

War Song 1161

Chapter 1161

Unexpectedly, Oliver learned that Barrett had arrived at the Southern Frontier and personally appointed him as a household soldier in Redstone Manor.

Redstone Manor's household soldiers were mainly responsible for handling all of Oliver's travel arrangements and ensuring his safety. This was especially important because enemy assassins often tried to infiltrate and target the marshal. While such threats had never materialized during Oliver's tenure, there had been quite a few attempts during Hector and Rafael's time. Oliver had already learned from Evelyn that Barrett had divorced Viola. Regardless of how Oliver felt about his sister, Barrett's actions were an affront to him. Given his current position, Barrett's treatment of his sister was nothing less than a challenge to his authority. Thus, he summoned Barrett and immediately set the latter to menial tasks-fetching water, chopping wood, sweeping the courtyard, and even serving food in the kitchen.

Barrett obeyed the orders wordlessly. He had been humbled to such an extent that his dignity no longer held any meaning.

In just a few days, Barrett had explored Redstone Manor from top to bottom. He realized that it was vastly different from the place he had known before. Apart from the outer shell of the residence, everything inside had changed.

The servants who had once been exclusively male were now joined by many maids and female attendants. There was also a lady of the house, whom Barrett had seen a few times. She was pregnant, perhaps five or six months along.

Given the comings and goings at the residence, the lady would always cover her face with a thin veil when she appeared. Her eyes, visible through the veil, were captivating, almost hypnotic. Barrett never sought to inquire about her identity, but others were always quick to gossip.

The people in the manor said she was Oliver's wife. Since her arrival, all the previous concubines and mistresses had been dismissed. The concubines who had come with Oliver to the Southern Frontier had mysteriously died, though no one knew why.

Barrett sometimes overheard the servants whispering, claiming that Oliver doted on the lady to such an extent that he gave her anything she wanted-if she asked for the moon and stars, he would have them brought down for her.

Barrett also noticed that the lady's belongings were beyond luxurious. Silks and satin, pearls and jewels-her every possession was extravagant. Now that the Southern Frontier was no longer at war, all manner of tonics were delivered to her. She consumed two bowls of royal jelly soup every day, one in the morning and one at night.

Her baths were prepared with goat's milk and petals, an indulgence she partook in every day without fail. Goat's milk and flowers were easy to find in the Southern Frontier, but to bathe in them daily was an extravagance beyond measure.

Barrett couldn't help but feel that Oliver's annual salary, already stretched thin to support his household, couldn't possibly cover such lavish expenses.

Oliver would never consider dipping into the military funds, right?

However, Barrett later heard rumors that the Earl of Silverstone's family would send him money. The Earl of Silverstone's family had been titled for generations and had amassed a considerable fortune, so it would be easy enough for them to support Oliver and his wife in their lavish lifestyle.

This made Barrett think of Zoey.

Having been related to the Prince family by marriage, Barrett held Zoey in the highest regard. Every time she stepped forward, it was to resolve a matter fairly, and she always acted with great impartiality. Though Viola was her sister-in-law, Zoey never showed bias toward Viola.

In terms of both appearance and possessions, Zoey was nowhere near this lady's level-she didn't even come close.

Putting everything else aside, just the flowing brocade and fragrant cloud silk the lady wore that day were worth a fortune. The Mystic Pearl on her hairpin was even more impressive.

People said that when Carissa married Rafael, she had received several jars of Mystic Pearls. Barrett had never seen one as large as the one in the lady's hairpin, but it was so exquisite that it could easily be set into an emerald crown without losing any of its luster. Days passed, and Barrett eventually learned that the lady's surname was quite strange. She had once been known as Ms. Kingsley, then as Ms. Cece, but now she was called Madam Spencer.

He even heard rumors that her family was somehow connected to the prestigious Spencer family from Ebonflow.

Thus, everyone now referred to her as Madam Spencer.

Of course, such gossip was not to be spoken of in front of Oliver or the lady herself. But when the servants and maids had a moment to relax, they would whisper to one another.

One day, Barrett overheard that Oliver had received a letter from home and was in a rage. A couple of days later, he learned that it was because the Earl of Silverstone's family had stopped sending money, which was the cause of his fury.

The servants began to speculate

that it was because Oliver's

legitimate wife had found out about the lady's pregnancy and had cut off the funds in a fit of jealousy. They all criticized the legitimate wife for being foolish. After all, men often had several wives and concubines. A woman so petty and jealous might find herself in trouble or even cast out.

Barrett almost spoke up to defend Zoey, but ultimately kept quiet.

If only they knew the true Earl of Silverstone's wife, they would realize that she was the one best suited to be the head of the household.

Chapter 1162

Perhaps Oliver wanted Barrett to see how grand and impressive his presence was, with people surrounding him and giving him attention whenever he entered or left. After showing off enough, he finally called for Barrett to meet him.

In less than two years at the Southern Frontier, Oliver had gained a lot of weight. Though he wasn't exactly obese, his double chin was visible as he sat in the grand tiger-skin-covered armchair.

He looked down from his lofty position, his eyes filled with a condescending superiority.

"I've heard about what happened between you and Viola," Oliver began slowly, his voice carrying the authority of someone in power. "It's just as well. A man as ordinary as you never deserved to be with my sister."

Barrett bowed and lowered his head, keeping his expression neutral, answering only with a soft murmur. He said nothing more.

Oliver sneered, his voice sharp as he reprimanded Barrett, "I never expected you to be so useless. You were made deputy commander of the Nightsteel Guard, yet you were dismissed. The entire Warren family is filled with incompetence. Your grandfather, may he rest in peace, must be turning in his grave after seeing you and your useless kin."

Barrett remained silent, though a vein throbbed on his forehead, betraying his anger.

"Don't even try to argue! Look at the kind of people coming out of your family. Then look at you- what has one woman done to you? Three women and you couldn't handle any of them. You've completely embarrassed us men."

At this point, Oliver was clearly pleased with himself.

He was surrounded by stunning beauties, one of whom was even carrying his child. Before her, he could have any woman he desired in the Southern Frontier. Women had always been the ones to seek his favor. That was why he looked down on Barrett.

After putting on a show of authority, he finally asked, "Is there anything major happening in the capital?"

"Nothing of great importance," Barrett replied quietly.

Oliver ran his hand along the armrest, a slight, cold smile flickering at the corners of his mouth. "Is that so? Then before you came, did you happen to see Zee?"

Barrett raised his head slightly. "Are you referring to Mrs. Prince?"

Oliver stared at him, immediately picking up on his intent. He sneered. "What? Are you telling me how to address my women now?"

"I didn't mean it like that," Barrett quickly responded. "I just haven't heard anyone refer to her by that name before, so I was confused. I just wanted to make sure you're talking about Mrs. Prince." "You're such a coward," Oliver sneered. "You say one thing, but can't admit what you said."

He genuinely looked down on Barrett, yet he continued pressing for information about his family.

"I'm asking about her. Has my family run into any trouble? Have you heard anything about a shortage of money?"

Barrett remembered hearing a few

days ago that the Earl of

Silverstone's family had stopped sending money to Oliver, so he replied, don't know about a money shortage, but I do know that Madam Prince has been ill for some time, and your family has spent quite a bit on medical expenses.

"As for the other costs... I know you have many children, sir. I've heard Viola mention before that their yearly expenses are quite high. They need clothes for all seasons, food, and other necessities. Their dowries and betrothal gifts need to be prepared ahead of time. They say MPs. Prince is a very organized woman, and she's even thought about the second branch's needs."

"Have you heard that she might sell off property-shops, houses, or land-to make ends meet?" Oliver pressed further.

Barrett shook his head. "No, I haven't heard anything like that."

Oliver made a thoughtful sound but didn't press the matter further. Instead, he shifted to a different topic.

"You've been around the king for some time. Do you know when the king plans to appoint the crown prince?"

Barrett quickly shook his head. "I've never heard the king mention anything about it."

Oliver frowned. "Then, what's your guess?"

"How could I guess? I wouldn't dare speculate on the king's intentions," Barrett replied earnestly.

Oliver scowled. "Pathetic. How can you have been around the king for so long and still not understand his mind?" Barrett could only offer a wry smile. "I truly am slow-witted."

Seeing Barrett's lack of spirit, Oliver grew bored of his posturing. The power play had lost its thrill, and he wasn't learning anything new. With a dismissive wave, he said, "Go back to the barracks. There's nothing else to discuss. Just go join the others and fool around for a bit

Barrett silently exhaled in relief. "Thank you, Marshal Prince."

He immediately gathered his things and left, making his way back to the military camp without delay.

When Timothy saw him return, he said nothing but instructed him to join the training session the next day.

Barrett was more than happy to comply. He had almost forgotten what it was like to be a soldier.

Just as he was about to leave, Timothy called out to him. "Have you seen the marshal's concubine while you've been at Redstone Manor?"

"Do you mean the one they call Madam Spencer? Yes, I've seen her, though she always wears a veil," Barrett answered.

Timothy spat in disgust. "Madam Spencer, my foot!"

Barrett stood still, watching Timothy turn and walk away. For some reason, he had the distinct impression that Timothy and Oliver didn't get along.

Chapter 1163

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The next day, Barrett learned that the so-called training wasn't about military formations at all-it was farming.

September was the ideal time to plant winter wheat, and since the Southern Frontier had been ravaged by war, resources were still scarce. After years of constant conflict, there were fewer people around, and the soldiers were tasked with helping in the fields. In addition to winter wheat, they were also planting cabbage, radishes, and melons.

Timothy told Barrett he had arrived just in time for the busy farming season.

From dawn until dusk, Barrett worked tirelessly. Yet, amidst the chaos of planting, he still found a moment to write a letter to Michael.

Back in the capital, Michael received Barrett's letter and stared at it blankly for a long time, scratching his head. Had their relationship really been that close?

The letter was long, taking up three full sheets of paper. Much of it was trivial, much like the rambling conversations Michael had heard from Barrett after a few too many drinks.

Barrett mentioned his life at Redstone Manor, describing the lavishness of the place-more extravagant than even the royal palace. He spoke of the countless servants tending to a pregnant mistress who wore nothing but the finest silks, her attire worth a fortune.

He also talked about the heavy farm labor, with soldiers working the fields before they could train. The soldiers were tanned from the work, with the exception of the marshal, who was as pale as a ghost.

After rambling on with all sorts of disjointed comments, he asked to send his regards to Zoey.

Then, he wrote about how he had once been like that-making mistakes-but couldn't bear to see others walking down the same path. And on it went.

Michael quickly saw through Barrett's intentions-Barrett was trying to get him to pass these details along to Zoey, so she could be prepared.

Michael wasn't so sure that was necessary. Someone as shrewd as Zoey surely knew exactly what Oliver was like. Still, the mention of Oliver's opulent lifestyle caught his attention. Michael felt it might be worth discussing with Carissa, who could then bring it to Rafael's attention.

He handed the letter to Carissa, but she didn't take it.

"Just tell me what's important," she said.

Michael summarized the letter

quickly, then added, "There's a lady

in Redstone Manor called Madam

Spencer, but let's put that aside. What's really surprising is how luxurious Marshal Prince's residence is. I'm not sure if it's being funded by the Earl of Silverstone's family, or if Marshal Prince has been using military funds. Or worse, taking them by force..."

Michael didn't want to be too direct, so he left things vague, showing more of the cunning behavior of an old fox.

Carissa also said little. She returned and told Rafael about the situation, handing him the letter from Michael.

Rafael was somewhat familiar with the circumstances in the Southern Frontier, though the full picture eluded him. The distance was too great, and letters were never clear enough to paint an accurate account.

At present, the military in Starhaven,

with the exception of the Southern Frontier and the Capital Army, didn't rely on the national treasury for funding. For instance, Victory Pass and the southern outposts had to sustain themselves through farming and their own resources. Only if the harvest failed did the government step in to provide additional

supplies.

The Southern Frontier was an exception. Having only recently been reclaimed from the Sandorians, the region's army had to assist with agriculture while farming. This meant they didn't have enough manpower to focus on their defense duties. On top of that, the temporary enlistments during the war with Sandoria increased the number of soldiers. So, the government was required to allocate additional funds for the Southern Frontier's military funds.

That was the arrangement during peacetime.

However, things were different in times of war. Aside from the endless supply of food and weapons, the soldiers' pay would be increased, accompanied by pensions and compensation for the wounded. It was a significant expense. All in all, war was an expensive business.

"I had thought Oliver wouldn't be bold enough to embezzle military funds, but it seems like he has been spending lavishly," Rafael said. "Even if his family emptied their treasury, it wouldn't be enough to support him."

"This is the first I've heard of such concerns. Timothy and Louis' letters only mentioned matters within the army. I know the generals and Oliver don't get along well, but because Oliver wasn't very involved in management, those tensions didn't escalate."

Rafael used to have a few trusted individuals stationed in Redstone Manor. But after Oliver arrived, he definitely moved everyone out. As such, Rafael wasn't clear about what was happening inside the manor.

At the time, it seemed unimportant

as long as the situation with the army was clear. But now, it seemed it wasn't that simple. Although many people oversaw the distribution of military funds, Oliver was the Southern Frontier's marshal and could secretly redirect the money. All he needed was a convenient excuse, and that would be that.

"It's likely that Madam Zoey is aware of the situation, which is why she's been making so many preparations. Even if there's no direct connection, just the misappropriation of military funds would be enough to get them into serious trouble," Carissa said.

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Rafael paused for a moment, then asked, "By the way, did Isaac agree to Madam Zoey's request?"

"I spoke to him about it. He said he would think it over, but he hasn't made up his mind yet," Carissa replied.

"I think you should tell him the full story and let him decide for himself," Rafael said. "After all, he's the one who bought some of the properties Madam Zoey had released previously. It's clear he wants to help the Earl of Silverstone's family in some way."

Carissa nodded, but then shook her head and corrected him. "Not exactly to help the Earl of Silverstone's family. More to help those who care for him...and perhaps the children."

The more she learned, the more Carissa began to suspect that Evelyn had been involved in David's plans years ago. But perhaps, in time, Evelyn had experienced a change of heart, leading her to visit Isaac only to find him dead in the fire. Feeling guilty, she had blamed David as she was unwilling to carry the weight of that remorse.

conscience.

That was probably why, after meeting Isaac, she made up a story to ask for his forgiveness and didn't really care about how he had been doing. Even after promising to compensate him, she hadn't bothered to send anyone to check on him. She only wanted to ease her Since Isaac was the child who hadn't grown up by her side, Evelyn didn't feel the same deep attachment to him as she had for Oliver and Viola.

Carissa nodded. "I'll talk to him."

After listening to what Carissa had to say, Isaac scoffed coldly. "What is this nonsense? Was he sent to the Southern Frontier to enjoy himself? He's even got a child now? And he married the lady? What about his primary wife? Is she supposed to act like a nursemaid?" "Madam Zoey probably already knows about it, which is why she made such a request. Now it's up to you to decide," Carissa said.

Isaac didn't hesitate anymore and said, "Tell her that we'll begin tomorrow. Transfer everything that can be moved, and don't keep it quiet. Let everyone know that their family's expenses are too high

to keep up with and that they need to sell off their properties." This would create the impression that Oliver cared nothing for his family's well-being, focusing only on his pleasure and that of his concubine. His family had been sending him money for his spending all along, and they could no longer afford it. So, they were forced to sell off their properties.

Carissa nodded. "Alright. I'll send Mabel right away to tell her."

These tasks could be done quickly or slowly-it all depended on having the right people in the right places. As long as one had their connections in the right spots, getting it done wouldn't be a problem.

Carissa turned to Ryan's uncle, Anthony, for assistance. With his influence, the matter was resolved in no time. Within days, the deeds were in her hands.

The contracts were all properly executed, with the sale conducted at the standard market price. Zoey had even arranged for a ledger to be kept, recording every transaction. The proceeds from the sale were directed toward settling the family's old debts.

The records showed that the Earl of Silverstone's family had no cash on hand before this. To support Oliver's lavish lifestyle with his concubine, the family had to borrow money. from Violet. Once the debt was paid back, Violet returned the promissory note, but it wasn't destroyed. It was still tucked away in the account books.

Now that they had sold off so many of the family's properties, there was some cash in the accounts to cover the household expenses for the time being. On top of that, Zoey wrote a letter in Evelyn's name, explaining that the family was short on money more to

and couldn't send any money

Oliver.

With so many children to feed and take care of, there were always expenses. Plus, with the cold weather setting in, they needed to make sure they had enough coal for the fire and proper clothes for everyone.

What she didn't expect, however, was for Oliver to send his deputy commander back to audit the books.

The deputy commander rode hard and fast to get back to the capital. When he showed up at Silverstone Estate, Zoey nearly had a heart attack. It wasn't because of the audit-it was because those stationed in the Southern Frontier weren't supposed to leave without orders.

For Oliver to secretly send someone back to check the accounts was insane.

At that moment, Zoey thought Oliver must have lost his mind. The Earl of Silverstone's family was really in trouble now.

The deputy commander was visibly anxious, and he hurried through his inspection. The next morning, he left the capital under cover of secrecy and returned to the Southern Frontier.

When Zoey had first told Caspian about the dire state of affairs, he had believed her, though there remained a shred of faith in his older brother. After the deputy commander's secretive return to inspect the books, Caspian could no longer doubt the truth of Zoey's words.

He now understood the peril facing

the family, but he felt powerless to

act. He couldn't even think of a

single w

to help. All he could do was silently thank Zoey for transferring the family's properties totsaac. If things truly went awry, at least they wouldn't starve,

Chapter 1165

After Jacob's thorough investigation, they narrowed the true mastermind behind the treason plot down to a few suspects and started keeping a close eye on their movements. But the suspicion was still just that, and they had no real proof. After Wayne's return to Valken, he had only seen Harvey. He had not met with anyone else or made any visits to the Spencer family. He had gone to great lengths to stay hidden.

According to the latest reports, the private army had been in Stonebridge County. However, they had relocated swiftly and left behind many of their possessions. Yet, where they went remained unknown.

The situation in Valken used to be chaotic, but things started coming together after Wayne returned. Local officials frequently visited Horizon Estate, enjoying lavish feasts and living without a care. Rafael passed the list of names to Salvador.

Still, it was clear that the group lacked a leader. It couldn't be said that Harvey or Wayne were the ones in charge.

After a brief discussion with Rafael, Salvador decided it was crucial to send Yuvan back to Valken. Yuvan's presence was vital to keep the situation in check and prevent the true mastermind from seizing control too quickly.

If Yuvan were absent, it would be easy for the true mastermind to take control of the power and resources available. Once Yuvan returned, however, all the connections and resources he had built up would remain under his control. Any attempt to displace him would require considerable effort.

Salvador issued an edict to Yuvan, informing him that his injuries had healed enough and that it was time to return to Valken.

Yuvan was eager to return to Valken. During his recovery, he constantly worried about the state of Valken and tried to figure out how to mend his relationship with the Spencer family. As soon as Salvador's edict arrived, Yuvan didn't even bother to bid farewell to Ruth. He immediately packed up and left the capital with his family in tow.

Though his body was crippled and his abilities in some areas lost, the period of despair had only awakened his ambition. He had always been ambitious, but in the past, he cared about maintaining his reputation. Even if he had plans to seize the throne, he wanted to do it legitimately.

Now, though, he was itching to march his troops immediately.

Of course, he knew the timing wasn't right. If he acted now, it would only lead to his downfall and likely an execution so brutal it would leave nothing of him.

For now, he had to focus on rebuilding his power base.

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Meanwhile, Oscar had reached out to Gillian. He begged her to deliver some items to Eleanor, hoping to honor what remained of the mother-daughter relationship between Ruth and Eleanor.

At first, Gillian refused. But after several pleas, her heart softened. She asked Helen for permission, and once granted, she agreed to do the favor.

However, Carissa had Mabel accompany Gillian on the trip.

Oscar also followed along. Since Ruth couldn't go herself, she had specifically sent him to check on Eleanor and report back.

Argent, an official from the Heritage

Bureau, informed Oscar that Eleanor's maid Florence had died two months ago. Now, Eleanor was left alone in her confinement. She received two meals a day, and a physician would be called whenever she fell ill. If she refused her medicine, they would force it down her throat.

Eleanor's tendons had been severed, leaving her unable to take her own life. She could only cling to a miserable existence. All her teeth had been pulled out, rendering her incapable of cursing anyone properly. It had been a long time since she had even tried. Since Florence's death, she hardly spoke

at all, spending her days living like an animal.

Hearing this, Oscar's lips trembled with horror. It was a tragedy-how far the grand princess had fallen! She was once a cherished daughter of the royal family, but she chose to walk the path of rebellion.

When the prison door was opened, a foul stench immediately wafted out. Oscar and Gillian covered their noses and stepped cautiously inside.

Only a few steps in, they saw a heap curled in the corner. At first glance, it didn't even look like a human-more like a pile of tangled straw someone had carelessly dumped there.

But it was Eleanor.

Her clothes were filthy, covered in black and gray stains, and her hair was a matted mess, resembling a bird's nest. Her face was blank, and there wasn't a trace of light left in her eyes.

The foul stench filled the air, coming

from both her body and the yard itself. With the tendons in her hands and feet severed, she couldn't care for herself. She relieved herself where she sat, and whatever came out stayed on her. In the summer, someone would come in to wash her down and change her prison garb.

After autumn, no one came to clean her anymore. Prison garbs were still tossed in occasionally, but Eleanor found them filthy. Though her limbs were weak due to her tendons being severed, she could still change into the loose-fitting prison garbs if she wanted to. Yet, she didn't. Instead, she just let herself sit in the filth.

Chapter 1166

Oscar dropped to his knees, tears streaming down his face as he called out, "Grand Princess Eleanor!"

He then collapsed onto the floor, weeping bitterly.

However, Eleanor didn't even lift her eyes. It was as if she were lost to herself, neither seeing nor hearing him.

After his crying fit subsided, Oscar took out a tray of pastries. Argent was about to come over to inspect them, but Mabel stopped him.

"Prince Rafael said there's no need to inspect the pastries," Mabel said. "She's allowed to eat them."

Oscar knelt on the ground, his eyes red and swollen. His voice trembled as he spoke.

"Your Grace, please just take a bite. This is from Lady Ruth. She specifically sent them to you. It's your favorite sweet pastry. There are more cakes, too. You can eat them slowly."

At the mention of Ruth, Eleanor finally raised her eyes to look at him. Her face was dark and gaunt, filthy with grime, and the skin around her eyes was a deep gray. However, her bloodshot eyes were still noticeable. "Put it down," she said. Her words, rough and unclear without teeth, were still unmistakable.

With trembling hands, Oscars held up a set of clothes. "And here's a change of clothes. Let me help you put them on."

Without hesitation, he reached out to lift her, ignoring the filth that covered her body. He carefully draped her over his arm, guiding her step by step inside the room.

Argent frantically glanced at Mabel and Gillian. "Aren't you going in to keep watch?"

"Let him help her change," Mabel answered. She reached out, discreetly hiding a piece of pastry in her sleeve.

Argent looked at her, confused and surprised. However, since it was Rafael and Carissa's decision, he didn't protest further.

About an hour later, Oscar emerged, carrying Eleanor on his back.

She had changed into new clothes, though she was so thin that they hung on her frame like a sack, loose and shapeless.

Oscar set her beside the pastries once more, and she curled up again, retreating into herself. The blankets and warm clothes he brought with him were also sent in.

Mabel nodded. "That's enough. Let's not make things harder for Mr. Lane. It's time to go."

Oscar, his eyes still glistening with tears, stole one last look at Eleanor before reluctantly leaving.

Eleanor watched them until they disappeared beyond the heavy door, and only then did she let out a soft, heartbroken sob.

Mabel took the pastries to Arcane Sanctum to have Ivy inspect them. After confirming they contained deadly poison, Mabel returned to report to Rafael and Carissa. "Did she eat them?" Carissa asked.

"She hadn't eaten when she left, but I'm sure Oscar told her about the poison," Mabel said. "And then he helped her change into clothes. It's up to her now-whether she wants to cling to life or seek release."

"Very well, thank you for your hard work. Go eat something now," Carissa said gently.

"Understood, Your Grace. I'll take my leave." Mabel bowed and turned to exit.

At this point, whether Eleanor lived or died didn't really matter. If Ruth couldn't bear to see her suffer and wanted to give her an escape, that was fine too.

For now, it was enough that Kyle had mastered Eleanor's handwriting to perfection. Once the right moment came and the culprits surfaced, a well-crafted suicide letter from Eleanor would make its grand debut. Eleanor had refused to name names, so her handwriting would do it for her.

Naturally, the letter didn't need to be written just yet. The right time hadn't arrived, and Eleanor probably didn't know the identity of the true mastermind behind it all. But in the suicide note, she would.

In truth, once it was clear that Yuvan wasn't the true mastermind, Eleanor's role became irrelevant.

The next day, news came from the Heritage Bureau-Eleanor was dead.

However, the official report didn't mention poison. Instead, it claimed that, after a period of reflection and guilt, she had taken her own life in despair over her crimes.

The news didn't stir much of a

reaction. A few court officials did hear that Eleanor had left a suicide letter before her death, but the king hadn't mentioned it and the Heritage Bureau's officials were tight-lipped. Sono one could find out what it contained.

This caused a stir among the families that had once been closely connected to Eleanor. They were left wondering what she might have written in her final letter. However, as days passed without any further developments, the unease gradually faded and everyone resumed their usual lives.

By November, the snow had fallen.

Silas and Riley had divorced.

After the public scene at Silverstone Estate, both families had called in their elders to mediate. Eventually, Silas' anger subsided and he sought Riley's forgiveness.

But some things, once broken, could never fully be mended. No matter how much they tried to move past it, the hurt remained. In the end, it couldn't last, and Riley requested a divorce. Women were like that. Even heartbroken and disappointed, they would crash into a wall time and time again before they were willing to stop.

Riley had a family to return to, but instead, she threw herself into working at Skye Embroidery. Her needlework was exquisite, so much so that even the ladies in the palace valued it. Salvador's favored concubine, Sylvia, even personally sent someone to the workshop, requesting Riley to make a garment for her.

It was clear that Sylvia was subtly opposing Kylie, but she also genuinely admired Riley's skill.

Chapter 1167

On Midwinter's Dawn, before the grand banquet for the entire court, the ladies of the inner and outer courts came to the palace to offer their greetings.

Victoria usually preferred quiet. But on this day, she welcomed visitors, chatting with the noblewomen from various families. Kylie stayed to keep her company for a while before returning to Everspring Palace to wait for her family to arrive. Little did she know that after all the waiting, her mother wouldn't show up. Instead, it was a group of aunts, cousins, and distant relatives.

Upon asking, she learned that Marjorie felt unwell and couldn't bear to face the wind. As customary, Marjorie would need to offer her greetings to Victoria if she came into the palace. Since she didn't wish to risk passing on her illness, Marjorie refrained from visiting the palace.

Of course, Kylie didn't believe it. The last time Marjorie spoke to her about the workshop, she had turned the latter down. She could see the disappointment and surprise on the older woman's face, so she suspected her mother was merely throwing a small tantrum. Kylie felt a bit disappointed, but didn't show it. Instead, she quietly told Lydia to send a message to her mother along with a small gesture of respect.

After the usual pleasantries, Kylie asked Jocelyn to stay for a chat.

Jocelyn was the troublemaker alongside Cassidy and Hailey. The three had been causing havoc in the academy, and Jocelyn had been particularly nasty toward Rosalind. After being put in her place once, she had toned it down a bit.

Every now and then, though, Jocelyn still tried to provoke Rosalind in hopes of angering her and tarnishing her reputation as a temperamental teacher unsuitable for the academy. The standing of Gracewood Women's Academy would also be damaged. Jocelyn puffed up her cheeks, upset. "Mrs. Ashford is so fierce! Mr. Spencer also scolded me, and I didn't dare to cause trouble again. Perhaps it's best to let it go. If the queen dowager hears about it, it wouldn't be good." Kylie leaned slightly to one side, casting a cold glance at her.

"Do you think I'm the one who wants to be at odds with the people at the academy? His Majesty feels the same way. When the academy was first founded, he feared Carissa might overshadow him, but he couldn't outright refuse since the academy was the queen dowager's idea.

"So, we resorted to more subtle methods to tarnish the academy's reputation. If the queen dowager ever questioned anything, Carissa would be blamed for failing to manage the academy properly.

"Frankly, I agree with him. Someone with a military background has no business running Gracewood Women's Academy."

Jocelyn had just turned 15, still shy of 16. Her scheming was far from refined, and she didn't really know whether Carissa was fit for the position. She simply did as her cousin instructed, so to her, there was no right or wrong in the matter.

Now, hearing that Salvador wasn't fond of the academy, she said, "I understand. When we return to the academy, I'll continue to make things difficult for Ms. Young."

Kylie nodded, satisfied.

Of all the teachers, the youngest was Rosalind. Though she was talented, she had neither a noble title nor widespread recognition, so it was natural that Kylie would target her first.

Trevor and the Quinton family were considered the leading figures of the scholarly elite, so claiming they weren't secretly competing with each other would be a lie.

Many of the Quinton family's sons had entered government service. While they were strictly disciplined, some of their actions had drawn criticism. Malcolm, in particular, had a history of personal misconduct. It was clear now that Trevor had firmly taken the lead as the true

representative of the scholarly elite.

Kylie was trying to help her family. If she could weaken the Young family-even better, if some private moral issues came to light-then outsiders couldn't criticize the Quinton family anymore. "You've come of age now," Kylie said casually. "When we return, I'll speak with your mom about your marriage. It's time to start thinking about a match."

Since Kylie wanted Jocelyn to do

something, she offered a big reward

powerful families-one of

in return. The Quinton family arranged marriages with other

daughters had even married

Kendrick, Dakota's son, and became a princess consort.

A powerful family with ties through marriage was beneficial, especially for Connor's future.

Jocelyn, embarrassed at the mention of her marriage, lowered her eyes. "I'll leave everything to you, Your Majesty."

Traditionally, the Quinton family's

marriages were either with the royal

family or noble houses with titles,

vel

rarely with military officers. However, considering how important the military was to Connor's future, Kylie had a

candidate in mind.

"Have you ever heard of Thomas Farrell? What do you think of him?" she asked tentatively.

Jocelyn wrinkled her nose in disdain. "Not much. He's older and has already been married once. People say his household is a mess and has no discipline. Who knows what else he's hiding?"

Kylie smiled. "He's not that old. Also, it's not worth paying attention to the gossip people are spreading. I was only asking. If you don't like him, I would never force you, silly girl."

Jocelyn's face brightened with a sweet smile. "I knew you'd be the kindest to me, Your Majesty!"

Kylie simply gazed back at Jocelyn, a knowing smile on her lips.

Chapter 1168

Kylie instructed that her children should be taken out to play, then called for Jocelyn's mother, Vera Jansen, to come in for a conversation. When Vera heard Kylie mention Thomas, she frowned slightly.

"Your Majesty, General Farrell is much older than Jocelyn. He may not be a suitable match. However, Marquis of Glandale's third son, Hubert Schmitt, is a promising young man. He's young and talented, and has already passed the provincial examinations last year. Though he won't inherit a title, with his talent and the support of the Quinton family, he could certainly make a name for himself."

Hubert was striking and composed. At just 19, he had already passed the provincial exams and was now preparing for the national exams. His future seemed full of promise.

Vera's words caused Lydia, who was standing nearby, to chuckle. "Madam Vera, do you think the Quinton family has many promising sons?"

Vera couldn't help but feel proud. "Naturally. There's not a weakling among them. The third branch may be the weakest, but even Logan has married a high princess."

Kylie laughed.

"My third uncle isn't weak-he simply had an accident. Before he fell, he was just as sharp and clever as any of the others. Our family has no weaklings. With such a big family and so many talented sons, many of them already serve in official positions, and even more are about to. What do you think someone like Hubert Schmitt, who's only supported by his mother's family, can achieve in his career?"

Kylie glanced at her fingers nonchalantly, then added, "We can't have him competing with your son for positions, can we?"

Vera immediately grew more serious.

Seeing the change in tone, Lydia quickly added, "Exactly. There are only so many positions to go around. It might be better if Ms. Jocelyn's husband doesn't have to compete with the Quinton family's sons. As for General Farrell-yes, he's older, but he's already a third- ranked general. His mom has received an official title as well.

"If Ms. Jocelyn marries him, General Farrell could secure her a title, and she would be a titled lady at such a young age. Why bother with someone else when the path to prestige is already clear?"

Vera took a moment to consider their words. Though she found the idea intriguing, it wasn't entirely convincing. Still, she began to think that Hubert was not as impressive as she had once believed.

"Your Majesty," Vera said, "General

Farrell's household is rather

disorderly. Who knows what else the Farrell family has hidden? Besides he was already married once. How could we allow one of our family's daughters to marry him? Even though military officials are powerful, they still can't compare to civil service officials in terms of reputation."

"Aunt Vera, if he wasn't once married, how would General Farrell ever consider Jocelyn? Have you heard? Ms. Young once admired him. Both families were about to arrange the match, but for some reason, General Farrell didn't think she was suitable." Vera had heard the story before, but she found it hard to believe. "How could General Farrell turn down the granddaughter of the royal chancellor? That shows just how arrogant he is."

"Arrogant, yes, but it's an arrogance he has every right to possess. Do you know why he can be so confident?" Kylie picked up her coffee, her pale fingers tracing the rim of the cup. A smile lingered at the corners of her lips.

"There are things I shouldn't be telling you, Aunt Vera, but Jocelyn is my cousin. When there's something good to be had, I always think of her first. It's not that I have any special opinion of General Farrell, but His Majesty does." Kylie took a slow sip of her coffee, watching as Vera's expression went from stunned to elated. She lowered her gaze, savoring the warmth of her coffee as she allowed the words to settle in.

Vera was indeed tempted.

Lydia seized the moment to stoke the fire. "Earlier, Her Majesty mentioned General Farrell to Ms. Jocelyn. However, Ms. Jocelyn

doesn't like General Farrell and net

thinks he's too old for her. But why didn't Ms. Young feel the same? Was Mr. Young wise enough to see the bigger picture?

"Mr. Young is a high-ranking official, and he was willing to go so far as to approach General Farrell's family to propose. That tells you just how desirable General Farrell is. Ms Jocelyn may not understand, but as her mom, you should consider this carefully for her sake.

"There's also her temperament to consider. Could she tolerate a concubine? General Farrell is very devoted, and Her Majesty even sent someone to test him. He has no intention of taking a concubine. No concubine means a much more peaceful life in the future." At this point, Vera was no longer merely intrigued she was thoroughly convinced, practically wishing for this marriage to happen.

Indeed, the idea of no concubines in the household was a tremendous comfort-fewer troubles, fewer complications. What could be more desirable than that?

Moreover, Kylie made a very valid point. Vera couldn't let her son-in-law and her son compete for position. After all, each branch of the family had its own pre-arranged roles and responsibilities.

Chapter 1169

As soon as Helen entered the palace, she couldn't wait to take a stroll in the gardens with Dakota and Josephine. The red ruby jewelry set she wore today was so striking against her complexion that she wanted everyone to notice it-preferably on purpose. Meanwhile, Rafael accompanied Carissa to visit Victoria and chat with her. A crowd of noble ladies, both from inside and outside the palace, gathered around to join them.

Just then, Thomas' mom, Alice, entered the palace to offer her greetings to Victoria. To her surprise, Victoria asked about Thomas' marriage right in front of so many noble ladies.

Alice felt a wave of bitterness rise in her heart but didn't dare say a word of complaint to Victoria. Instead, she forced a smile and replied, "Your Majesty, matters of marriage cannot be rushed."

Victoria sighed. "It's a shame for him to be dragged into all this for no reason. The Farrell family has always been so kind-hearted, yet some people are causing all this chaos."

Alice then realized why Victoria had suddenly brought up the topic-the queen dowager was trying to clear Thomas and the Farrell family's name. Her heart swelled with gratitude, and her eyes welled up with tears. Her voice was hoarse as she said, "He's just a bit unlucky."

Victoria shook her head. "Nonsense. He is one of Starhaven's great generals and is deeply favored by the king. How can you say he's unlucky? His destiny has been written, and his fated match will come in time." Alice immediately bowed deeply. "Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you for your concern."

The other ladies in the room now looked at Alice differently. Before, there had been a hint of mockery in their gazes after all, the scandal was widely known and involved everyone in some way, and no one dared claim they were innocent. Now that Victoria had spoken, things had shifted. After all, she had just praised Thomas as a great general of Starhaven.

Victoria never spoke about matters from the previous reign, yet today she had taken the time to mention Thomas. The sharp women in the room could easily sense the underlying message. From now on, no one would dare belittle the Farrell family or gossip recklessly about them.

Victoria said little more on the topic, moving on to ask about the affairs of various families. Her gaze swept the room, and she casually inquired about Marjorie's absence once she noticed. Just then, Lydia's messenger arrived. She explained that Marjorie was feeling unwell and didn't want to risk spreading illness to Victoria, so she would come on another day to offer her greetings.

Upon hearing the news, Victoria sighed lightly and raised her hand, signaling for the messenger to withdraw. She said no more.

The sigh and the expression spoke volumes-enough to make the courtiers recall the rumors about Malcolm and his mistress.

Carissa watched from the side, impressed by how skilled Victoria was.

With just a few words and gestures, Victoria had enough influence to keep everyone guessing and talking about something for a long time, from Midwinter's Dawn all the way to the end of the year.

In one simple sentence, Victoria shut

down all the rumors about the Farrell family, turning Thomas and his family into victims who had been dragged into a mess. She pointed out his high standing in the military, and suddenly, no one dared to look down on him.

Then, with a gentle sigh, she subtly reminded the highborn ladies of Malcolm's affair with a mistress. With that, she cleverly shifted the conversation from the Farrell family to the Quinton family. It was brilliant!

Rafael didn't linger much longer. After exchanging a few words, he excused himself, leaving Carissa with a group of noblewomen.

The moment he stepped out, the women surrounded Carissa, eager to offer compliments. Some spoke of the couple's affectionate

relationship, others admired her net

commanding presence, while a few remarked on how handsome and imposing Rafael looked. A few even asked when Carissa might have news of a pregnancy.

Marriage and children were favorite topics among the noblewomen, and Carissa responded with a smile, "There's no rush. Having children is something that can't be forced."

Her answer seemed a little strained, as if there were some unspoken concerns. Both Carissa and Rafael had been to the battlefield, so it wasn't surprising if they had some hidden injuries that left lingering effects on their bodies.

The women quickly began suggesting various physicians and remedies, the conversation growing lively and warm.

Carissa couldn't help but wonder-had they been talking about this behind her back?

Her suspicion wasn't unfounded. In fact, many had indeed been speculating. Some whispered that Rafael's injuries had damaged his health beyond repair, while others claimed that Carissa had sustained a battlefield injury that made it impossible for her to bear children.

Thus, the remedies offered were mixed-some for men, some for women.

Carissa graciously accepted them all with a smile.

Afterward, when Victoria didn't say anything, everyone finally stopped talking.

Chapter 1170

As the ladies were chatting, Ruth sent someone to privately ask Carissa to join her. After receiving the invitation, Carissa checked with Victoria for permission and went. Ruth was Augustus' concubine, and she was supposed to be living in comfort on her son's fief. Instead, she remained alone in a secluded palace in the royal palace.

When Carissa followed Oscar into Everlasting Palace, the atmosphere struck her as cold and desolate. There was no sign of festivity or hint of the holiday spirit. It felt as if they were not only separated by a few palace halls, but also by an unbridgeable divide of heaven and earth.

Since winter had set in, Ruth's health had worsened. Yuvan's son, Randall, had remained in the capital. Today, he was in the palace, attending to his grandmother.

Upon seeing Carissa, Randall rose and bowed. "Greetings, Your Grace."

Carissa gave him a cool glance. "Greetings, Your Highness. I see you've come to the palace today."

"Yes, I'm here to keep my grandmother company." Randall felt uncomfortable under Carissa's gaze, so he couldn't meet her eyes.

Carissa ignored him and stepped forward to offer her greetings to Ruth.

Ruth was lying in bed, supported by two soft embroidered pillows. Her face was a sickly yellow, her eyes sunken. Her hair was unkempt and hung loosely, streaks of white strands scattered around her face-a result of staying in bed for so long. She looked at Carissa, coughed once, then said in a slow, feeble voice, "Your Grace, please sit. There's no need for formalities."

Her speech was labored and barely audible.

A palace maid brought a chair and placed it by the bed. Oscar gestured to it. "Your Grace, please sit closer. Lady Ruth is weak, and her voice is faint. It will be easier to hear if you're closer."

Carissa thanked Ruth and sat down, then asked softly, "Are you feeling any better, Your Grace?"

Ruth sighed. "I suppose it's no use hoping for improvement."

She applied a bit of lip balm to her dry lips, but instead of improving her complexion, it only made her already pale face look even more lifeless.

Carissa offered a gentle reassurance, "If you take proper care of yourself, you'll improve."

The warmth from the charcoal in the room was nearly too much for Carissa. Despite the comfortable heat, there was no sign of smoke, which showed the quality of the charcoal being used. Salvador didn't treat Ruth poorly despite her being Yuvan's mom.

"Your Grace, I asked for you to come because I wish to offer an apology on behalf of Eleanor. She committed many wrongs toward your family, things that even I found appalling when I heard about them. I'm sorry, and I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive her." Carissa lowered her eyes. "When someone dies, it's as if a light is extinguished. Whether or not one forgives, it no longer matters. There's no need for you to carry this burden, Your Grace. You should focus on resting and regaining your strength."

"It matters," Ruth replied with deep

sorrow in her voice, tears welling up in her eyes. "Forgiveness is what clears her karmic debt so that in the next life, she can suffer less. In this life, she didn't find peace. But in the next, I hope she can marry a good man and live a peaceful life."

"Your Grace, the mistakes she made in this life weren't due to a bad marriage, nor are they connected to it at all," Carissa said, her voice calm but firm. "Yes, I know. She was wrong in so many ways. But as you said, when someone passes, their light is gone. There's no point in holding onto hatred anymore." "There's no more hate," Carissa replied softly, not wishing to dwell on the matter further.

Oscar approached to wipe away Ruth's tears. After a moment, Ruth continued, her voice thick with grief.

"And then there's my

daughter-in-law. That poor woman! She endured so much suffering and torment, especially when she ended up in Verdant Monastery. To think she passed away without children to care for her-what

a tragic end! Every time I think of it, it feels like a Knife through my heart. But what can I do? I couldn't intervene, couldn't speak out, and couldn't help. I hope you won't think poorly of me, Your Grace."

Though Carissa showed no sign of displeasure on her face, she couldn't help but feel a touch of irritation in her heart.

How could Ruth not intervene, not speak out, not help? Even if it wasn't possible, had Ruth ever truly done anything to help?

It would've been better if Ruth didn't know, but she did.

Avis had been sent to Verdant

Monastery without anyone to care for her. As a mother-in-law, Ruth could have sent someone to Valken to rebuke Yuvan and his family, or arrange for someone to care for Avis at the monastery. That would've at least shown some effort on her part.

"It's not for me to hold any grievances or offer forgiveness for what happened to my aunt. I have no right to speak on her behalf," Carissa said calmly.