hypocritical scoundrel." Violet asked, "Then tell me, if you were genuinely thinking of getting married, would you consider Ms. Young?"

"My dear godsister, how could I possibly be worthy of her?" Thomas repeated his answer, then added, "Honestly, I don't know her well. I know she has a great reputation, but she's at least ten years younger than I am, and she would be my second wife. I can't put her through that." "She's happy to accept that," Violet countered.

Thomas chuckled. "How could she genuinely be happy? It's just a young girl's fleeting fantasy. As His Highness said, I should come up with a good excuse to decline gracefully, so as not to embarrass the Young family or the girl herself. Violet, you're clever-why don't you help me think of something?"

Violet replied, "I'm not going to help you reject her. Like my godmother, I'm hoping you'll marry and start a family soon to ease Viola's obsession."

"You little imp. You go on about how you don't want to marry, yet here you are pushing me into it!" Thomas said, exasperated.

"Everyone says a woman has no other path but marriage, but I refuse to believe that," Violet said, glancing at Carissa with a smile. "Besides, if I don't marry, Carissa will take care of me for life."

Rafael watched the sun sinking lower in the sky, his heart sinking along with it. Today was not a day they could have a nice day out.

He sighed inwardly.

He stole a glance at Carissa. She seemed genuinely intrigued by the banter between Thomas and Violet, as if she cared deeply about Thomas' prospect of marriage.

But really, she should focus on her own husband. He was feeling utterly dejected.

Thomas finally said, "Actually, there are plenty of women claiming they want to marry me, and I'm sure they'll change their minds in no time. If you don't believe me, you just need to wait and see. As for Mr. Young, it would be best for His Highness to send a reply. How he responds is up to him."

Rafael called out, his face impassive, "Someone fetch Jacob."

Thomas couldn't handle Trevor himself, and Rafael wasn't good at lying. So, it was best to leave the clever maneuvering to someone more adept.

Thomas clearly wasn't too concerned about the matter at hand. He had other issues he wanted to discuss with Rafael. So, he invited Rafael to his study for a private conversation.

"I've been investigating the assassination attempt at Valor Estate and have come across some findings. The assassin was targeting Aurora, and now the Capital Guards are on high alert..."

Rafael waved his hand dismissively. "I'm already aware of all this. Don't concern yourself with the investigation. Just wait for the king's assignment."

Thomas frowned. "But now that we've returned to the capital, we have nothing to do. The assignment is taking forever to come through, and it feels like we're wasting precious time." In plain terms, he couldn't stand idleness. Being idle made him restless.

"I suspect the king may appoint you

to Victory Pass or to oversee the garrison in the capital. General Xavier is getting old, it's about time for him to retire. However, the King is assessing your capabilities to see where you'd be best suited.

"But General Sullivan is stationed at Victory Pass," Thomas pointed out.

"There are some matters..." Rafael started, but then bit back the words. "I won't say more for now. Just refrain from investigating the assassination at Valor Estate. I know the whole situation. Also your team should limit contact with me for the time being. I called you over today for personal reasons. But if there's anything in the future, I might have Violet relay messages to you."

Thomas was momentarily stunned, not grasping the implications. Rafael had saved their team-why wouldn't they be allowed to maintain contact? But after a moment of reflection, the truth dawned on him. With the king's recent ascension and the throne still shaky, it was only natural to be wary of a prince with significant military accomplishments.

"Understood, Your Highness." Thomas nodded. "I'll wait patiently for my assignment."

He looked deeply at Rafael, a thought unspoken. No matter what, their team would always be part of the Sinclair Army.

And every member of the Sinclair

Army was loyal to the king and to the marshal. Rafael had once been the marshal of the Sinclair Army, leading the Hell Monarch Army alongside them to reclaim the Southern Frontier-a feat of unparalleled significance,

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In the end, Jacob thought up an excuse. He mentioned that they had spoken to Thomas. With no official appointment from the court yet, Thomas didn't even know where he would be dispatched. Rosalind was the treasured granddaughter of Trevor, and she would be expected to follow him to the borders if they were to marry, potentially spending three to five years away from the capital without a visit. Rosalind was a person of utmost purity and devotion. How could she bear to leave her family and endure hardship in some remote outpost?

Everyone agreed that this reasoning was compelling. Rosalind was exceptionally devoted to her grandparents, who were now elderly. There was simply no way she could leave the capital and them behind.

Since Rafael was to return to the Supreme Court the next day, Carissa and Violet decided to visit Trevor's residence.

Rosalind came out to greet them, dressed in a pale yellow blouse paired with a matching pleated skirt. The skirt was intricately embroidered with butterflies in silver thread, which shimmered faintly as she walked, making it seem as if the butterflies were fluttering about. "Greetings, Lady Carissa! I am Rosalind," she said, curtsying with impeccable grace, demonstrating the poise expected of a woman from a noble family.

"There's no need for such formalities, Ms. Young," Carissa replied with a smile, glancing at Violet, who was watching Rosalind with wide, admiring eyes.

Violet couldn't help but compare herself to Rosalind. During her own upbringing, she had learned etiquette under the strict guidance of a governess who wielded a ruler to keep her in line. She had endured countless smacks to her hands and knees, and the etiquette she learned with great difficulty turned out to be quite stiff.

However, Rosalind moved with effortless elegance. Her gestures flowed smoothly, and she exuded a calm and graceful demeanor that made Violet look downright wild by comparison.

Rosalind's parents were also present, radiating warmth and affection towards one another, which no doubt contributed to Rosalind's gentle and refined nature.

Carissa spoke up, "Now that we're all here, I'll be blunt. I invited Thomas over yesterday, and he said that since he hasn't received his appointment yet, it's uncertain whether he'll be stationed at the borders. He understands that you're a person of pure virtue and deep devotion to your family, Ms. Young. If you were to accompany him to the borders, you would face hardship and be far from your family. Also, you would be unable to fulfill your duties to them, and that would weigh heavily on his conscience."

As her words hung in the air, a heavy silence settled over the room.

Rosalind fell silent.

She wanted to marry Thomas, but she couldn't leave her grandparents and parents behind, going years without seeing them and neglecting her duties. After a moment of silence, tears glistened in her eyes. "I see."

Seeing her in that state, Carissa sensed that Rosalind had made her decision and couldn't help but let out a small sigh of relief.

The matter wasn't so difficult to resolve, after all.

Rosalind turned to Carissa, and said, "Please convey to him that I have weighed the pros and cons, and feel unworthy of him now."

Carissa blinked, momentarily confused by her words.

Was Rosalind seeking a noble excuse, or did she truly mean it?

Carissa replied gently, "Ms. Young, marriage is indeed a matter of weighing advantages and disadvantages, but there are many factors to consider. It's not about who is worthy of whom it's about compatibility." Rosalind spoke softly, "You're right, Your Grace, but..."

She looked up at Carissa, tears

shimmering her eyes. "I sincerely

wish to marry him, and my

reluctance to leave my family is no pretense. In this world, how can one have it all? Since I chose my family, I can't speak of my feelings for him any longer. All I wish is for him to be happy and at peace."

Carissa paused, a flicker of understanding passing through her mind, but she couldn't quite grasp it. All she felt was a pang in her heart. "But everyone would choose their family, wouldn't they?" Violet glanced at Carissa, but said nothing.

That wasn't necessarily true. Some women, if they had a man they admired, would throw caution to the wind and chase after him without regard for family.

Like her cousin.

Mildred sighed, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "You're so silly, child. If you truly wish to pursue your happiness, then go for it. As long as you can bear the hardships of the borders and don't regret your choice, we will always support you.

Rosalind shook her head, tears brimming in her eyes as she smiled at her grandmother.

"No, I'll stay here with you and Grandpa. I can't bear the hardships of the borders. You've pampered me. I wouldn't withstand the

desolation of the vast desert or the loneliness it brings. I'd rather stay in the capital, being your precious granddaughter and enjoying the blessings of this world."

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Rosalind threw herself into her grandmother's embrace, resting there for a while before finally lifting her head. Her eyes were red, but they sparkled brightly, as if everything she said came straight from her heart. Carissa and Violet exchanged glances, both sensing something a bit strange.

But they were there to encourage Rosalind to let go of Thomas, so they decided not to say anything further regarding the matter.

After leaving Trevor's residence, the two women returned home and sent someone to inform Thomas of the outcome. Originally, Carissa intended to only relay the news. But after thinking it over, she asked Violet to go see him in person and share everything Rosalind had said. Though she might be a bit slow when it came to matters of the heart, Carissa could still see the discomfort Rosalind felt after making her rapid decision.

Her feelings for Thomas didn't seem to stem from a fleeting infatuation. They must have had some connection in the past, right?

Yet, that didn't seem possible. They were nearly a decade apart in age, and Thomas had joined the military at a young age he was probably only fifteen when he began serving under General Xavier in the military encampments outside the capital. While he could return home occasionally, there shouldn't have been any interaction between him and Rosalind.

After hearing Violet's words, Thomas simply nodded. "Alright. Thank you for your efforts, Your Grace, Violet. I also appreciate Mr. York for coming up with such a reasonable excuse."

Violet paused for a moment and said, "Thomas, Rosalind is a good girl. She's a really, very good girl. She wishes you peace and happiness."

Thomas knew Violet was discerning when it came to people, and her endorsement of Rosalind meant the girl was indeed exceptional. However, he also understood that someone as admirable as Rosalind, especially at such a young age, deserved a gentle and refined suitor.

With a smile, Thomas replied, "I wish her peace and happiness as well, and hope she finds her ideal match soon."

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Meanwhile, Zoey returned home with Viola and laid everything bare.

"You needn't go around doubting everything and everyone. Thomas was the one who first discovered this matter. He found Silas' emerald pendant tucked between the corner of your bed and the wall, and I told him the rest."

Viola stared at Zoey in disbelief. "He found the emerald pendant, and you didn't even try to cover for me? You're my sister-in-law! Instead, you exaggerated the truth and told him everything? What have I done to you for you to betray me like this?"

"Cover for you? What grudge do I have against Thomas?" Zoey replied coldly.

Viola felt her hands and feet turn icy. She never expected to be betrayed by her sister-in-law. In a fit of anger and tears, she exclaimed, "But you're not even close to him! I'm your sister-in-law! We're family! You'd harm family? Don't you fear

retribution for this?"

She grabbed Zoey's arm. "Come with me to Mom! Is this how you treat your sister-in-law? I've never done anything to you! You've always had your way in this household, and everyone listens to you, including me. Isn't that enough? What more do you want from me?" Zoey shook off her grip, and slapped Viola across the face. "This slap is from me on behalf of Lady Carissa."

Before Viola could process what had happened, another slap landed on her right cheek. "This slap is from Thomas."

"How dare you hit me?!" Viola screamed.

Ignoring her outburst, Zoey raised her hand and brought it down harshly against her own face.

"This slap is for me-it's for all the years I let you get away with everything, for all the times I opened my heart to you, for putting family ties above right and wrong. You

were the one who secrete

involved with someone, but helped you terminate your pregnancy, found someone to take care of you after, and even personally escorted you back to the Farrell family."

Tears streamed down Zoey's face as she delivered the self-inflicted slap, leaving clear red fingerprints on her skin.

"Madam Zoey!" Jane cried, rushing over to grab her hand. "Why hurt yourself? If you're angry, you can take it out on me!"

Zoey shook off Jane's hold and struck herself again, crying as she did so.

"This slap is for my foolishness back then. When the news of Thomas' death was reported, you wanted to return to us and take his death pension was too scared to tell you to return it, worried it might reveal something that would shame our family. Well, I'm done with the pretenses today! I don't care anymore. Go ahead and cause a

scene before Mother. Let everyone know what's happened."