

## War Song 1221

### Chapter 1221

At Serenity Palace, Victoria was listening to a report from Ruth's chamberlain, Oscar. After he was done, Victoria sighed softly.

"I understand. Have the royal physicians do everything they can. Use the best herbs available."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Oscar replied, his eyes red-rimmed. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Why was this not reported to the queen?" Victoria asked calmly.

Oscar explained, "I've already reported it. The queen said it's a natural part of aging and that it was bound to happen. She sent some food over and told Lady Ruth not to worry, and that everything would be taken care of. I didn't dare to repeat this directly to Her Grace." Victoria frowned slightly. "I see. Yes, there's no need to mention it. What needs to be done will be done. But for now, we must do all we can to provide treatment."

Oscar's voice was hoarse as he said, "With Your Majesty's words, I am at ease. With the royal physicians attending her, at least Lady Ruth will be more comfortable."

"Go now. I will visit her later myself," Victoria instructed.

Oscar, deeply moved, bowed in gratitude before stepping out.

"Keith," Victoria called out, her tone now tinged with mild anger. "Go to the Royal Medical Department and inquire whether the queen has refused the physicians from attending to Ruth."

Keith acknowledged the order and was on his way out when he was informed that Kylie had arrived. Turning back, he glanced at Victoria. She nodded, signaling for him to continue his task. So, he hastily left.

Kylie entered the hall, accompanied by Lydia. She curtsied and respectfully said, "Greetings, Your Majesty. May you be in good health and peace."

Victoria nodded. "No need for such formalities. Have you come with matters to discuss?"

Kylie stood up and smiled, "Mother, are you saying that I wouldn't come to greet you if I had no reason to see you?"

Victoria had someone bring refreshments. "It's rare to see such devotion from you, Kylie. I heard you've been unwell. Are you feeling better now?"

Though Kylie had been under house arrest, the official excuse had been her illness. However, everyone knew the truth. Still, Victoria was willing to offer her a semblance of grace.

"I'm fully recovered now, thanks to your grace and blessings, Mother."

"Good. The weather is cold. Now that you're well again, you should rest more. Don't expose yourself to the wind."

Kylie gave a small, somewhat embarrassed laugh. "Of course."

Such casual words might seem trivial, but they always made Kylie overthink.

This was always the case. Victoria never spoke too sharply, but her words, though gentle, often left one with the sense of a hidden meaning. It was only when one thought carefully about her words that it

became apparent they were not as innocent as they seemed,

The more Kylie thought about it, the more she couldn't be sure if there was another meaning behind it. It left her puzzled and unsure.

Take Victoria's latest words of telling Kylie she should rest and not expose herself to the wind, for example. It sounded like a caring suggestion, but Victoria knew well that it was not Kylie's health that kept her confined-she had been under house arrest. So, the words either carried a hidden meaning or were simply an attempt to give Kylie an easy excuse.

Regardless, Kylie could not shake the uncomfortable feeling in her chest, as though a thorn were lodged in her throat-neither easy to expel nor to swallow.

After a few more idle exchanges, Kylie turned the conversation to the Gracewood Women's Academy.

"When they first entered the palace, I tried to persuade them gently, encouraging them to send their daughters back to the academy. Studying and becoming well-educated surely nothing could be more important than that?"

Victoria gave a slight nod. "You're right, and your counsel was wise."

Kylie stole a glance at her. Seeing no noticeable change in Victoria's expression, she cautiously ventured, "I have heard that the Gracewood Women's Academy plans to accept students from merchant families and commoners. Has Carissa mentioned this to you?" Victoria replied calmly, "I am unaware of this matter. What is your opinion on it?"

Kylie had expected a sharp rebuke, but instead, Victoria asked her thoughts with an unexpected calmness.

What could she say? Naturally, she thought it was all a joke. But seeing that Victoria wasn't angry and didn't show any sign of agreement, how could she answer?

"Well?" Victoria repeated, resting her elbow on the armrest. "What do you think?"

Kylie had no choice but to grit her teeth and answer, "I believe...it is not quite appropriate."

"Not appropriate in what way?" Victoria's tone remained gentle, clearly urging her to explain further.

Hearing this, Kylie felt a slight relief and sat up straighter.

"Historically, true academies only admit men. Men study to serve in the court, to help the state, and to enlighten the people. The national examinations held every three years are the hope of many scholars who have spent years in study. Some families spend nearly everything they have to send one son to study., which shows just how valuable

education is.

"If academies like Gracewood Women's Academy lower their tuition fees, education will lose its prestige. Everyone will think it's something anyone can do, even women. That would cause chaos.

"Furthermore, common women are

often rough in temperament and

unwilling to follow proper conduct. Many of them even look down on scholars, seeing them as heartless. If we accept them as students, we could end up with all sorts of scandals and unruly behavior from women acting out of line."

Chapter 1222

Upon hearing these words, Victoria raised an eyebrow slightly, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

"I recall before you married the king, you were renowned throughout the capital for your scholarly accomplishments. You've read so many books, yet now you claim that women shouldn't study? You were just praising the benefits of learning, and yet here you are, contradicting yourself. Are you unaware of this?"

Kylie was taken aback. "I... I didn't mean it in that way. It is not that women should not study. Indeed, it is a good thing for ladies of noble families to broaden their knowledge for their refinement. After all, they are guided by family rules and propriety. Education just adds to their virtues."

Victoria's smile remained, but her voice turned pointed. "I've noticed that you often speak of propriety and rules. Do you truly enjoy being bound by such things?"

Kylie was momentarily stunned. "Mother, surely, this is the foundation upon which women are meant to stand. How could one speak of liking or disliking it? Those who follow proper conduct must, of course, adhere to it.

"It is like the laws of Starhaven, which restrain the people from committing evil. Those with malicious intent may resent such laws, but for those who live honestly, they will never feel oppressed by them."

Victoria chuckled. "So, this is how you see it. Quite interesting."

Kylie couldn't catch a hint of praise in Victoria's words, and she felt a sense of unease growing in her chest. "Mother, have I spoken incorrectly?"

Victoria's smile deepened. "Such conversations between mother and daughter-in-law rarely have a right or wrong. We speak as we see fit."

"Is this not what you believe as well?" Kylie was increasingly perplexed by Victoria's cryptic tone.

Victoria ran a hand through her meticulously arranged hair, her eyes distant. "What I believe matters little, and what others think matters even less." Kylie was confused and pressed on, "Then what is truly important? I'm afraid I'm not clever enough to understand, Mother. Please enlighten me."  
"There is no need for enlightenment. Just do what you're supposed to do in the position you're in."

Victoria clearly wasn't interested in discussing the matter further and seemed to lose interest.

However, Kylie was not there to discuss such matters. She had come to complain about Carissa. She hoped to convince Victoria that Carissa's actions were misguided.

"Mother, surely you can't be in favor of this? If education becomes so cheap, won't it spark a backlash from scholars everywhere?"

"The Gracewood Women's Academy is a small place with a mere handful of female students, and yet enough to provoke a rebellion from scholars everywhere? You're giving it more credit than it's due."

"It is but a beginning. What if others start copying it? Won't it cause chaos?" Kylie protested.

Victoria glanced briefly toward the door. When she noticed Keith's swift return, she let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Keith entered and whispered urgently in Victoria's ear. The change in her expression was palpable, her demeanor cooling visibly. She cast a glance at Kylie, her voice almost emotionless.

"Are you aware of the situation with Lady Ruth?"

Kylie was preparing her argument in her mind, trying to prove just how harmful Carissa's actions were, when Victoria suddenly asked her the question. Without thinking, she instinctively replied, "I know, Oscar reported it to me." "Why didn't you send the royal physicians to treat her?"

"Lady Ruth is gravely ill," Kylie

replied, "and both the medicine and

the needle treatment have ceased to do any good. I deemed it

unnecessary to trouble the rovaneto

physicians further. Moreover, His Majesty, as you are aware, has lost much favor with Prince Yuvan. It's enough that we're not causing

trouble for her."

Victoria's lips curled into a cold smile. "Forget that Lady Ruth was King Augustus' concubine, and that her position in this palace remains unchallenged. Consider instead, what you are doing now. You're the mother of the nation and the queen. If Prince Yuvan wishes to avoid responsibility, are you just going to give him a hand?"

Kylie's face turned pale, and she dropped to her knees hastily. "Mother, I beg your pardon. What do you mean by that? This...this is a bit harsh, isn't it?"

Victoria's gaze hardened, her voice cold as ice.

"If you do not understand, then go and reflect on it carefully. You may consult the king, or even Derek, should you find it difficult to grasp. I have neither the time nor patience to explain further.

"All I will say is this: the treatment for

Lady Ruth must not cease. Dispatch

the royal physicians to attend her

daily, and record every prescription and method of treatment. If she suffers, let the medicine and needle treatment provide some relief. If nothing else works, then at least let her go peacefully."

Kylie knelt on the floor, feeling confused but dared not ask further.

She had come to complain, but instead, she ended up being scolded. In her heart, she couldn't help but feel that Victoria was biased-after all, she was Victoria's rightful daughter-in-law. Rafael was Helen's son, and Carissa may call her 'Mother', but ultimately, they weren't related by blood.

Chapter 1223

-

After dismissing Kylie, Victoria summoned a messenger to deliver a royal edict to Carissa. The edict stated that she alone could decide the direction of the Gracewood Women's Academy and that the opinions of others were not to be heeded. Once the edict was sent, Victoria dispatched another messenger to inform Salvador that he was to join her for the evening meal.

Keith poured her a fresh cup of coffee, placing it before her with care. "Your Majesty, please don't let this trouble you. It's not worth it. If the queen doesn't understand, you can always teach her."

"Teach her? Have I not spent years trying? Which of my words has she ever heeded? Why waste my breath on her now?" Victoria rubbed her temples, her tone weary. "She even had the audacity to make things difficult for Lady Ruth. Does she wish to hand Prince Yuvan an excuse to raise a fuss publicly?"

Yuvan had returned to Valken, his body crippled and his heart undoubtedly hardened. If Ruth were to die in misery, it would give him the perfect opportunity to stir the citizens of Valken, fanning the flames of unrest.

Kylie would have indeed given him a hand at such a great time.

If this continued, perhaps it was time to consider replacing the queen.

Meanwhile, Salvador was in the royal study. He had just been informed that someone from Serenity Palace had arrived, informing him that Victoria had summoned him to dine with her that evening.

Salvador felt a chill crawl up his spine. A summons to dine was rarely just about the meal-it often meant he was the "main course".

With no other options, he called for Derek to investigate. "Go and see if someone has provoked my mom. Find out what's happened." Derek, well-versed in these situations, quickly sought out Keith for answers. It didn't take long for him to piece the story together.

This routine was one Derek and Salvador had gone through many times before. Each time Victoria summoned Salvador for a meal, the latter would make inquiries to prepare himself.

When Derek returned, he relayed the details. "Your Majesty, there seem to be two matters at hand. First, the queen brought a complaint about the Gracewood Women's Academy. Second, the queen dowager is displeased with how Lady Ruth's illness has been handled. She reprimanded the queen earlier, but it seems her anger hasn't subsided."

As Derek recounted the events, Salvador's hand began to tremble with rage. "I punished her with confinement, and she still doesn't see her fault? She's never once involved herself in the affairs of the women's academy or the workshop. But now, she eagerly takes the lead to complain, using me as her shield? How very clever of her."

"Your Majesty, please calm yourself. The queen likely acted out of a moment of confusion," Derek offered cautiously.

"A moment of confusion?" Salvador scoffed, his voice rising. "How many years has she been confused? As the queen, instead of fostering harmony among the women in the harem, she sows discord wherever she goes. Does she truly think I am blind to her meddling? Those young women leaving the academy-does she think I don't know it was her doing?"

"I don't like how Carissa is getting close to those noble families, so she goes and ruins people's reputations like this? How despicable! After all these years of marriage, how did she never figure out what I was



thinking?" t

Derek said, "Her Majesty is raising the prince and princess, and she also has to manage the harem. She's burdened with countless. affairs, so it's understandable that

she might fail to grasp your ve

intentions, Your Majesty.

"Perhaps it would be better to lay things out plainly for her. If she were allowed to take part in the affairs of the Gracewood Women's Academy, she could gradually diminish Lady Carissa's influence. In doing so, Your Majesty's concerns might be

resolved."

"What's the point of saying this now?" Salvador snapped, his voice cold with fury. "Carissa has already started enrolling female students from the general populace!"

Derek lowered his gaze, knowing full well that Carissa had already begun her efforts. Most of the noble daughters had withdrawn from the academy-his suggestion came only because of the current state of things. "Your Majesty, please calm yourself," Derek said softly.

But Salvador was far beyond calming. Without another word, he immediately set off for Everspring Palace.

-

Kylie had returned to her quarters feeling unsettled after being reprimanded by Victoria. When she saw Salvador storming in, her heart sank. She quickly rushed to greet him with a few attendants. Salvador waved the attendants away, leaving only Kylie in the hall. Lydia hesitated, casting a worried glance back at her mistress, but eventually stepped out and closed the door behind her.

Kylie stood in the now-silent hall, trembling under Salvador's piercing gaze. His expression was dark, nearly feral, and she felt her composure slipping. Her voice broke as she began to speak. "Your Majesty, have I done something wrong?"

Salvador's glare didn't soften. His tone was sharp as a blade. "If you can't manage the harem, then leave it to Sylvia and Grace to handle."

Kylie was still upset about what happened at Serenity Palace, feeling more and more wronged. Her voice wavered as she spoke, "Your Majesty, I didn't argue with the queen dowager today." Salvador's face remained grim. "Who gave you the authority to cut off Lady Ruth's medicine? And who told you to bring up the women's academy to Mother?"

Kylie was confused about these two things, and hearing Salvador's sharp questions only made her more tangled in her thoughts.

"Your Majesty, why are we still taking care of Lady Ruth? Do you really think if we treat her, she'll get better? And Prince Yuvan won't use it against us to cause trouble?"

"Also, I thought you didn't like the women's academy. I wanted to use this opportunity to persuade the queen dowager to close it down-doesn't that align with what you want?"

Chapter 1224

Salvador leaned forward slightly, his gaze sharp with barely contained anger.

"Did I ever tell you that I wanted to shut down Gracewood Women's Academy? The academy was Mom's idea-it was meant to unite the noble families' women and be beneficial to me! Why would I want to shut it down?" Kylie looked at him, bewildered. "But haven't you always been displeased with Carissa's growing closeness to the noble families?"

Salvador's eyes narrowed as he stared at her, his words cutting and deliberate. "Are you saying you have no ability to replace Carissa?"

Kylie froze, her eyes widening in disbelief. "Your Majesty, are you suggesting that I lower myself to attend the academy? Or that I should curry favor with those noblewomen?"

She was the queen of Starhaven. How could she possibly step into such a role? And those noblewomen-why should she, as the queen, have to win them over? Shouldn't they be the ones trying to win her favor?

Wasn't this a complete reversal of proper order?

Salvador's tone turned colder.

"The power of the throne may appear untouchable, but it can never truly be so. If the foundation below us collapses, we'll crash to the ground and shatter to pieces.

"I am the king, yet even I must occasionally yield-closing one eye to certain matters, offering gifts, or showing favor. This helps them willingly bend their backs and become the steps beneath my feet. What makes you think everyone should bow to you unconditionally? Simply because you're the queen?"

Kylie was stunned into silence, unable to muster a response.

"You're not truly ignorant of this. You simply refuse to consider what's best for me. Otherwise, you wouldn't have tried to marry your cousin to Thomas to draw military power to Connor's side," Salvador added.

Kylie's expression shifted, and she quickly protested, "Your Majesty, that was never my intention! I only thought General Farrell was a man of integrity and a good match for my cousin, which is why I suggested her to him."

"Do you even believe yourself?" Salvador asked with a cold laugh.

Kylie insisted, "I truly meant it. If you don't trust me, then there's nothing I can say to change that, Your Majesty."

Salvador's brows furrowed, clearly frustrated. "Sometimes, speaking with you is so exhausting. You seem to understand what I say and yet, at the same time, completely miss the point. You're always trying to read my thoughts, but when it truly matters, you get everything wrong."

Kylie bit her lip, tears brimming in her eyes. "I am foolish and dull. Would it not be easier for you to simply tell me directly, rather than leaving me to guess?"

Salvador looked at her, a mix of frustration and disdain flashing in his eyes. As queen, she ought to carry herself with dignity, yet she wept like some petty concubine. His anger deepened.

"Haven't I been direct with you many

times over the years? Which of my words have you listened to? Which of my commands have you followed? Every time you act, you make mistakes. It would be better if you did nothing at all-focus on managing the harem and raising our children. Matters beyond the palace are beyond your capabilities, so stay out of them."

Kylie could see the weariness and distaste in his expression, and her heart ached. "If you wish for me to win over the noblewomen or visit the academy to make an appearance, I can do that. Tomorrow, I will summon them to the palace and have them send their daughters back to the academy."

Salvador raised his hand in a sharp,

dismissive gesture. "Don't bother.

When it comes to strategy,

intelligence, and execution, you even compare to even half of Carissa. Yet, you resent her for

earning the people's favor. Do you think that simply bearing the title of queen entitles you to their praise without effort? You don't deserve it."

There was a large number of students being accepted at

Gracewood Women's Academy now, and it would be strange for the former students who had dropped out to reenroll again. If that

happened without propped

reason or

explanation, the common people would only feel more resentment

toward the nobility.

How could Kylie suggest something like that so casually?

His words cut like a blade, piercing her heart deeply. Kylie lifted her head sharply, tears spilling over as her voice trembled with resentment.

"If you think I am inferior to Carissa in every way, then why did you marry her off to the Hell Monarch? Why didn't you take her for yourself and replace me instead?"

The sound of a cup shattering against the floor echoed through the chamber, shards scattering in every direction as Salvador roared, "Do you wish for me to depose you?!" The fragments flew toward her, one sharp edge slicing across the back of her hand.

She froze, the words hitting her heart like a heavy blow. Pain twisted her heart, but she acted quickly, falling to her knees in desperation.

"Your Majesty, I misspoke. Please forgive me!"

Salvador didn't spare her another glance. Without a word, he stood and strode out.

Chapter 1225

The chamber doors creaked open, and Derek quickly called out, "His Majesty is departing!"

Lydia hurried inside, rushing to Kylie's side and helping her to her feet.

"Your Majesty, your hand is injured." Lydia gasped. She immediately pressed her handkerchief to the bleeding cut, then motioned for the maids to bring water and bandages.

Kylie sank into a chair, her body trembling as though her strength had left her entirely. Fear lingered in her wide eyes, and her voice was shaky with disbelief. "He said he would depose me. His Majesty said he would depose me." "His Majesty is just angry for a moment. How could he really depose you? Don't worry."

Lydia sent the maids who had come to assist back out, then sighed as she looked at Kylie.

"Your Majesty, you shouldn't have said those things to the queen dowager. And as for Lady Ruth's situation, I advised you about it, but you didn't listen."

"I don't understand! What was my mistake?" Kylie's eyes burned with indignation. "It was just two incidents. Even if there were faults, they were trivial-nothing worth mentioning!"

Lydia sighed heavily. It was clear that neither Victoria's warnings nor Salvador's fury had made any impression on Kylie. Her thoughts were consumed entirely by undermining Carissa and securing advantages for her son.

But this was the wrong path to thread on.

Lydia began with patient determination, "Your Majesty, you could ally yourself with Lady Carissa instead of opposing her. She's not one of the harem's concubines."

"But His Majesty has always been wary of the Hell Monarch. What good would it do for me to win them over? Wouldn't it bring more trouble for Connor?"

"My dear queen, you can't keep focusing on the past. You must adapt to the changing situation and evaluate things wisely. His Majesty now heavily relies on the Hell Monarch. Though there are conflicts between the brothers, His Majesty depends on him for state matters. The Hell Monarch and his princess consort are capable, and they will become His Majesty's best allies."

Kylie sighed heavily. "This is exactly the outcome I dreaded. Carissa and I are both women, yet she overshadows me in every way. I am the queen-how can she, a mere duke's daughter, be better than me?"

Lydia saw the despair and resentment circling in Kylie's mind, a storm she couldn't escape.

She had seen cases like this before, and the outcome hadn't been good. Take the third daughter of the Earl of Silverstone's family, Viola, for example.

Carissa's abilities surpassed many

women's. She was skilled in martial arts, had strategic thinking, and could carve out a path for herself earning victories on the battlefield. She wasn't the kind of woman one could compare to the average lady.

But why compare at all?

Everyone was different, with their own strengths and weaknesses. Carissa wasn't perfect, either.

Moreover, Carissa had been

criticized and scorned before

because of her involvement in Skye Embroidery, a thankless task that left her ridiculed. Whatever goodwill

she had gained on the battlefield

was nearly lost, yet she refused to compromise and continued doing things her way. She never compared herself to anyone.

Lydia was conflicted. After the issues with the workshop and the academy, she had come to admire Carissa. But the more she admired Carissa, the more she felt that Kylie wouldn't let things go easily. The truth was, Kylie was no match for Carissa.

In the end, the one who would be hurt most was her mistress.

Lydia wasn't able to rise above her personal feelings and put reason before her mistress. She was loyal to the queen and could only think of what was best for her.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, the golden light fell across the tranquil halls of the Serenity Palace.

Inside, Salvador attentively served Victoria at the table. Outside, he was the all-powerful king. But here, he was merely a dutiful son.

"Sit down and eat. I didn't ask you to hover over me like a servant," Victoria chided, though her tone lacked any real harshness.

"Of course," Salvador replied, his grin boyish and wide. "This soup smells divine—I'll have some too."

With that, he drank half a bowl of soup in a single go.

Victoria gave him a brief glance, saying nothing for the moment. It remained that way until the meal was finished and the servants had cleared the table.

Then, she dabbed the corners of her mouth with a cloth and asked casually, "Did you visit Kylie today?"

"I did," Salvador answered without hesitation, sitting up straighter. His expression turned serious. "I scolded her. Her mistakes were too severe, and she hasn't shown a hint of repentance."

Chapter 1226

"Kylie wasn't always this foolish," Victoria remarked as she rose from the dining table, moving to the carved cherrywood armchair. She was pleasantly full, and the chair's firm support felt just right.

"She used to be quite clever. When a clever person suddenly becomes foolish, it's often because they're too entangled in their own schemes. They can't see past their own interests. And for those interests, they think any sacrifice is justified, no matter who pays the price." "Mom, your words are absolutely correct," Salvador agreed, nodding.

Victoria gestured for him to sit and then asked, "What are your thoughts on the current admissions policy for the women's academy?"

Salvador replied thoughtfully, "I think it's a good idea. It gives the common folk the impression that they aren't so far removed from the nobility. It might even ease some of the discontent among them."

He naturally spoke with the broader picture in mind. As for whether it offered women a chance to broaden their horizons, he cared little for such details.



"And do you believe the scholars from everywhere will rise in protest because of this?" she pressed.

Salvador chuckled. "Why would they? Some scholars don't take it seriously and look down on it, thinking women aren't smart enough and that the women's academy is just a joke. Others believe women are capable of learning and understanding. Those scholars tend to be broader-minded and might even support such efforts.

"But the most crucial point is this-women aren't allowed to take the national examinations. So, they pose no threat to the scholars' ambitions. Besides, if any scholar causes a ruckus, they risk losing their own eligibility to sit for the exams. Apart from a few bitter cynics, who would gamble their future over this?"

Victoria let out a soft laugh. "Such simple reasoning. How could Kylie fail to grasp it? The excuses she gave me earlier were clearly meant to deceive, as though I'm some fool easily placated by hollow words."

Salvador's expression grew serious. Victoria rarely showed such disdain for someone, especially Kylie. She usually afforded her some measure of respect, at least outwardly.

Kylie had meddled with Gracewood Women's Academy and had ruined the reputation of others. Salvador knew that Victoria wasn't happy that Kylie had gotten away with only being under house arrest. She had been looking for a reason to punish Kylie further, and the latter had practically handed her the perfect opportunity.

"The Quinton family is large and well-established, with deep, far-reaching connections," Victoria continued, her voice calm but firm. "That gives Kylie her confidence. I won't interfere in other matters, but there are two matters she must never touch: the foundation of the kingdom, and the women's academy and workshop. She mustn't interfere with either of them, not by so much as a hair."

"I understand. I'll have a word with her," Salvador replied solemnly.

Victoria paused briefly before continuing, "Since we're speaking openly as mother and son, allow me to say a bit more. After the incident with Ms. Young, even though General Farrell came forward to propose, the Young family's reputation has been all but ruined. "Mr. Young no longer holds the same respect he once had, and his position has fallen sharply. Mr. Young was your teacher, and he has done much for you. Also, the Young family has remained loyal and upright-such pure loyalty is rare and invaluable. "You should look to the Young family for promising young talents to cultivate.

Otherwise, the Quinton family will continue to grow unchecked, commanding the loyalty of nearly all the scholars in the realm.

"If more than half the court ends up coming from the Quinton family, even if they cause no harm for the next ten or twenty years, trouble will eventually arise. Pruning a few of their overgrown branches would benefit both the Quinton family and the court as a whole."

This was a concern Salvador himself

had pondered often. The Quinton family was unquestionably loyal for now, and their older generation often taught their younger members to stay humble and modest. But when a family became too large, it was hard to control everyone. When some members of the family swelled with pride, others naturally followed suit.

Many things that would be unreasonable to others would seem perfectly fine to them, and some things that should be normal would seem unreasonable to them.

"If-heaven forbid the eldest prince doesn't become Crown Prince, what do you think the Quinton family would do?" Victoria said slowly, voicing Salvador's deepest fear.

The Quinton family's current humility and restraint were based on the assumption that Connor would become Crown Prince. If the Quinton family continued to grow in power, the decision of who to name as Crown Prince would, in essence, fall into their hands.

"Use your brother wisely," Victoria

advised. "He can act as a counterbalance to the Quinton family, while you can secure your position and maintain balance between the two sides. A truly wise ruler doesn't need to fear either side. You simply need to know how to use them."

Victoria finally said the words she had always kept to herself. She had never spoken in favor of Rafael before because, at that time, Salvador was wary of him.

Now, however, the Quinton family loomed like a colossal beast. If there was no one to control them, relying solely on the king's power to suppress them would only create a dangerous standoff between the Quinton family and the throne, leading to mutual destruction.

It would be far better to release

another tiger into the field. The two tigers wouldn't need to clash. Their mere presence would create a balance, ensuring that both sides remained committed to preserving the stability of the throne while trying to prevent the other side from growing stronger.

With a few simple words, Victoria had cut through Salvador's hesitation and brought clarity to a matter he had long struggled to resolve.

Chapter 1227

Once the investigation into the gentlemen's retreat was concluded, Carissa personally entered the palace to deliver her report. She was unaware that Kylie had lodged a complaint against her, intending only to report on the matter at hand before visiting Victoria.

When Salvador heard that martial-trained Sandorian spies had been hiding within the gentlemen's retreat, he was visibly shocked. His expression immediately grew serious.

Carissa refrained from mentioning Gerald's frequent visits to the gentlemen's retreat. The investigation had made it clear that Gerald's visits were purely for leisure, and he deliberately concealed his identity. Otherwise, he wouldn't have gone to such lengths to disguise himself in that ridiculous manner.

From what she overheard, Gerald's conversations revolved solely around frivolities, with no mention of court affairs or suspicious behavior. Thus, there was no basis to suspect any breach of security.

Claire, who had eavesdropped on the courtesans' private discussions, noted that they referred to Gerald as "the old ghost" behind his back. They spoke of him with disdain, complaining about his frequent visits. If not for his generous tips, it was unlikely anyone would have entertained him at all.

Since it was clearly a matter of personal indulgence, Carissa saw no reason to report it. Moreover, it appeared Gerald hadn't recognized that some of the courtesans were Sandorian. The Sandorians had been deliberate in their selections, choosing men with striking features that suggested an exotic allure without fully embodying Sandorian traits.

Most of them, in truth, were children born of unions between the people in the Southern Frontier and Sandorians. Strictly speaking, they were half Starhaven by blood.

The Southern Frontier had been under Sandoria's control for so long and had only recently been reclaimed in the past two years. These people have been hiding in the capital for four or five years, which means their master was from Sandoria. "These individuals were smuggled into the capital when Eleanor was still around, disguised as merchants traveling with trade caravans," Carissa explained. "Eleanor arranged for their new identities and placed them in the gentlemen's retreat. "She believed it to be no more than a flesh trade. Moreover... The gentlemen's retreats were established under her orders because it was exceptionally profitable. When Eleanor fell from power, Lord Schmitt couldn't bring himself to shut it down." Salvador felt both angry and uncomfortable hearing this. "I once heard a rumor that the Marquis of Glandale had a liking for young men. The reason he didn't close the gentlemen's retreats might be because of that."

Carissa replied carefully, "That may be part of the reason. However, based on my investigation, neither Eleanor nor Lord Schmitt knew that these Sandorian spies were trained in martial arts. They likely assumed the newcomers were merely seeking fortune.

"In truth, these spies have been gathering information through the loose tongues of certain nobles over the years. However, they've struggled to transmit their findings back to Sandoria. This was revealed during our covert surveillance of their private conversations. Some of them have even proposed devising a plan to leave the capital and return to their homeland."

"So, they've been posing as spies in the capital all this time," Salvador said, anger flickering in his eyes. "Eavesdropping on the secrets of nobles? It seems my court has quite a few officials who enjoy visiting the gentlemen's retreat."

Speaking about this with Salvador made Carissa feel a bit awkward, but since it was an official matter, she knew it had to be addressed.

"According to my investigation, not many truly indulge in such preferences. Most go out of curiosity, seeking novelty."

In essence, they were bored of ordinary pleasures and wanted something more thrilling. For those who had reached a certain level of wealth and status, everyday indulgences were no longer satisfying. They craved the extraordinary.

Another factor lay in the restrictions

placed on officials. Although the

court didn't explicitly forbid visits to entertainment parlors, such

activities were frowned upon as

improper. Civil officials, in particular, were wary of being caught in a compromising situation. After all, many frequented

brothels-especially the idle, undisciplined scions of noble

families. These young men were the

most unpredictable, prone to

reckless chatter that could lead to

trouble.

The gentlemen's retreat, however, was different. It had strict standards, high entry fees, and clientele carefully screened. Those deemed suspicious were barred entry altogether. Salvador's face darkened with displeasure. "Do you have a list of names?"

"The investigation hasn't been ongoing for long, so we've only identified a few officials currently in office," Carissa replied.

"Any former retainers from Goldencrest Palace?" Salvador asked sharply, referring to those who had served him during his tenure as crown prince.

Carissa hesitated briefly before answering truthfully, "Yes."

Salvador slammed his hand on the table. "Outrageous!"

The former retainers of Goldencrest Palace had been his loyal supporters when he was the crown prince, and many now held important positions in his administration. Carissa thought he would demand their names, but instead, he refrained-likely out of consideration for their past loyalty.

After a tense pause, Salvador issued

his orders coldly. "Take the Capital Guard and the Garrison Unit to raid all these gentlemen's retreats. Go at night. Detain everyone present and bring them to the Capital Guard headquarters to be jailed for two days. As for the Sandorian spies, hand them over to the Supreme Court."

Chapter 1228

The Capital Guard headquarters' prison was as sparse as they came, and they didn't usually imprison people there. It wasn't that they didn't arrest anyone. Minor offenders were usually fined or given a few lashes, while those committing serious crimes were sent to the authorities to face proper sentencing. "Your Majesty, if there are court officials present, should they also be detained?" Carissa asked. Salvador's expression darkened. "Naturally, they are to be detained as well."

Carissa understood that Salvador intended to teach these officials a lesson, though not publicly-he didn't want word of their indiscretions spreading to the authorities. Locking them up in the Capital Guard headquarter's prison was meant to serve as a discreet warning while protecting their reputations. More importantly, the raid's true objective was to capture the Sandorian spies and subject them to a rigorous interrogation.

"And make sure no one warns them in advance," Salvador added.

It was time to discipline a few people and restore proper order.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Carissa replied respectfully.

As she left to carry out the orders, her thoughts turned to Gerald.

Truth be told, Gerald had reprimanded her not long ago, and she was still annoyed by it. Yet, she couldn't overlook the fact that he was Sigmund's tutor at one point and carried the distinguished title of a royal tutor. If the old man got caught in such a place and thrown into the Capital Guard headquarter's prison, he would likely die of shame.

His embarrassment was one thing, but it was Sigmund's reputation that was truly on the line. Fortunately, ever since surveillance began late last year, Gerald hadn't visited often. If memory

served correctly, he had gone three days ago, which meant he likely wouldn't return in the next couple of days. She decided to proceed with the raid that very evening. As for the Marquis of Glandale, Salvador hadn't given explicit instructions to apprehend him, so it was clear he intended to handle the matter personally. That was out of her hands.

Carissa returned to the Capital Guard Headquarters to mobilize the troops.

The locations of the five gentlemen's retreats had already been thoroughly investigated. Each establishment employed around ten enforcers and housed over twenty courtesans. The 15 Sandorian spies were scattered across the five retreats.

While their exact martial prowess remained uncertain, their light, nimble footsteps suggested they were well-trained in Lightfoot Skill.

Violet had been training the Capital Guard and Garrison Unit for quite some time now. After those intensive lessons, their skills improved considerably. As for Max and Michael, their martial prowess had surged ahead as well.

Still, Carissa decided to be cautious. She called for Violet, Claire, and Mabel to join her, to prevent the spies from using their Lightfoot Skill to flee. A citywide search would cause too much commotion.

They had more than enough hands

for the job. Each team was assigned 50 men, with Claire and Mabel leading their respective squads, while Garissa and Violet took command of the one heading to the retreat on the northern side of the city.

This particular gentlemen's retreat had the best business and was Gerald's frequent destination. It also housed a larger number of Sandorian spies-four of them. It was essential to capture them all in one swoop.

Carissa was dressed in her official attire, while Violet was disguised in men's clothing. They led the charge with 50 capital guards at their back, bursting through the door with a loud crash.

The enforcers inside barely had time to react. One of them, clearly startled, stepped forward and roared, "Who dares to barge here? You think this is your playground?"

Before he could finish, Violet was already on him. A few quick punches left him and his buddies sprawled on the floor, their teeth scattered on the ground.

The place immediately descended into chaos. Carissa left 20 guards to secure the three exits while she led the rest inside. As they moved further in, a figure caught her eye.

Her heart skipped a beat. She recognized him-the man Gerald always brought with him, who remained outside while Gerald entertained himself.

The man looked to be in his forties, with a sharp, almost delicate appearance. Though unarmed, a long whip hung from his waist.

When Carissa and her group stormed in, he instinctively turned to retreat deeper into the building. Carissa quickly stepped forward, grabbing his shoulder and yanking him back.

To her surprise, he broke free and spun around, pulling out the whip and striking at her without hesitation. After just a few moves, the man was subdued, tied up with rope, and tossed toward the entrance, where the guards from the Capital Guard took over.

The rest of the people tried to flee in panic, but the area was already tightly secured. Every exit was guarded, making escape impossible.

The Sandorian spies, however, were

determined to fight. They were

skilled and vicious, but compared to someone like Michael, they fell short. Naturally, they were no match for Carissa and Violet, who quickly took them down without much trouble.

As for the guests and courtesans enjoying themselves, they were all rounded up as well. Among them were a few officials who wished they could hide their faces behind their sleeves. They recognized Carissa, and at that moment, they felt like dying would be less humiliating.



Carissa pushed open the door to a private room on the second floor. Behind the screen, she found Gerald and two courtesans trying to hide.

She didn't let anyone else enter the room, instead saying coldly, "Should I call people in to drag you out, or will you come out on your own?"

Chapter 1229

Inside, heavy breathing could be heard-panicked and unsteady.

Perhaps Gerald had never experienced such chaos in his entire life.

No matter how big the problem, he had always been able to handle it with ease.

But this? This was beyond his control.

The thought of dying here was mortifying enough, but the idea of his body being found in such a place was even worse-especially since, on the eve of the New Year, he had sternly scolded Carissa before leaving the palace.

"Come out!" Carissa shouted again, her voice sharp and commanding.

Two barefoot courtesans stepped out. The room was warm, heated by silver charcoal. Carpets cover the floor, making it easy to walk barefoot.

"Will you leave on your own, or must I escort you?" Carissa asked calmly.

The two courtesans hurried out, leaving Gerald behind the screen, trembling faintly.

Carissa grabbed the embroidered tablecloth from the tabletop and moved behind the screen, draping it over Gerald. Then, she seized his arm and said, "Let's go!"

With the tablecloth obscuring his face, Gerald stumbled as Carissa led him down the stairs. Though his head was lowered, he kept it high enough to see the path.

He was confused. Carissa couldn't have seen him, as he had hidden behind the screen beforehand and hadn't made any contact with her. But it seemed as though Carissa knew who he was, and she allowed him some dignity. As she pulled him downstairs, she didn't use much force. Instead, she was careful to support him as he stumbled.

Gerald was bundled into a carriage, separate from the others, who were all being dragged away.

His mind raced, looking for any means of escape. If he revealed his true identity, perhaps he could strike a deal with Carissa. Surely, with enough incentive, she would let him go.

But he couldn't be sure that Carissa knew who he was. With his disguise, most people wouldn't recognize him.

Though it was night, the scene caused quite a stir. Many people gathered along the way to watch as the procession moved along. Several officials were shoved into a carriage, while the others who had been caught had cloths wrapped around their faces.

From the way the cloths were torn, it was clear they had been ripped from tablecloths and used to cover their faces.

The Sandorian spies were escorted separately, heading for the Supreme Court. Carissa had already made arrangements with Matthew to have them transferred to Randall's custody for questioning, with further decisions to be made afterward.

The rest of those detained were locked away in the Capital Guard headquarters' prison.

The prison was simple just four walls with an entrance so low one had to bend down to get in. It hadn't been used in a long time and hadn't been cleaned. As soon as they entered, a musty smell hit their noses. After the stench, there was a bone-chilling cold. The walls were cracked, with small holes letting in the wind.

All the so-called guests looked terrified. This was a fear beyond the usual dread. It was a fear that outstripped even the cold embrace of death.

In their circle, having a preference for male companionship was normal. But in the eyes of society, having such a preference meant facing harsh condemnation.

Carissa didn't have anyone remove the cloth covering their faces. They could take them off themselves if they wanted or keep them on.

No one removed their cloths, even

those who had been drinking and having fun in groups. It didn't matter if their faces were covered now, since they had already seen each other when they were caught. The cloths were only put on when they were being taken out, so they could cover their faces if they wanted. It didn't make a difference.

As for Gerald, he still had a cloth covering his head, sitting stiffly in the corner like a wooden statue.

While others' eyes were visible, his

entire head and upper body were covered by the cloth. Even his lower clothes and shoes were hidden, especially when he curled up.

Besides Gerald, there were a few officials and more than a dozen noble family sons present.

One figure quietly approached Gerald-it was his personal guard, Cody Langley. He had fought with Carissa and had also been caught. Now, his face was covered by a cloth, leaving only his eyes visible. After searching the room, he found Gerald and settled beside him.

"Do you think we can fight our way out?" Gerald's voice was low, trembling with panic.

"I can't beat any of them," Cody whispered.

Gerald's face turned ashen. He didn't know what awaited him, and the uncertainty was the most terrifying

part.

Chapter 1230

The news of the gentlemen's retreats' raid spread like wildfire through the entire capital.

Fabian was struck dumb with shock. He had been feeling unwell that evening and hadn't gone to any of the retreats, never imagining it would be seized.

The gentlemen's retreats had been in business for years, hosting many of the capital's elite. If Salvador had intended to shut it down, surely someone would have tipped him off.

But there had been no warning-it had simply been raided out of the blue!

When Fabian finally returned to his senses, he immediately called for one of his most trusted servants. He needed to know who had carried out the raid-and, more urgently, whether Gerald had been there tonight. He was well aware that Gerald frequented the retreat, and he had always kept that knowledge a secret.

Even the rest of the Quinton family was unaware, except for Gerald's trusted servant, Cody. To Gerald, the only person in the gentlemen's retreat who knew his identity was the steward.

The stableman who took care of the horses wasn't arrested and rushed straight to Glandale Estate to report the situation.

There was no need for further investigation. Two major pieces of news had already come to light. One, Carissa had brought the Capital Guard and the Garrison Unit and led the raid. Two, the white-faced old man had also been taken and was now being held at the Capital Guard headquarters.

The stableman hadn't known Gerald's true identity-only that he was the "white-faced old man". Fabian's eyes widened in alarm. "Doesn't that mean someone saw him?"

"They were all covered up when they were taken, sir. The old man's face was concealed with a tablecloth, so no one could see his face."

But that didn't ease Fabian's mind. He knew that once they reached the Capital Guard headquarters, Gerald's identity would likely be discovered, especially by Carissa. After all, the Quinton family had once offended her.

Plus, Fabian's youngest daughter Hailey had been causing trouble with Jocelyn at Gracewood Women's Academy. Eventually, everyone withdrew from the school, mostly because of some things

Kylie had said. There were old grievances here, and if Carissa knew Gerald's true identity, she would make a public spectacle of it.

That would be a real disaster.

What made matters worse was the fact that the gentlemen's retreat had been established at Eleanor's suggestion. Fabian had invested money in it, and after Eleanor fell from grace, the retreats had become entirely his. Not many knew this, but if an investigation were to be carried out, it would all come to light. Opening the gentlemen's retreat wasn't a grave offense, but what terrified Fabian was if Carissa accused him of being involved in Eleanor's treason plot. If that happened, his family name would be ruined, and he would never live it down.

Fabian couldn't help but regret letting his daughter run wild at the academy.

And as for the Quinton family-they should have kept better control over Jocelyn. But Fabian couldn't openly blame the Quinton family, not now. He needed to be on their good side.

To get out of this mess, he would need the Quinton family's help. They were his only hope, but Gerald had already been arrested. If the Quinton family found out, they might blame Fabian. Forget about getting their help he would be lucky if they didn't make things worse for him.

Regardless, he needed to inform the Quinton family about this matter. They had more connections than he did. If they could get Gerald out before he froze or starved to death in the Capital Guard headquarters, it would be a miracle.

Fabian ordered a carriage to be prepared and left the estate. Instead of going straight to the main residence to consult with Malcolm, he headed to his elder sister's house.

Gerald's brothers had all split off and had their own residences. Gerald lived in the main house, while his second, third, and fourth brothers lived in nearby properties that were still connected.

Fabian's elder sister had married Gerald's third brother as a secondary wife. While she didn't hold much power in the Quinton family, she was still Malcolm's

aunt-in-law, and Gerald was heel

older brother-in-law. For the Sake of

both the Quinton and the Marquis of Glandale's family, she had a duty to help.

After hearing her brother's words, Betty Schmitt trembled all over.

"My heavens, you've stirred up a hornet's nest she muttered, trembling. "What are we going to do now? Why didn't you tell me sooner? If you'd said something earlier, at least the family could have helped you! Now that he's in Lady

arissa's

hands, do you think she'll-tet him off

easily?"

Although Betty kept to herself most

of the time, she hadn't missed a single piece of gossip from the outside world. She had married a man who was much older than her, and while she was greatly favored in the family, she held little real power. She had no other ambition than to enjoy a life of wealth and luxury.

But if something happened to Gerald and her natal family got dragged into it, how could she possibly stay in the Quinton household?

"Don't tell your brother-in-law about this. He's not in good health," Betty said. She knew that staying out of this matter was going to be hard, but after thinking it over, she realized she couldn't get involved just yet. "Betty, we should ask him for help. He's still Lord Malcolm's third uncle. Surely he can speak on our behalf," Fabian pleaded.

Betty shook her head. "The fewer people who know about this, the better. Don't say you came to me for help. If things get really bad and we need to plead for mercy, then I'll step in."

Suddenly, she had an idea. "Also, you could suggest to Lord Malcolm that Lord Logan and Princess Kiera go to Carissa and plead for mercy."

Fabian nodded eagerly. "Yes, that's right! Logan married Princess Kiera, and Lord Gerald is Lord Logan's grandfather. As his grandson, Lord Logan can't possibly stay out of this.'