

## War Song 1241

### Chapter 1241

The group chattered away, exchanging stories of what had happened since their last meeting. Then, came the big news-a bombshell, really-that Cynthia and Bun were officially betrothed. Carissa and Violet were both stunned. They shot to their feet, staring at the couple in disbelief. Carissa, chin in hand, mused, "Well, I'll be. They really do look like a married couple now, don't they? Both with those round, cherubic faces.'

Violet raised an eyebrow, adding, "Now that you mention it, they do have the same features-eyes, ears, nose, mouth, all in perfect proportion. Are we sure they aren't siblings?"

Cynthia blushed deeply and scoffed. "Ugh, you two are the ones who look like siblings."

Violet looked between them and asked, "But seriously, when did you two catch each other's eye?" Violet was already thinking about whether she would need to prepare a wedding gift or add to Cynthia's trousseau. Well, she might end up doing both since the bride and groom were both her good friends. She sighed happily. It had been a long time since she had the pleasure of spending money so freely. "Go ahead and tell them, Thia," Bun said, glancing at her.

He really had become much more composed. His slimmer face even made him look rather handsome now.

"It wasn't about catching each other's eye. It's just that I'm at the right age, and my mentor said we shouldn't let good things go to outsiders, so he told me to take him," Cynthia explained, slightly embarrassed.

"Good things, huh?" Violet teased, looking back and forth between them. "Alright, Bun, you've lost weight but you're still a good thing, I suppose."

In the Crystal Bloom Guild, many of the senior apprentices married among themselves, mainly because they rarely interacted with outsiders. Besides, when young men and women spent so much time together, it was inevitable that some feelings would develop.

Cynthia and Bun had fought side by side

battles, sharing a bond of camaraderie and mutual respect. Having grown up together, their paths had intertwined over the years. They weren't perfect, but they had grown to understand each other well enough to know that they could live a happy life together.

After the congratulatory remarks and a few sighs, the conversation shifted to the raid on the gentlemen's retreats that Carissa had carried out.

"To think you had to stay up all night, Cari. Being an official must be tough. Thank goodness we didn't stay in the capital," Cynthia said, her face full of sympathy.

"I saw the frustration on your face when you came in. Did someone upset you? If it's both exhausting and frustrating, why bother being an official? Come back to Meadow Ridge with us, life would be so much more carefree and enjoyable there," she added.

Carissa naturally longed to return to Meadow Ridge-the thought alone made her happy.

"I will, eventually. Not right now, though. Growing up means taking on responsibilities. Once I've wrapped up all the things I'm working on, I'll convince Raf to come back with me and settle down at Meadow Ridge," said Carissa.

Violet sighed. "But even if you go back to Meadow Ridge, it won't be all sunshine and roses. Your martial uncle's rules are strict."

Carissa stood tall, her chest puffed out with pride. "I'm not worried. I have Raf, whom Sage Everett dotes on. He's also fiercely protective of Raf, and I'm sure he'll extend that affection to me too."

"You're right about that! I don't think there's anywhere better than Meadow Ridge. If Cari's going back, I'm following her. They'll probably have kids in the future, and I'm going to be their godmother!" Violet said with a chuckle, sounding more enthusiastic now.

The four of them chatted all the way into the afternoon, their excitement and joy making it seem like the conversation would never run out of

steam. The only regret was that o

Travis wasn't there. If he was, the five young generals from the

battlefield would have been reunited.

Eventually, it was Violet who urged Carissa to rest. After all, staying up all night couldn't be good for her health.

Carissa was still riding high on excitement, but knowing she had to return to the Capital Guard headquarters later that evening to stand watch, she reluctantly agreed to take a break.

Meanwhile, Violet led Cynthia and Bun out for a stroll, and naturally, they couldn't avoid overhearing the buzz about the shocking events from the night before.

The people of the city were all guessing which officials and aristocrats had been taken from the gentlemen's retreats. It wasn't hard to figure out, though. All they had to do was look at which families were gathered outside the Capital Guard headquarters.

The Marquis of Glandale's family's affairs couldn't stay hidden for long. That morning, officials from the Supreme Court had already gone to search their estate. Less than a day later, their secrets were laid bare.

Rumor had it that someone had

seen Fabian in his carriage, struggling with a handsome young man who was later tossed out of the carriage. Some of the servants from Fabian's household spoke about his clear preference for men, claiming he only married women to produce heirs. Others, however, said he was fine with both men and women.

Whatever the truth, the Marquis of Glandale's reputation was thoroughly tarnished.

At a nearby coffeehouse, Violet, Bun, and Cynthia spent a good while listening to gossip. One of the

stories floating around was at

Malcolm, who had been seen

entering and leaving the Capital Guard headquarters late last night. People wondered if some of the Quinton family's younger members had ended up at the gentlemen's retreats as well.

No one suspected Gerald. The common folk had vivid imaginations, but there were limits to what they

could come up with, which was why no one thought to consider Gerald, a royal tutor.

The Quinton family, of course, was keeping a close watch on the rumors. If any talk started pointing fingers at Gerald, they would quickly find a way to shut it down.

#### Chapter 1242

The trio listened as the common folk continued to praise Carissa. They spoke of her efforts in establishing Gracewood Women's Academy and Skye Embroidery, and how she had now even cleaned up such a filthy place. She was truly a remarkable woman.

Of course, where there was praise, there was also criticism. Some whispered that a woman's place was in the home, managing the household as well as bearing children and raising them.

"Lady Carissa has been married for so long, yet she hasn't even had a child. She's neglected her proper duties as a wife, and worse, she's doing a man's work."

Violet, having grown used to such talk, merely rolled her eyes. But Cynthia and Bun, ever protective of their friend, were quick to react. They were about to step forward to argue when Violet caught them by the

arm.

With a smile, she said, "Let them talk. Don't waste your breath. It's nothing to lose sleep over. If we engage, we'll only cause Cari more trouble. Besides, there are plenty of people who will defend her. She has quite a following."

And sure enough, voices soon rose in defense of Carissa.

Feeling reassured, Cynthia murmured, "Cari is only growing more remarkable."

Meanwhile, trouble continued to brew at the Capital Guard headquarters. Gerald hadn't eaten or drunk anything all day. By nightfall, a high fever struck him. Despite the heat of two charcoal stoves and the weight of two thick blankets, he trembled uncontrollably.

Carissa sent word to Malcolm, who panicked and was at a loss. He was too afraid to call in any outside physicians, so he could only rely on the household physician from the estate.

Malcolm had already received a stern reprimand from Salvador and had his salary docked for a year on top of his original punishment. After leaving the palace, he was relentlessly focused on how to fix the situation, and now, another problem had arisen.

The situation he found himself in now was like a wildfire only blocked by a thin cloth. Whether that cloth was burned through or set alight, it would be a disaster for the Quinton family. The only thing he could be thankful for was that Salvador didn't seem to want to see the Quinton family fall.

In his heart, Malcolm felt torn toward Carissa-grateful yet resentful. Grateful that she continued to shield the Quinton family from disgrace, but resentful that she hadn't warned him sooner. But he couldn't voice this resentment, especially since Kylie had originally opposed Gracewood Women's Academy. Why should Carissa tell him anything?

Carissa had already said it

herself-she hadn't expected Gerald would make another trip to the gentlemen's retreat so soon after just having been there. Maybe this was just bound to happen; the Quinton family had grown too

strong, too quickly.

With a high fever, Gerald rambled incoherently. Carissa wouldn't allow anyone near him except for Malcolm and the household physician. Naturally, she insisted on staying, wanting to know exactly how Gerald was faring.

His fever-induced ramblings made little sense to her. His words were muddled and soft, yet heavy with sorrow. It was as if he was longing for something he could never have, no matter how hard he tried. They fed him medicine, but by midnight, his fever still showed no sign of breaking.

The household physician explained that Gerald's condition was brought on by the strain of emotional turmoil-an anxious heart, combined with two days without food or drink, had finally overwhelmed him. Simply put, it was his mind that had faltered first. The arrest had been a deep humiliation for him, something he could not bear to face.

By morning, Gerald's condition hadn't improved, and the household physician shook his head in dismay. Carissa called for Malcolm to step outside, then suggested, "I think we should call for Sebastian, or perhaps take Lord Gerald back to the Quinton family's residence."

Malcolm knelt, his hands pressed over his face, the weight of exhaustion heavy on him. He hadn't slept in two days and was on the verge of collapsing.

He knew that calling for Sebastian meant that more people would be in the know. Taking Gerald back to the estate was an option, but it had its complications. Salvador could be appeased, but how could they bring Gerald back home in this state?

Not to mention, there were shops that opened early, and there were people hustling along the roads. There was also the chilly wind

cutting through the air, making net

impossible to let him out in his current state. With a fever that high, exposure to the cold could be fatal.

"Lord Malcolm, you should make your own decision. I'm just offering my suggestions."

With that, Carissa turned away and returned to the building.

After a brief pause, Malcolm finally agreed to summon Sebastian. Carissa sent Max to personally handle

the task.

Chapter 1243

And so, Sebastian, the renowned physician sought after by many, was called to the Capital Guard headquarters.

After examining Gerald, he retrieved a vial of medicine and administered it to him before performing needle treatment. Within 15 minutes, Gerald stirred and began to sweat, his fever finally breaking somewhat.

Sebastian stepped outside to speak with Carissa for a moment.

"His condition isn't great to begin with. His health is already weak, and he looks like he's gone without food or water for two days. His heart, lungs, and stomach are all in poor shape. But the biggest issue is the mental toll. That's the hardest to treat.

"Every minute he stays here is another minute of suffering. He has no will to live. It's better to send him back for treatment as soon as possible, or he might die here at the Capital Guard headquarters."

"The problem is, how do we get him out of here?" Carissa asked, frustrated. "It's already morning. And with his condition so bad, it's risky for him to go out and be exposed to the cold. He might even refuse to leave on his own."

Sebastian thought for a moment before suggesting, "Prepare a few hand warmers and wrap him up warmly. He can ride in my carriage with me, and we'll head to Arcane Sanctum first.

"Then, when I'm about to see patients, have someone from the Quinton family come to Arcane Sanctum and loudly say that Lord Gerald has collapsed and needs immediate treatment. That way, I can take the carriage and accompany him back to the house to avoid attention."

"That's a clever plan! I'll inform Lord Malcolm right away," Carissa said, then hurried off.

When Malcolm heard the plan, he exhaled in relief. It was the best option-no one would question

Sebastian's actions. Malcolm felt deeply grateful and thanked him over and over again.

Sebastian had already removed his coat and hat so that Gerald could change into them. With people

already moving about outside, Gerald had to disguise himself as Sebastian. It was crucial that no one recognize him. They also needed to find someone to escort him discreetly.

Malcolm went to Gerald to explain the situation. The old man could stand, but his legs were weak. Though he could walk with assistance, reaching the carriage seemed impossible.

But this was the only solution they had.

When Gerald said it was impossible, Malcolm almost collapsed in frustration, saying, "You keep saying everything is impossible. Do you actually want the whole world to know what you've done?"

Gerald's makeup had been wiped away, but his complexion remained ghostly pale, tinged with a sickly yellow. His cheeks were hollow, and the skin beneath his eyes sagged terribly. His hair had almost turned completely white, making him look much older than his years.

It was true what people said—stress or grief from a tough situation could make a person age rapidly.

Gerald didn't look up. With a voice

devoid of energy, he muttered, "There's no need for me to go. Let me die here. Afterward, just wrap me in white cloth and say I went to the countryside to recover. Announce my passing six months later."

When Malcolm heard his father's words, he felt immense sorrow.

"Dad, you mustn't think that way," he chided, his voice cracking with despair.

At the sound of Malcolm calling him "Dad", Gerald slowly looked up. There was a haunting emptiness in his eyes as he let out a bitter laugh.

"My son, this is the best way for the Quinton family."

Tears welled up in Malcolm's eyes. "No, I can't stand by and watch you die. This... this isn't so dire. No one knows about you. Even Lord Fabian wouldn't dare say anything."

Gerald closed his eyes once more, whispering with finality, "My mind is made up."



Death no longer frightened him. If anything, he had grown keenly aware of how fragile his life was, knowing it could slip away at any moment.

No matter how much Malcolm pleaded, Gerald remained resolute.

Feeling helpless, Malcolm stepped outside, seeking Sebastian and Carissa's counsel.

Sebastian sighed deeply. "He

refuses to step out of this room. If he dies here, he can pretend as though nothing happened. He'll still be seen as a revered royal tutor,

both in life and death. It's nothing

but self-deception."

Michael pulled Carissa aside, urgently saying, "We can't let him die here. If word gets to His Majesty, the

Capital Guard won't be able to bear the consequences."

Chapter 1244

Carissa knew all too well the gravity of the situation.

Salvador had already berated her for not informing him of this matter in advance. If Gerald were to die here at the headquarters, her comrades in the Capital Guard would surely face the consequences. But how could she have warned Gerald in advance? Was she supposed to have sent someone to the Quinton family's residence and have them tell him that the Capital Guard was about to raid the gentlemen's retreats?

It would be a miracle if the Quinton family didn't tear her apart for it. Who would believe that the old man would ever venture near a gentlemen's retreat? And if Gerald denied it, she would be the one caught in a trap, painted as troublemaker.

Carissa furrowed her brow. "If he chose to go to the gentlemen's retreat, he should've known this day would come. If he couldn't face it, he shouldn't have gone in the first place."

She went to speak with Malcolm, but even after the latter spent an hour trying to persuade his father, there was no progress. The old man remained silent, his eyes closed, offering no response.

Malcolm tried to feed him medicine and water, but Gerald's lips remained tightly shut. The liquid trickled down his chin, and not a single drop made it down his throat. It was worse than when he was unconscious.

Carissa watched from the side, sensing that Gerald might want to die, but there was also anger in him. Why did he insist on dying here, at the Capital Guard headquarters? Why involve so many people? Even when Malcolm told him that Salvador hadn't blamed him, Gerald still showed no reaction.

Carissa couldn't tolerate this any longer. She asked Malcolm and everyone else to leave, then grabbed the last remaining chair from the side room and sat down in front of Gerald.

"Lord Gerald, you blame me for this situation, don't you?" Carissa asked.

Gerald didn't open his eyes. In fact, there wasn't a flicker of emotion on his face.

Carissa continued, "You're either blaming me or blaming the world for not accepting someone like you.

But the truth is, you can't blame anyone. The laws of this kingdom didn't force you to marry and have children when you were young. No one could have forced you.

"You gave in to society's expectations-you conformed. And now you want to turn around and blame others and the world? Doesn't that seem foolish to you?

"Just like women, they can complain that the world is unfair to them. No matter what they try to do, there are always people like you who stand up to criticize them. But they don't back down. They push forward, enduring the criticism along the way.

"And you? You never even stood firm in your own beliefs. You never put in any effort for the life you wanted. You were too afraid of losing your glory and your position, but you also wanted to be extraordinary. Now, when you've been caught, you can't even summon the courage to face it.

"I can only say, thank goodness not all men are as cowardly as you. Otherwise, who would defend our borders?

"You're lucky that Sebastian is willing to help you. Whether you want to go or not, I'll release everyone tomorrow. If you don't leave, I'll have someone drag you out on a cart."

Carissa finished speaking in one breath.

Though Gerald still kept his eyes closed, a vein pulsed on his forehead. Her words had angered him, but he remained tucked inside his shell, unwilling to respond. He was indeed a coward.

But Carissa's words had some effect, particularly the last sentence. If he were dragged away on a cart, he would lose all his dignity and reputation.

Soon, Malcolm and Cody helped Gerald into Sebastian's clothes. Meanwhile, Michael took the opportunity to drive away the crowd, as he had been doing several times throughout the day.

After Gerald was sent away, the Capital Guard headquarters remained busy-meals still had to be prepared twice a day for the people being detained.

Once Sebastian's plan to switch identities with Gerald was carried out and the people were released the next day, the Capital Guard headquarters finally quieted down. But the rumors about the gentlemen's retreats were far from over, spreading like wildfire across the city.

For a time, the Quinton family had remained untouched by the scandal. However, just as Malcolm was overwhelmed with worry, a group of scholars began publicly condemning the Marquis of Glandale. They accused him not only of bringing corrupt practices to the nation, but also of running businesses tied to the traitor, Eleanor.

Though the Marquis of Glandale had been imprisoned, Salvador hadn't yet taken action against his family. But when the scholars raised their voices, someone went so far as to accuse him of treason.

The people making the accusation? None other than Malcolm's former pupils.

This enraged the members of the marquis' household. Treason meant the execution of nine generations, after all. Desperate to save themselves, they stepped forward to claim that several of the

gentlemen's retreats were operated under Gerald's orders, and that he

was a frequent visitor himself.

## Chapter 1245

The news, regardless of its shock value, had only one result-it completely enraged Gerald's admirers. Like Trevor, Gerald had been one of Starhaven's most respected scholars and was renowned for his wisdom. Trevor had stepped back from court politics, leaving his influence to dwindle. That was why when trouble befell the Young family, few people spoke up for them.

However, Gerald was different. His son still held a powerful position in the Civil Department, and many officials, unaware of the truth, saw this as a way to win favor with the Quinton family. They clamored in court, demanding the Marquis of Glandale be held accountable for spreading rumors about Gerald. Under normal circumstances, this would have been little more than a passing storm. But that day, several officials and prominent young men had been arrested. Though Salvador tried to preserve their reputations, the common folk were relentless in their gossip. Wherever one went, there were whispers, fingers pointing in every direction.

The officials were desperate to shift the public's attention elsewhere, so they acted quickly.

Within days, servants from the gentlemen's retreats began to speak out. They confirmed they had seen Gerald there on numerous occasions, sometimes braving the fiercest storms just to make the trip. When that happened, the scandal escalated beyond anyone's control.

At first, Salvador had been furious. However, Jeremiah advised that, since the truth had already come to light, it would be unwise to keep covering it up. The matter had become so public that acknowledging it and taking steps to clear up the misunderstanding was the only sensible option.

Moreover, Sigmund had other tutors, and honoring his true mentor would preserve the late king's dignity. Thus, the once-respected scholar, Cloud Draken, was posthumously honored with the title of Royal Tutor. His memorial plaque was moved to the royal chapel.

Cloud had no descendants. He was a scholar who had placed third in the national examinations during the seventh year of Augustus' reign. Brilliant and highly talented, he served as an official for two years before resigning to travel the world.

Upon his return to the capital, Augustus appointed him as tutor to Sigmund, who was crown prince at the time. However, after two years of teaching, Cloud couldn't resist his restless spirit and requested to resign again.

Cloud had a free-spirited personality and often wrote articles criticizing social issues, sometimes in an extremely sharp manner, which made him less liked by people. Later, he turned to poetry and published many collections. After his passing, over a thousand of his poems had been passed down through the world, and he was celebrated as a great poet.

After his death, Sigmund himself wrote a tribute in his honor. Now that he had been posthumously named a royal tutor, it seemed reasonable for his memorial plaque to be moved to the royal chapel.

Salvador had his reasons for this move, one of them being Victoria's words that the Quinton family was large and well-established, with deep, far-reaching connections. It was time to trim a few of their overgrown branches.

What he didn't expect was that before the branches could be trimmed, half of the roots had already been dug up.

There was no way around it. After all, it was something he himself had set in motion. Being a king sometimes required going with the flow, something Salvador knew all too well.

Appointing another royal tutor and moving his memorial plaque to the royal chapel was a heavy blow to the Quinton family. It was as if it was being publicly acknowledged that Gerald had indeed been to the gentlemen's retreat.

Although his title of Royal Tutor wasn't officially revoked, did it really make a difference anymore?

The title itself was just a label. What truly placed Gerald at the peak of power was the respect of others. Now, this incident had dragged him down from the mountaintop straight into the muck. From here on out, every mention of his name would be laced with disgust and disdain. No one would speak of him with respect again.

It was as if a heavy burden had crashed down on the Quinton family. No matter how much they tried to conceal things from Gerald, he always found a way to uncover it.

He had already made up his mind to die, and now there was no trace of a will to live left in him. He refused to eat or drink, no matter how much anyone tried to coax him. Malcolm had even gone to Salvador, pleading for a special favor to allow Kylie to see Gerald, hoping that perhaps she might be able to change his mind.

Kylie believed her royal status could sway him, and she thought surely her words would reach his heart. She was, after all, the king's

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and she held power in her own. She was confident her grandfather would listen to her.

In the end, Kylie sat by Gerald's bedside and spoke for an hour, but he never once opened his eyes to acknowledge her. Not a single drop of the soup she personally spooned into his mouth went down his throat.

It seemed like he was on the brink of death. He refused even to say a final word, which drove the Quinton family to desperation.

Just when Kylie and Malcolm were at their wits' end, Gerald finally uttered something a single request. "I want to see Carissa."

Malcolm refused to send for her.

With tears in his eyes, he said, "Dad, she was only doing her duty. We can't blame her for this. Please just let it go, okay?"

"Find her!"

Those two words came out slowly, painfully, as if each syllable took all of his remaining strength.

After a long pause, he added, "Bring her here... and I will take the medicine."

## Chapter 1246

Tears streamed down Malcolm's face as he knelt before his dad. "Dad, His Majesty no longer favors our family. Why must you force me to offend Hell Monarch's household as well?"

"Then let me die," Gerald replied, his voice barely above a whisper. "If I die, you will all be free."

With those words, he closed his eyes again, his energy all but spent. The few words he managed to say drained him completely.

Kylie had long since harbored a deep hatred for Carissa. The Quinton family, once at the height of power, had been struck a devastating blow by her actions. It left them severely weakened and ruined their reputation.

As a result, Kylie was also implicated.

Once outside, she said to Malcolm, "Since it is Grandfather's wish, then let us call for her. It'd be best to summon Mr. Murray as well. At least then, we'll have a witness to see how she's the one who's driven Grandfather to his death."

Malcolm abruptly lifted his head. "What are you saying? Do you truly want to see your grandfather die? Is that what you want?!"

"Dad," Kylie said, wiping away her tears. The cold calculation in her eyes was unmistakable. "Grandfather's right. Once he dies, our family will finally be free. As long as he lives, we'll be under scrutiny. Once he's gone, people will start to celebrate his accomplishments. In time, they'll forget about him going to the gentlemen's retreats. All they'll remember is the good he has done."

Malcolm could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Are you out of your mind? This is just your grandfather's angry outburst! How can you take this seriously?"

"Listen to me," Kylie said, holding up her hand for him to calm down. "Isn't Carissa to blame for what happened to Grandfather? He blamed her. That's why he wanted to see her to die in front of her. This is his way of getting revenge, but also a way of freeing our family. Being devoted is about following his wishes. If he wants this, then as his descendants, we must comply. That's how we show our respect." Malcolm disagreed. "No! We don't need to make an enemy of the Hell Monarch's household. Carissa may have done things I don't agree with, but she is a righteous

person. Her actions to cleanse the gentlemen's retreats were the king's orders, and there were Sandoria spies there. This wasn't a targeted move against our family."

Kylie was livid "Dad, you're blind to the truth! Whether we intended it or not, our family has already crossed paths with the Hell Monarch's household. We may try to walk the righteous path, but they'll be scheming behind our backs!

"If we don't act first, we'll only end up manipulated. Right now, our family is suffering. The only way forward is to unite and help Connor secure his place as Crown Prince. After a few more years of patience, we'll return to our former glory.

"Right now, the Hell Monarch's household has already shown they don't support Connor. The Hell Monarch and Lady Sylvia's dad, Lord Patrick, are too close. If he backs Lady Sylvia's son, our family will never rise again!"

When Malcolm remained unmoved, Kylie's frustration boiled over.

"Dad, you said it yourself-Connor lacks the talent to secure his future on his own. You've worked to strategize for him before. Why have you stopped now? Have you given up on him?"

Malcolm was now in a state of confusion and unable to sort out his thoughts. He repeated himself in circles, lost in his indecision.

"This is different. Offending the Hell Monarch does no good for Connor or our family. Bringing Carissa to see your grandfather won't benefit us, either. If our two families become enemies because of this, it will be irreversible."

Kylie felt a pang of disappointment in her dad.

"Once this opportunity passes, there's no turning back. We don't want to wage war with the Hell Monarch's household, but Carissa is at fault here.

"Even if it's not because of Grandfather, she should have spoken up for King Sigmund's sake. Now, Grandfather specifically wants to see her, and I happen to be here. I'll summon her myself. She won't dare refuse.



"If Grandfather dies in front of her,

the Hell Monarch's household will have no choice but to avoid us from then on. I don't understand what you mean by offending them. Hearing such words-words that lift others while diminishing our

strength-coming from me

own

dad's mouth truly leaves me disappointed and heartbroken."

After she finished speaking, she ignored the continued attempts by Malcolm to persuade her and

immediately sent someone to summon Carissa and Jeremiah.

Chapter 1247

Upon receiving Kylie's summons, Carissa found herself bewildered.

Why was she being asked to meet Gerald? If they wanted to question her, they could have called her directly to the palace. Why go to the Quinton family's residence to see him?

Gerald was gravely ill. If he wanted to scold her, she wouldn't even have the chance to retort. And if he died in front of her, no words would save her then.

Violet had filled her in on Gerald's condition, gathered from the past couple of days' inquiries. He had stopped eating and drinking, and it seemed like he was on the brink of death.

"Does Gerald want you there to watch him die? That old man's got some malice," Cynthia said.

She was aware of the whole situation, and she had always been sharp-tongued. Knowing how Gerald had treated Carissa, Cynthia didn't hesitate to speak her mind.

"Don't go just refuse the order," Bun chimed in from the side. "The queen's order isn't that serious. The king's reaction is what really matters.

Violet had matured a lot now, and she said, "Ignoring the queen's summons might seem like no big deal on the surface, but the king will remember. He might not show it, but he'll definitely hold a grudge since he'll think you're disrespecting him. You're better off going. At least you'll be able to go on record as having done your duty. It was bound to happen, and there's no avoiding it."

Violet knew how Salvador operated. When things were fine, there were no issues. But when things went south, he would remember every little detail. He wouldn't come out and say it, but he would give the person the cold shoulder and make life difficult for them.

Carissa had already felt his frustration because of the gentlemen's retreat incident.

In short, both the king and queen were difficult to deal with.

"I'll go with you, Cari," Violet said.

Carissa thought for a moment. Given how things had escalated, she knew she would be blamed no matter what. At least she had the accomplishment of capturing the spies from the Sandoria.

Fine, she would go.

"You don't need to come with me. I'll have Sebastian accompany me, and I'll request Madam Marjorie to come along as well."

Carissa believed the Quinton family wasn't completely without boundaries. If Kylie had set a trap, she could try to avoid it. But even if she did, they would still use Gerald's death against her. In that case, it was better to go there herself and bring witnesses to ensure she was covered.

It was better to be accused directly than to remain ignorant of a trap. At least this way, she would know what she was up against.

"Alright, I'll go see Sebastian and ask if he's willing to go with you," Cynthia offered.

Violet grinned knowingly. "No need to ask. He'll agree without question. Sebastian's always looking out for her."

Cynthia smiled brightly. "That's great!"

Cynthia and Bun both believed that

no matter how big the problem was, it could always be dealt with. If they needed people, they had them. If they needed money, Violet would provide it. If all else failed, they could retreat to Meadow Ridge. It wasn't a big deal.

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When Carissa arrived with Sebastian at the Quinton family's residence, they saw Jeremiah already waiting at the gates. She watched as the coachman helped Jeremiah down the carriage. The moment he emerged, Carissa couldn't help but notice his head full of white hair.

She sighed softly. She had heard from Natalie that Jeremiah had been wanting to retire to his hometown

for years. But as each year passed, he hadn't been able to let go. He just couldn't bring himself to let go of his duties to the kingdom.

Even in a situation like this, it was still him who had to come personally.

Carissa felt a pang of guilt in her heart.

She knew exactly why Kylie had called Jeremiah. It was to have him as a witness-if Gerald passed away after scolding Carissa, they would say she drove him to his death by angering him.

Jeremiah certainly couldn't go into court and argue on her behalf. He couldn't tell them that Gerald was already on his deathbed and wouldn't have lasted long anyway, even if he hadn't gotten angry.

No one would care about the details. They would only look at the outcome.

Carissa stepped forward and said respectfully, "Thank you for making the trip, Mr. Murray."

"You're too kind, Commander Sinclair," Jeremiah said with a smile. "I was just thinking of visiting Lord Gerald."

Then, he turned to Sebastian and nodded slightly. "How are you, Sebastian?"

"I've been doing well. Thank you for asking, Mr. Murray," Sebastian responded with a smile, nodding in return.

The three of them entered together

and made their way into the main hall, where they found Kylie already seated in the grand chair. Several members of the Quinton family were gathered, including Logan's dad, Heath Quinton. He was idly tossing a leather ball back and forth

completely unfazed by the solemnity of the situation.

Upon spotting Carissa, Heath smiled. He knew she was his daughter-in-law's sister-in-law, so he stood up

with a chuckle and offered her the leather ball.

"Here, have a go. It's a lot of fun. My son made it for me."

"Heath, stop being rude!" Malcolm quickly scolded.

Carissa smiled and took the leather ball. She tossed the ball quickly between her hands in rapid movements that were almost too fast to follow, leaving Heath in awe as he clapped in admiration. "Enough!" Kylie's sharp voice broke the moment.

She turned to Jeremiah.

"I called you here today to accompany Carissa into the inner chambers to meet my grandfather. If there's any dispute, you can act as a mediator."

Chapter 1248

Jeremiah bowed in respect and said, "Your Majesty's command is one I dare not disregard. After all, I am but a humble servant. However, Lady Carissa is here to visit Lord Gerald, and there is no personal enmity between them. I do not foresee any dispute."

In front of the thousand-year-old fox, Kylie was no more than a young weasel-with ill intentions but clumsy methods.

Using her position as queen, Kylie boldly plotted against Carissa. She was fully aware that it could cost her grandfather his life, yet she showed no concern at all.

Contrary to Carissa's expectations, Jeremiah was indeed willing to testify and would argue on her behalf with reason.

He cast a cold glance at the Quinton family. "Ah, a fine group of devoted descendants. Lord Gerald should have no regrets."

Anyone who understood the situation lowered their heads, too afraid to meet Jeremiah's gaze.

Before Carissa could speak, Marjorie stood up. "Commander Sinclair, thank you for bringing Mr. Dalton to treat my father-in-law. Your kindness is truly appreciated."

Kylie clearly hadn't expected her mom to speak up, and her expression darkened in an instant.

"Mom, it is enough for the royal physician to attend to grandfather. A village physician like this has no business treating him."

She knew that Sebastian was proud, and by insulting him, he would likely leave in a huff. If she could best Carissa at this moment, she wouldn't care if she offended Sebastian.

But the Quinton family members, realizing the implications, shifted uneasily. The medicine Gerald had used in the past had often come from Arcane Sanctum, and with such a large family, they regularly relied on Sebastian's expertise.

Sebastian's skills were even beyond the chief physician in the Royal Medical Department. If the Quinton family offended him, who would be able to call upon his services in the future?

They expected Sebastian to take offense, but to their surprise, he only smiled.

"To be called a village physician by Her Majesty-what an honor. At least I'm a physician recognized by the queen herself."

"Didn't Lord Gerald want to see me? Please lead the way," Carissa said, dismissing the need for further pleasantries. "I dare not disobey Her Majesty's command, but I'm sure the king and queen won't object to me bringing Mr. Dalton in with me."

Carissa's words were clear-she had only come out of respect for Salvador.

"Show her the way," Kylie said calmly.

Malcolm led the way. Marjorie wanted to go with Carissa, but Lydia grabbed her, even pulling her to

Kylie's side without worrying about offending her.

Kylie's gaze was as cold as ice. "Mom, please think of your grandson."

"You're only hurting Prince Connor by doing this." Marjorie's voice was tinged with frustration. "And you're condemning your grandfather to death."

"Grandfather no longer wants to live," Kylie replied stubbornly, her chin raised. "He's seeking revenge, and I'm helping him. Do you understand, Mom?"

"All I understand is that you want to

use your grandfather's death to bring down Lady Carissa. I'm telling you now, it won't work." Marjorie shook her head. "His Majesty will not abandon Lady Carissa now. On the contrary, he allowed you to return to the estate to demonstrate your devotion to your family, not to use such dirty tricks to harm others."

Kylie's face hardened. "Are you saying I'm using dirty tricks? I am your daughter, and you choose to side with outsiders and criticize me? Since you don't care for me, don't blame me for failing my duties as your daughter."

Her expression grew sharp. "Guards, take the madam back to her chambers and keep her under close watch. No one is to allow her out without my permission."

Marjorie's shoulders sagged slightly, and she cast a disappointed glance at her daughter.

"You've truly lost your way."

Kylie coldly watched as Marjorie

was dragged away. This time, when

returning to her family home, Kylie brought many trusted palace servants who were all at her command. Even the Quinton family members present dared not defy her.

Once Marjorie was out of sight, Kylie turned to Lydia and motioned for her to follow. The two of them made their way to Gerald's residence.

There, Cody emerged from the room and bowed respectfully. "My lord, Lord Gerald wishes to meet only with Lady Carissa.

"Please inform Lord Gerald that Mr. Murray is here to visit, and Mr. Dalton is also here."

"I'm afraid Lord Gerald insists on meeting only with Lady Carissa," Cody replied.

Kylie arrived just in time to hear the conversation and she immediately ordered, "Let Carissa go in the

bedroom alone, but everyone else

may remain inside the hall. Also, summon the Quinton family

members to wait in the outer hall if Grandfather has any instructions for them."

The bedroom was separated from the main hall by a curtain, and the distance was short enough that the conversation could easily be heard.

Kylie knew that whether or not Carissa could handle the confrontation, once Gerald became enraged, it would undoubtedly hasten his condition.

The royal physician had warned that if anger overwhelmed Gerald, there was a risk of the outcome being fatal.

#### Chapter 1249

A delicate curtain separated the bedroom from the inner hall. As Carissa parted the beaded curtain, the soft sound of pearls clinking together echoed in the quiet room.

People said a small room helped preserve energy. For the elderly, the room shouldn't be too spacious, as it could cause the life force to scatter and harm their health.

Thus, the room was modest in size, with carved cherrywood bed positioned to the east and a low couch to the south. A small wardrobe stood nearby, though Carissa had already noticed another wardrobe in the inner hall, suggesting that this one had been specially added.

She glanced around the room, noting the fine, elegant furnishings-everything was of the highest quality. "Lord Gerald," Carissa called softly. When she thought about it, there was no personal grudge between them. Their paths had merely crossed at the wrong time.

Gerald opened his eyes slowly, his dull, murky gaze sweeping the room. Only when he confirmed that it was just her did he sigh wearily.

He was frail, his breathing shallow-indeed, he seemed to be at the very end of his strength.

On the table beside him was a bowl of medicine and a bowl of gruel that was still warm. It seemed someone had tried to feed him, but he had refused.

He lifted a trembling hand and pointed weakly at the gruel.



Carissa looked over at the bowl. "You want some gruel? I'll have someone feed you."

Cody entered at once, casting a grateful glance at Carissa. Gerald hadn't eaten for several days, and now

he wanted gruel just because Carissa was here. For this alone, Cody was deeply appreciative.

Outside, Kylie listened carefully, a slight frown forming on her face. This wasn't what she had expected- why was Gerald eating gruel now? She thought for a moment, deciding that perhaps he lacked the strength to scold Carissa and needed the nourishment just to keep his energy up.

She would wait and see.

Gerald drank little, and the gruel was thin and brewed with nourishing herbs. After finishing nearly half a bowl, he shook his head and gestured for Cody to leave.

After Gerald had consumed some gruel, Cody nearly burst into tears. If Gerald died, he too would likely follow soon after. For now, he hadn't yet been summoned for judgment as Gerald still needed him. After eating the gruel with nourishing herbs, Carissa could tell from Gerald's breathing that he had improved slightly. But he did not speak right away. He was too weak, and even the nourishing herbs would take some time to show its effects.

The Quinton family had naturally only brought in top-quality herbs to be used.

Carissa pulled up a chair and sat down beside his bed, just as she had at the Capital Guard headquarters.

Gerald's eyes were half-closed, and he began to speak in a weak voice.

"That day, you said I hadn't fought for anything. Today, I called you here..."

He exhaled slowly, then inhaled with great effort. It was as though it took all his strength to draw in a

breath.

After a long pause, he continued, "I want to tell you that some things, no matter how hard you fight for, are in vain. They only harm both others and yourself."

Carissa remained silent, understanding that he wasn't finished.

After another pause, he went on, "What you're doing now... It won't succeed, either. The success you see now is but an illusion. In the end, in the world we live in... It won't be allowed."

He gasped for air several times, and a murky tear slid down from the corner of his eye. "Years ago, King Sigmund forbade it because...because he saw right through me."

His thin, brittle hand clutched the blanket, the veins standing out like twisted roots, as he fought to speak

his words. "One cannot defy the king's command! If you can't fight, then...then surrender."

Carissa felt he had said all he wanted. His eyes closed with exhaustion, his breathing shallow and labored.

Finally, she said, "Actually, there's no

need to bring up the past. You made your choices when you were young. Let's focus on just one thing-officials are not allowed to visit the red-light districts. As a Royal Tutor, even if you didn't go to the gentlemen's retreat, you would've been condemned if you'd stepped into the entertainment parlors."

"Yes, I was wrong," he murmured softly, "but when I went to the gentlemen's retreat, I only wanted to see them. There are always some who find happiness there. Just seeing them...gave me a sense of comfort."

Carissa shook her head,

disagreement in her eyes. "No, those who go to places like that are not the ones who are truly happy. To me, they are just seeking fleeting pleasures. True happiness comes from a meeting of hearts, not just physical enjoyment without any emotional foundation."

"But at least... I knew there were others like me. That was enough."

"You've always known there were others like you. You didn't need to go to the gentlemen's retreat to prove that," Carissa countered.

Chapter 1250

Gerald was silent for a long time, his breathing growing more rapid, as though anger were rising within him.

Kylie had been listening from outside. When she sensed the conversation was straying, she almost stepped forward to intervene. But when she heard her grandfather's labored breath, she stopped in her tracks.

She was certain of her guess-with the crushing blow Gerald had received, his pride couldn't take it. He would see this as the greatest humiliation and would surely seek revenge against Carissa. If he had nothing left to live for, why not use his death to take vengeance?

But after a while, she still heard no outburst, only Gerald's faint voice.

"Perhaps you're right. But what you said at the Capital Guard headquarters was wrong. Struggling is pointless. What you're doing now is also all in vain," he retorted.

Carissa smiled softly. "Would you dare take a bet with me, Lord Gerald?"

"A bet?" Gerald chuckled, though it was a hollow, bitter sound. "Do you think you can win? And how would you even measure victory?"

"In a few years, you'll see many more workshops like Skye Embroidery and women's academies springing up all over. Will that count as my win?"

"Delusions," Gerald muttered, shaking his head slowly. He struggled to speak. "The women's academy in the capital exists because of the queen dowager. Elsewhere, it would never work. As for workshops, they are even less likely."

Carissa leaned in a little closer. The stench of his body hit her sharply, making her eyes sting, but she didn't shy away. "That's why I want to make a bet with you, Lord Gerald. It won't take long. Just two years -two years should be enough."

Gerald's mind seemed to be clouded as his eyes wandered aimlessly to the ceiling. "We're not the same. My ideas are far more shocking than yours. No one will ever truly accept them. They can never be made public, nor will society ever approve."

"But you don't even accept them yourself. You've gone against your own heart. You don't like women, yet you married and had children. You betrayed yourself, so what right do you have to talk about earning society's approval?" Carissa said.

"Do you accept them?" Gerald asked.

"It doesn't matter."

"You don't!" Gerald said, anguished.

"Lord Gerald, whether I accept them or not isn't important. What matters is you've already made your choice, and I think this is a personal matter. It doesn't need anyone's approval. You don't have to make it public or seek society's approval. Just as some people love daisies, and others love roses. People have their preferences. Why must everyone else like orchids the way you do?"

Gerald clearly gained strength when they started talking about this topic, and he sharply countered, "Not being accepted makes you an outsider, and no one wants to be one. The truth is, you're an outsider too."

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"Do You are the first female official of this era. And I can assure you, no other woman will ever serve as an official again."

"Then let's make another bet. I guarantee that within two years, a woman will once again serve in the court," Carissa said calmly.

Kylie couldn't contain herself any

longer and stormed in. "Grandfather, it's her who's ruined your reputation! Why are you still making a bet with her? I'm here! If you're upset, take it out on her I'll stand up for you!"

Gerald was greatly startled by the sudden intrusion. He took a heavy breath and barked, "Leave!"

"Grandfather!" Kylie was seething. "I am the queen. How dare you tell me to leave?!"

"Get out!" Gerald's eyes flared with fury. "Your little schemes... You think they fool me?"

Kylie's anger flared as she clenched her fists, "Grandfather, you've lost your mind because of your anger towards Carissa! You want me to get her out of here, don't you?"

Gerald struck the bedding with a fist, his face contorting with rage. "I'm not dead yet!"

Carissa remained composed, her gaze steady on the queen. "Your Majesty, perhaps it's best if you leave for now. Lord Gerald and I still have much to discuss."

Kylie was livid, her temples throbbing. This wasn't how it should be-Gerald was utterly foolish. If he no longer cared to live, why didn't he just help her get rid of Carissa?

He was only thinking about his shameful indulgences, not caring at all for Connor or the Quinton family.

Taking a deep breath, Kylie looked at

him with steely resolve.

"Grandfather, I ask you-don't you hate Carissa so much? Isn't she the one who wronged you? I'm here and ready to help you. Whatever you

need, just tell me."

Gerald ignored her, his focus entirely on Carissa. "I'll take those two bets-what are the stakes?"  
"Anything you want, just say it," Carissa replied.

"Grandfather!" Kylie's frustration was palpable.

Gerald thought for a moment, a dark glimmer in his eyes. "If you lose, you'll find me a person, or their grave. If I lose, you tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

"Deal!" Carissa said with certainty. "Though I'm sure I'll win, you can tell me now-who is it you want me to find?"