

War Song 1301

Chapter 1301

Carissa knelt on one knee in the royal study, enduring Salvador's cold and sharp scrutiny.

Her eyes remained lowered, her expression calm and composed. There was no trace of guilt or ambition -she carried herself with the same respectful demeanor as always.

For a fleeting moment, Salvador thought of her lineage. She was Hector's daughter, after all. His earlier suspicions now seemed somewhat absurd. How could the daughter of Hector Sinclair, a man who had given his life on the battlefield, harbor treasonous intent?

But the trust only lasted for that brief instant, and it extended solely to Hector, the man who had fallen on the battlefield.

A wife followed her husband's lead. Carissa and Rafael shared a unified front-their interests were inevitably aligned.

"I sent the royal physician to check on Rafael," Salvador said, finally breaking the silence. His voice was steady, betraying none of the turbulent thoughts that had plagued him moments ago. "Jacob informed me that Rafael has gone to Meadow Ridge to recuperate."

Carissa bowed slightly. "Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty."

Salvador pressed his lips together. Her words of gratitude seemed like a polite deflection, sidestepping the matter entirely.

"I believe his illness stems from exhaustion," Salvador continued, his tone measured. "You accompanied him to Lunvale not long ago, and now you're managing the Mystic Army, the workshop, and the academy. The household needs at least one of you in good health. It won't do for both husband and wife to fall ill. "Since you requested leave not long ago, I will extend it for another six months. Focus on managing the workshop and the academy. As for the Mystic Army, I will temporarily assign its command to Ian." Carissa's expression flickered with a hint of surprise, though deep down, she wasn't the least bit shocked. Before her audience with the king, Jacob had analyzed the situation for her. If Salvador suspected Rafael of treason, his first move would be to strip Carissa of her position as commander of the Mystic Army, severing any chance of internal and external collusion.

However, if Salvador merely inquired about Rafael's condition without touching her rank, it would indicate he still trusted Rafael.

The surprise on Carissa's face vanished as quickly as it appeared. She lowered her head and replied, "Understood. Thank you, Your Majesty, for your consideration."

There was no resentment in her tone, no panic, and certainly no hint of guilt.

Salvador studied her for a long moment before finally saying, "You may leave."

"I will take my leave, Your Majesty." Carissa rose gracefully, her gaze as steady and unshaken as ever.

Outside the royal study, Derek stood with his hands at his sides, his posture stiff yet respectful. When he saw Carissa emerge, a faint trace of worry flickered in his eyes.

Carissa smiled at him, her expression calm and untroubled, before striding away without hesitation.

Derek let out a nearly inaudible sigh. Though he didn't know where Rafael had gone, he was certain the prince harbored no ambitions of treason.

Salvador had often said this was a critical time when capable people were desperately needed. Yet, whether it was suppressing the Yuvan rebels or repelling Sandoria's incursions from the Southern Frontier, he had never once considered using the Hell Monarch.

Derek still remembered Salvador's words from a private conversation.

"Ambition grows over time, nurtured little by little. Even those who once had none may develop it after achieving great feats, like reclaiming the Southern Frontier. Gaining the people's support can feed ambition.

Salvador had clearly been speaking about the Hell Monarch.

Derek sighed inwardly. A man with great talent became guilty by simply possessing it!

The Hell Monarch's estate was now under surveillance, while Carissa carried herself with the relaxed air of someone unburdened by official duties. She made rounds at Skye Embroidery, visited Gracewood Women's Academy to observe the students in class, and by evening, she was teaching martial arts. For two days, the watchful eyes on her noted nothing unusual.

But on the second evening, an urgent message arrived from the Southern Frontier. It was delivered first to the prime minister's office and then passed into Salvador's hands by Jeremiah.

When Salvador read the contents of the secret report, he was thunderstruck. His mind went blank and his entire body froze in place.

For a long time, he stood there, unmoving. Then, all at once, he began trembling with rage.

"Oliver Prince!" he bellowed, his voice thundering through the halls.

The shout left him so shaken that his vision darkened and he nearly collapsed on the spot.

Within hours, the Ministry of Defense officials, the head of the Civil Department, two vice-ministers, and every court official of third rank or higher were summoned to the palace.

Davis had been dreading this moment. Though he knew Salvador's distaste for the suggestion, he had repeatedly urged the king to send the Hell Monarch to the Southern Frontier to take command.

At the time, Salvador had rejected the idea outright, leaving Davis to focus instead on accelerating the production of the six-barreled matchlocks, ensuring at least a portion of the weapons could be delivered to the Southern Frontier.

Now, as Davis read the urgent report alongside the others, his blood surged hot with anger while his heart sank with icy dread.

Oliver had caused a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions!

Chapter 1302

The urgent sealed report stated that Oliver had abandoned his post before the battle. Rumors were spreading like wildfire across the Southern Frontier, shaking the troops' morale. Desertions had begun, and even the soldiers who were originally stationed in the Southern Frontier were showing signs of unease and retreat.

Louis reported these things in the urgent sealed report, requesting the court to appoint a commander who could stabilize the situation. Without strong leadership, the loss of the Southern Frontier would not be an exaggeration.

Salvador's face darkened as he scanned the room.

"Nominate a general to take command at the Southern Frontier," he ordered coldly.

The gathered officials exchanged hesitant glances.

Aside from the Hell Monarch, only one other candidate had the reputation to command such a critical campaign-Dominic Sullivan.

Unfortunately, Dominic had been stripped of his rank.

As for the remaining generals-whether it was the aging Tyler, the young Thomas, or the once-reliable Joseph Carter-none of them had the presence or authority to stabilize the chaos at the Southern Frontier or rally the troops' broken morale.

The Hell Monarch was the obvious choice, but reports of his sudden illness complicated matters. Could someone in frail health withstand the strain of the battlefield? And with the Sandorians already at the gates, there was no time to waste. A commander needed to depart immediately. The Hell Monarch's condition was too precarious for such a role.

Even if Dominic were reinstated and ordered to ride from Victory Pass to the Southern Frontier at full speed, it would take no less than half a month for him to arrive, even with the fastest horses. Time was a luxury they didn't have. Besides, he was now advanced in years.

Aside from these two, who else could possibly take on such a monumental task?

There was another option, one that a few officials dared to consider but no one dared to voice. Their gazes shifted briefly toward Salvador.

The king leading an army into battle would undoubtedly restore morale and rally the troops, but the risk was unfathomable. If something happened to him on the battlefield, the one who had suggested it would bear the weight of a crime too grave to imagine.

The tension lingered until Jeremiah broke the silence, steady as ever. "How is the Hell Monarch's condition? Has there been any improvement in his health?"

Salvador's eyes darkened. His voice was clipped as he replied, "He has gone to Meadow Ridge to recuperate.

No one had been aware of this. They had all assumed Rafael was recovering at his estate. Salvador's statement caught them off guard, leaving the officials momentarily stunned.

"He was able to travel to Meadow Ridge? Does that mean his condition has improved?" Malcolm ventured cautiously, his tone probing. He couldn't help but notice the subtle shift in Salvador's expression moments ago.

"Forget the Hell Monarch for now," Salvador replied coolly. "Aside from him, who else is there?"

Jeremiah stepped forward, delivering the words that had been lingering in everyone's mind. "To stabilize the situation at the Southern Frontier and restore the army's morale, there is only one option-Your Majesty must lead the army yourself."

The moment Jeremiah spoke, the room fell silent. It was the kind of silence where even the faintest sound could echo like a drumbeat.

Even though many people thought the same and felt it was the most reasonable suggestion for the prime minister to bring up, they didn't expect Jeremiah to say it so directly without the usual layers of careful reasoning.

In truth, no reasoning was needed. Every official present was sharp enough to understand the gravity of the situation.

Salvador, too, had considered leading the troops himself. In fact, when he convened the ministers, he had already begun eliminating other candidates.

The two most suitable choices were no longer viable or rather, the opportunity had already been missed. When Davis brought it up, a decisive decision should have been made.

Now, Rafael had likely already left for Valken.

The thought churned Salvador's emotions, leaving him seething with frustration and regret. His chest felt tight, his blood boiling, and a bitter taste rose to his throat. More than anything, a deep sadness settled over him.

Rafael was his brother!

The doubts he had once harbored no longer filled him with guilt. Instead, Salvador was overcome with regret for not being more proactive and frustration over the attempt to reuse Rafael, unaware of his true ambitions.

Seeds of doubt quickly grew in times of escalating crises. What started as suspicion was now a certainty in Salvador's mind.

Yet, even with that certainty, Salvador dared not act against the people at Hell Monarch Estate. Arresting Rafael's people at a time like this would only hand him an excuse to proceed with his plans.

As for leading the army himself, Salvador knew it was a last resort. He could not leave the capital unless there was absolutely no other choice.

If he were to step onto the battlefield, the kingdom would be left without its king. Rafael, in turn, would face no resistance as he marched on the capital, seized the throne, and crowned himself king. It might take him less than three months.

The officials, seeing Salvador's grim expression and prolonged silence, assumed he was contemplating Jeremiah's proposal. None realized he was spiraling into his thoughts, trapped in a cycle of anger and despair.

They waited for Jeremiah to kneel and formally request the king's personal command. Once he did, they planned to follow suit, kneeling in unison to support the proposal.

But Jeremiah, having spoken, said no more.

The room grew tense as officials exchanged uncertain glances, unsure of what to say or do next. Some even began to wonder if it was time to propose appointing a crown prince.

Chapter 1303

Ever since being confined to Everspring Palace, Kylie hadn't set foot outside its gates.

However, after years of maneuvering and influence within the court, news of major events always found its way to her, even in isolation.

Today's whispers were no different. She had heard about Jeremiah's bold suggestion that Salvador personally lead the army.

The thought alone sent her heart racing, excitement and anticipation surging through her veins. If Salvador were to lead the army himself, he would have no choice but to appoint a crown prince before leaving.

And at this moment, there was no other contender but Connor-the eldest prince.

It seemed to Kylie as though the Hell Monarch's sudden illness couldn't have come at a better time.

As her initial excitement subsided, she forced herself to think clearly. This development, as promising as it seemed, might not come to fruition. Salvador had been absent from the battlefield for years.

Would he really risk his safety to go now?

Besides, there were still capable generals in the court, and Yuvan was stirring up a rebellion.

Still, the idea lingered in her mind. If Salvador did decide to lead the campaign, he would earn

unparalleled support from the people. And Yuvan, like someone clinging to their last chance, wouldn't last much longer.

Her thoughts churned endlessly, leaving her tossing and turning through the night.

Before dawn, the sound of hurried footsteps broke the silence. Her maid, Talia, rushed in with urgency written all over her face.

"Your Majesty, the king has sent someone to escort the eldest prince to him."

Kylie immediately rose from bed, her voice trembling ever so slightly. "Hurry, help me get dressed." During her time in confinement, Salvador hadn't visited her once, nor had he summoned Connor. Though the wait had tested her patience, she had known better than to act rashly. She could only bide her time and wait for the right moment.

Now, this turmoil-this precarious balance of internal strife and external threats-was nothing short of a divine opportunity for both her and her son.

Once she had washed and dressed, a thought occurred to her. "Did His Majesty summon me as well?" "No, Your Majesty," Talia replied. "He only instructed Mr. Walker to escort Prince Connor."

Kylie's heart sank with disappointment. If Salvador were preparing to lead the army, the management of the royal harem should naturally fall back into her hands. Only she could maintain order among the concubines and curb their ambitions.

After all, naming a crown prince while leaving the harem's authority in Sylvia and Grace's hands would be far too dangerous.

Kylie's brow furrowed. "Where's Lydia?"

"Your Majesty, Ms. Lydia is comforting Prince Connor," Talia reported with a tinge of exasperation. "It's still so early-he refuses to get out of bed."

Kylie glanced at the faint light of dawn seeping through the windows. "No surprise there. It's barely morning."

She had spoiled Connor in the past. Though there had been some improvement recently, he still didn't wake up early to study. Knowing that this was a critical time, she decided to personally visit

his bedroom. There were many things she needed to remind him of, to make sure he didn't say anything that would upset Salvador.

When she arrived at Radiant Hall where Connor resided, she was greeted by the sounds of a tantrum. Loud protests and grumbling echoed from within. Concerned, Kylie quickened her pace and entered the chamber.

Inside, she saw Lydia holding Connor in her arms as a maid combed his hair.

"Lydia!" Kylie's sharp tone cut through the commotion. "You cannot let him behave like this, especially with Mr. Walker waiting outside. What if he sees this disgraceful scene?"

"Don't worry, Your Majesty," Lydia replied hastily. "I've already sent someone to keep Mr. Walker entertained in the front hall. He won't come here."

Connor remained cradled in Lydia's arms, his face flushed with frustration. Having been unceremoniously dragged out of bed, he had thrown a fit earlier, making it a challenge just to get him dressed. Now, half- asleep, he was grudgingly allowing his hair to be combed as he dozed off again in Lydia's arms.

Seeing his mother's arrival, he opened his eyes slightly, rubbed them with a scowl, and mumbled, "Mom, I don't want to get up. I don't want to see Dad."

"Enough nonsense!" Kylie's voice was firm, her expression severe. "What have I taught you? You must spend time with your dad, behave properly in his presence, and never act out. Do you understand?" Connor kicked his legs out as he hit Lydia's shoulder with his small fists. "I hate this! I was finally excused from morning greetings, and now I have to go again. It's so annoying! I don't want to go!"

Kylie's patience wore thin; her hand instinctively rose, ready to strike his leg. But she stopped herself, knowing her son's temperament. If she punished him now, his tantrum would only escalate.

In the confines of Everspring Palace, his outbursts might be tolerable, but today was different. He was about to meet Salvador on a matter of great importance. She could not allow him to behave so poorly

now.

Lowering her hand, Kylie knelt slightly to meet his gaze, softening her tone. "If you behave and listen to me today, I will let you skip lessons in the study hall for a few days. How does that sound?"

Connor's eyes brightened at the promise. "Really? Mom, you can't lie to me!"

"If you're obedient, I will naturally reward you," Kylie assured him. She gestured for the maid to hurry with his hair.

Salvador was waiting, and she didn't want him to get impatient.

Chapter 1304

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When Connor was sent to Derek, Kylie smiled and said, "It's too early today. Prince Connor hasn't fully woken up yet. Please keep an eye on him on the way and remind him not to get confused or behave improperly in front of His Majesty."

After speaking, Lydia stepped forward and discreetly handed over a banknote.

However, Derek didn't take it. Bowing slightly, he replied respectfully, "Your Majesty, there's no need to worry. There's no question of improper behavior. His Majesty simply wanted to see his son and sent me to fetch him."

Derek was well-versed in reading people's intentions, and it was clear Kylie was fishing for hints about what Salvador might ask Connor. She hoped Derek could coach the boy during the journey on how to respond properly.

In the past, Derek might have quietly accepted such a gesture. Yet, today was different.

Kylie's smile faltered for a moment, but she quickly recovered and responded, "Then I'll leave it in your hands, Mr. Walker. Thank you for your trouble."

Derek bowed again. He then took Connor's hand and departed.

In the corridor outside Goldleaf Palace, Salvador paced back and forth, his expression stormy. He had

spent the entire night awake, unable to rest as the words lead the army in person wrapped around his mind like a thorny vine, relentless and suffocating.

There were too many things to consider if he were to lead the army himself.

If he were to lead the army, it would necessitate naming an heir. Unfortunately, Connor, his eldest and rightful heir by birth, was young, ill-suited for leadership, and plagued with a temperament that could only be described as spoiled and lazy. In every aspect, the boy lacked the qualities of a future king.

And yet, Connor was his firstborn and legitimate son.

"How long has Derek been gone?" Salvador asked abruptly, his tone sharp with impatience as he turned to the chamberlain Giovanni, who stood nearby.

"Your Majesty," Giovanni answered respectfully, "it has been an hour."

In truth, it had been longer, but Giovanni dared not say so. Salvador's expression was already dark and foreboding.

"An hour is far too long!" Salvador snapped. "Everspring Palace isn't far from here. Why hasn't he arrived yet?"

Giovanni immediately replied, "I will go and check on them at once, Your Majesty."

Before Giovanni could leave the Golden Harmony Hall, Derek appeared, panting heavily. Connor was slumped over his back, fast asleep.

Salvador's gaze turned thunderous at the sight. His voice boomed with fury. "Put him down!"

"Your Majesty, please calm your anger!" Derek called out as he gently lowered Connor to the ground.

The boy, deeply nestled in sleep, was startled awake as his feet hit the floor. Disoriented, he lashed out instinctively, his small fists aiming punches at Derek.

"You insolent servant!" he snapped.

Derek caught Connor's fist with ease and bent down to whisper urgently, "Your Highness, quickly greet His Majesty."

Connor rubbed his bleary eyes and froze when he met Salvador's icy glare. A shiver ran through him, and his rebellious expression melted into one of obedient fear. He dropped to his knees with a thud. "Greetings, Your Majesty," Connor said.

Salvador's voice was cold as steel. "Why was Derek carrying you here? Are your legs not for walking? What are they for, then?"

Tears welled in Connor's eyes, and he stammered, "Dad, I was just so tired..."

Salvador stared at the boy, and a wave of profound disappointment washed over him. How could this child ever shoulder the burden of kingship?

Suppressing his growing anger, Salvador turned and strode toward the palace.

"Come inside!" he barked.

Derek leaned down to help Connor up, whispering, "Hurry along now."

Connor tugged at Derek's sleeve, his small face full of apprehension. He didn't dare enter alone and cast a pleading look at Derek.

With a heavy sigh, Derek followed him into the hall.

Inside, the flickering light of the lamps illuminated Salvador's stern, unforgiving expression. Connor knelt on the floor, his head hanging low, looking like a criminal awaiting sentencing.

Salvador disliked the sight. He raised his hands and said, "Stand up and answer me properly."

"Yes, Dad!" Connor scrambled to his feet, instinctively moving closer to Derek for reassurance. As soon

as he caught Salvador's sharp glare, he froze and stepped back, lowering his head again.

"What have you been reading lately?" Salvador asked.

Connor stuttered, "I... I've been reading The Thousand Verses and...and The Expanded Wisdom."

"Recite a passage from The Thousand Verses," Salvador commanded.

Connor's face went blank.

R-Recite?

"Heaven and earth are dark and mysterious. The universe is vast and ancient..."

He racked his brain, trying to recall the next part. He had been reading it every day recently and could

usually recite several lines, but why could he only remember one now?

He became more and more anxious, and his mind started to spin.

"Heaven and earth are dark and mysterious, the universe is vast and ancient. The sun...the sun and moon have no light, and...and the stars rise..."

Salvador's patience snapped. He grabbed the inkpot from the desk and hurled it toward Connor.

"I'll show you how the sun and moon have no light!"

Chapter 1305

The inkpot didn't hit Connor-Derek had made sure to step in and block it. At this crucial moment, Connor couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

Even though it hadn't struck him, the boy was terrified. He burst into loud, uncontrollable sobs.

Salvador's fury was unrelenting. "At your age, I could recite The Thousand Verses with ease! You can't even manage two proper lines! From now on, you'll live in your grandmother's palace."

Connor's wails grew louder at the decree. "No! I don't want to go! I want to stay with Mom! I hate Grandmother!"

He truly did hate visiting Victoria. Every time he went to see her, she would drill him on his studies-just

like his dad. Connor despised being questioned about reading and lessons. Why did everyone insist he study all the time?

"Take him away! Send him to Serenity Palace immediately," Salvador ordered coldly.

Giovanni promptly summoned two young chamberlains to escort Connor to Serenity Palace.

Salvador's face turned red with anger, but in his heart, he felt an overwhelming sense of sadness.

How could his eldest son be such a failure?

Derek began tidying up the shattered inkpot quietly. His expression was an unreadable mix of emotions. Finally, he murmured, "Your Majesty, please calm your anger."

Salvador's chest heaved as he struggled to suppress his fury and frustration. His mind churned with thoughts of contingency plans. If the worst comes to pass, perhaps he would have Victoria govern from behind the scenes until Connor grew older.

But even if Victoria devoted her heart and soul to raising Connor, what hope was there? He would never become the ruler this kingdom needed. Worse yet, he might grow into an ungrateful wretch.

Weariness swept over Salvador. He hadn't slept all night, and though his body felt fatigued, his mind remained sharp and restless.

After a long silence, he turned his piercing gaze toward Derek. "What do you think? Where has the Hell Monarch gone?"

Derek hesitated, clearly uneasy. He had his suspicions but dared not voice them. "Your Majesty, I do not know."

Salvador's eyes narrowed, and his tone turned colder. "You're thinking he might have gone to the Southern Frontier, aren't you?"

Beads of sweat formed on Derek's brow. He wiped them away hastily and replied, "I would not presume to speculate, Your Majesty."

Salvador rubbed his temples, weariness evident in the lines etched across his face.

"Even if he has gone to the Southern Frontier, how could he have predicted Oliver would desert his post? Unless Louis and his men uncovered Oliver's intentions and sent him a letter? But then, why would Louis inform him and not report to me first? Or perhaps..."

His voice turned colder.

"He already has his scouts stationed in the Southern Frontier-men who can relay information to him faster than it reaches me."

Derek's heart pounded as he listened, each word from Salvador making his pulse quicken.

Salvador gave a bitter laugh. "If he truly knew about Oliver's desertion, he should have reported it to me first. Sneaking onto the battlefield without an order and without the military command emblem-will the troops in the Southern Frontier obey him or defy him?"

Derek sighed inwardly. Even if the Hell Monarch had gone to the Southern Frontier, it would still be like setting a trap for himself.

With Oliver's escape, it was almost certain the military command emblem had gone with him. Without it, commanding the Southern Frontier army was nearly impossible. If the Hell Monarch returned victorious, it wouldn't matter whether the military authority he held was recalled-the mere fact he could lead without the military command emblem was a threat enough.

To neutralize that danger, there would be only one solution: his death.

"But he wouldn't go to the Southern Frontier. That would do him far more harm than good. Without my edict, leading troops into battle would be a grave crime. Even if he emerged victorious, his achievements would never outweigh his offense. He's too intelligent to commit such a foolish mistake-don't you think?" Salvador continued.

Derek kept his head bowed, silently thinking that Salvador had already said it all.

Salvador let out a faint, self-deprecating chuckle. He understood his logic well enough. Yet, deep down, he couldn't help but hope Rafael had indeed gone to the Southern Frontier battlefield. Even if it meant Rafael acted without his order, Salvador was still willing to forgive and let it go.

At Hell Monarch Estate, Carissa rose early that morning. The news of Oliver's desertion had reached her yesterday, along with the knowledge that Jeremiah had petitioned Salvador to personally lead the troops. Today, she was to enter the palace. Her goal was clear: to secure a royal edict permitting Rafael to join the battlefield despite his illness.

Carissa couldn't afford to wait until later to address the issue. She needed to act now to prevent a worse outcome.

Chapter 1306

There was no morning court the following day. Salvador, who had not rested the previous night, gathered the officials to continue discussing the situation at the Southern Frontier.

No one could offer anything beyond the suggestion of his personal involvement in the campaign. The men recommended for command were, frankly, unsuitable.

Salvador was deeply worried and furious, and vented his frustration at them. "The court is full of capable people, yet no one is helpful when it matters! You all live off my support but never worry about my problems. What good are you?"

The entire court, both civil and military officials, remained silent, feeling helpless.

What else could they offer? Salvador constantly urged the promotion of younger military officers, yet he never considered those already within the Hell Monarch Army or the Sinclair Army's ranks. Instead, he had promoted Oliver, a man long absent from the battlefield. No one from Louis' group had even been considered.

Salvador's eyes grew colder as he thought of Oliver, a man he had personally elevated. His fury flared even higher.

"Lord Klein!" he barked. "Take men to raid Silverstone Estate! As for Oliver's family, lock them in the Astral Prison. Handle them as you see fit afterward."

Anthony stepped forward and bowed. "I shall carry out your orders, Your Majesty!"

After receiving the order, Anthony left while everyone watched with envy. As the court ministers

exchanged furtive glances, Salvador's rage reached new heights. The silence was suffocating, until the doors were suddenly flung open.

Derek rushed in, breathless.

"Your Majesty," he said, voice urgent, "Commander Sinclair requests an audience!"

Salvador was about to shout in anger, but he swallowed the words. His eyes shifted slightly, and he said, "Ask her what she wants. Tell her I'm in the middle of a meeting with the officials to discuss military matters."

Salvador wanted Derek to find out if Carissa wanted to speak privately with him, or if she was willing to discuss it with the whole court.

Derek didn't need to leave as he replied, "Commander Sinclair said she heard of the matter and has come to join the discussion with the other officials."

Salvador's instincts told him Carissa was here to speak of Rafael's whereabouts. But was this something she could reveal in front of all the court? Still, he knew her well enough-she was clever, and he would see how she intended to twist the truth.

"Let her in," Salvador ordered.

Carissa walked in under the eager gaze of the officials. She kept her eyes straight ahead and knelt on one knee. "Greetings, Your Majesty."

"Rise," Salvador commanded, his eyes scanning her. She showed no trace of guilt, the same composure she had displayed when she had lied before.

Yet, Carissa didn't stand. She remained kneeling, her voice strong as ever.

"Your Majesty, I have come to request permission for my husband, Prince Rafael, to join the Southern Frontier campaign. He is recovering at Meadow Ridge. After hearing of Mr. Prince's desertion, he immediately sent word by carrier pigeon, asking me to seek your royal edict. Once he receives it, he will depart immediately.'

At her words, many people let out an unguarded sigh of relief.

Salvador fixed his gaze on her. The confidence in her words almost bordered on arrogance. But then he smiled, his laughter filling the space with unexpected warmth.

"As expected of my wonderful brother-the Hell Monarch of Starhaven! Come, prepare the edict!" The speed with which the edict was prepared was swift. Within moments, it was placed in Carissa's hands. She took it with a composed demeanor.

"I believe His Highness will not fail to fulfill your command, Your Majesty."

The court exhaled in unison, a weight lifting from their shoulders. Even though the Hell Monarch was still recovering, his presence on the Southern Frontier would certainly rally the troops and stabilize the situation.

Salvador looked at Carissa and said, "Stay a moment, Commander Sinclair. I have a few things to discuss with you. The rest of you may leave."

His feelings were complicated, but he was certainly relieved, even surprised that Rafael had truly gone to the Southern Frontier.

The court officials filed out, their once-tense faces now cleared of worry.

Derek remained by Salvador's side, his mind still troubled by Salvador's earlier musings. He couldn't quite shake his unease.

"You leave as well," Salvador ordered.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Derek said respectfully and exited the room.

The vast hall was now empty, save for Salvador and Carissa.

"Carissa," Salvador said softly, his expression warm as he called her name. "I must ask you to answer truthfully. Do not withhold anything from me."

Carissa nodded. "Of course, Your Majesty, feel free to ask."

"He never had any heart ailment, did he?" Salvador asked.

Carissa had no intention of hiding the truth. In fact, there was much she wished to reveal.

Chapter 1307

With the royal edict in her hands, Carissa replied, "Your Majesty, Prince Rafael never had any serious illness. After deceiving Mr. Lester and Mr. Walker, he didn't go to Meadow Ridge. Instead, he headed straight for the Southern Frontier."

Salvador's brow furrowed. This was one of his greatest concerns.

"So, you were both aware of the situation in the Southern Frontier beforehand?"

Carissa shook her head. "No, he didn't know Mr. Prince would desert the battle. He only went because he was concerned."

She took a step closer and continued, "He was concerned because those soldiers in the Southern Frontier are his comrades. Together, they had driven the Sandorian forces out of Simonton City. They risked their lives, fought in bloody battles, and some even lost their lives, all for a common goal-to reclaim the Southern Frontier.

"When it was finally won, His Highness handed over the command with pride. But now the Sandorians are returning, with suspicions of collusion with traitors within our kingdom. How could he trust someone who hasn't seen battle in years and spends his time in leisure to lead as a marshal?"

Carissa paused, then continued, "He said the people of Southern Frontier could no longer withstand a prolonged war. They needed a swift resolution. Mr. Prince lacks experience, and his arrogance could lead to disastrous decisions-decisions that would cost countless soldiers their lives. His Highness said that if it weren't for Mr. Prince's presence in the Southern Frontier, he would have no reason to go."

Salvador's eyes flickered. She had cut straight to the heart of the matter: he had placed his trust in the wrong person.

Carissa did not miss his reaction. Her voice grew sharper. "The truth is, Mr. Prince is useless-cowardly, incompetent, and malicious. His desertion has shaken the morale of the army. And Your Majesty, part of the blame lies with you."

Salvador's face twisted as if he had swallowed something bitter.

"As for why His Highness didn't seek permission, it's because he knew you would never grant it. You doubt him, suspect him not based on any ambition, but simply because he can lead troops and has the support of the people. To put it plainly, he's guilty simply for being capable."

She took another step forward, determined, as if ready to risk everything.

"Your Majesty, you can call my words insolent, or accuse me of dishonoring the throne, but I will say this -you have never trusted him. Even if he laid his heart bare before you, you would still believe he hides ill intentions.

"The way he went to the Southern Frontier-that was your doing, Your Majesty. Don't we know the consequences? As a prince, he ventured into a warzone without your command, which is a grave offense. If he succeeds, his victory will be yours. If he fails, his life is forfeit. He took that risk because of you. If you believe he has selfish motives, then I have nothing more to say.

"That is all, Your Majesty. I apologize for my impertinence."

Carissa's gaze did not waver, meeting Salvador's darkened eyes with unwavering steadiness. Salvador studied her face, flushed with indignation. For some reason, his stormy mood lightened somewhat. After all, anyone who could speak so frankly had nothing but sincerity in their heart. As for Rafael, he remained as elusive as a shadow, always obscured by a fog he could not fully pierce. However, Carissa was like her dad steadfast and loyal.

Of that, Salvador was certain.

Suppressing the turmoil within him, Salvador found himself not angry, but smiling-almost with a touch of teasing.

"So, upon hearing of Mr. Prince's desertion, you came straight to me for an edict, as if he were given orders to lead, rather than sneaking onto the battlefield. I suppose I cannot take away his accomplishments now, can I?"

Carissa had braced herself for his anger. From what she knew of Salvador, such bold words would surely provoke his wrath. He was a king who did not tolerate challenges to his authority.

But the thunderous rage she expected never came. Instead, he spoke in a tone that almost resembled a teasing older brother. For a moment, she felt a deep ache in her heart and couldn't feel happy at all.

If only he could speak to Rafael like this-so openly, without suspicion.

Her eyes stung with unshed tears, but she quickly pushed them down, forcing herself to remain composed. "Your Majesty, I believe you have wronged him. He deserves at least your trust." Salvador looked at her for a moment, feeling a mix of emotions he couldn't quite express.

After a long pause, he simply said, "He really does deserve my trust. You misunderstood me. I've never doubted him. Mr. Lloyd did suggest he replace Mr. Prince in South Border, but I didn't agree.

It's not that I don't trust him. It's just that Prince Yuvan's rebellion isn't over, and the people behind him haven't been caught yet. He's still investigating for me..."

He paused for a moment, then directly acknowledged his mistake in choosing the wrong person.

"It is true. I made a mistake. I placed my faith in Mr. Prince, which caused the situation in the Southern Frontier to spiral out of control. Thankfully, my brother's foresight helped me turn things around." These words effectively pardoned Rafael for going to the Southern Frontier without permission and also acknowledged his understanding of the situation with the people in power.

Carissa still couldn't bring herself to feel happy.

A ruler and his loyal subject, a brother and his sibling-such a bond should have been a thing of beauty. With it, they could have been unstoppable, impervious to any threat.

Yet, here they were, caught in a divide of suspicion and misunderstanding, one that Salvador himself had created where none should have existed.

Still, the fact that she had not been punished for her audacity in speaking out was, perhaps, a small comfort.

Chapter 1308

Outside the hall, Derek was drenched in cold sweat, his legs trembling. Even when Carissa emerged, he felt his heart still hanging in the air, uncertain and uneasy.

Salvador had not exploded in anger as Derek had expected-that, in itself, was a shock.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Derek bowed respectfully as Carissa passed.

Carissa spoke quietly, just loud enough for the two of them to hear. "Don't worry, Mr. Walker."

Derek felt a pang in his chest. "Take care, Commander Sinclair."

Once she was gone, Derek returned to the hall to attend to the king. He couldn't resist stealing a glance at Salvador. To his astonishment, Salvador's face seemed to hold a note of happiness-something Derek had never anticipated.

Earlier, when he had sent Connor off to Serenity Palace, Salvador had spoken of the Hell Monarch's journey to the Southern Frontier as if it were all part of a grand scheme. So why was he suddenly in a good mood now?

Truly, the mind of a king was difficult to read.

Salvador noticed Derek's gaze and said, "Bring in the meal!"

Since hearing of Oliver's desertion, Salvador hadn't eaten a single bite. Derek instructed the servants to bring food and replaced Salvador's drink with a fresh cup.

Salvador's mouth felt dry and bitter, but after taking a sip, he felt a bit better.

"Still puzzled?" Salvador asked lightly, his mood visibly brighter.

Seeing his smile, Derek couldn't help but mirror it. "I don't need to understand, Your Majesty. If you are pleased, then I am too."

Salvador's lips curled up in a small smile. "I am indeed pleased. If what Carissa said today reflects my brother's true thoughts, it reassures me. On the other hand, if my brother has been hiding everything from her and they lack unity as a couple, then Carissa can still be useful to me."

Derek laughed along. "Your Majesty speaks wisely."

"I remember when my brother and I had no grudges between us. Those were happy days."

He placed his fist to his mouth, coughing a few times.

Raising his cup once more, he drank, but the tickle in his throat caught him off guard. He choked, unable

to swallow properly. The coughing fit intensified, leaving him violently vomiting into his lap.

He had barely eaten anything lately, and now the vomiting didn't produce much-only a bit of yellow bile mixed with a trace of blood.

Derek's face changed instantly. He immediately ordered the royal physician to be called.

When Robert arrived, he examined Salvador quickly. He explained that the coughing was caused by excessive heat in Salvador's liver and lungs. The severe coughing had strained the throat, leading to a trace of blood.

On top of that, Salvador hadn't slept all night or eaten, so naturally, his health had weakened a bit.

Derek let out a quiet sigh of relief. At least now, he knew it wasn't anything worse.

If only Salvador could calm his mind for just a moment, his health would improve significantly. He really overthought too much.

Meanwhile, Kylie had been waiting anxiously ever since Connor was taken away. Her heart was full of both anticipation and worry. She didn't dare send anyone to inquire too hastily, for fear Salvador would notice. It would only cause trouble.

Hours passed, and no word came back. She couldn't help but feel uneasy.

But then she reminded herself since such a major matter was underway, it was only natural that Salvador would need to meet with the officials or consult the Royal Astronomers, following the proper procedures to let the court know that Connor was destined by fate.

But when even the midday meal arrived and there was still no news, her patience finally wore thin. She

sent someone out of the palace to inquire and soon learned that Salvador had sent Connor to be raised at Serenity Palace.

Kylie's face drained of color. "Why would he do this? Lydia, what happened? What made His Majesty so angry?"

Lydia was equally worried and responded, "I heard that His Majesty asked Prince Connor to recite the Thousand Verses. Connor only managed the first line, and then he just babbled. When His Majesty heard this, he flew into a rage and threw an inkpot. Thankfully, Mr. Walker stepped in and blocked it, and Prince Conner wasn't hurt."

Kylie collapsed into a chair, her face pale as she muttered to herself, "What was the point of testing him now? Of all times, why the Thousand Verses? Is that really what's important?"

"Perhaps I should go to Serenity Palace and check on Prince Connor. He's not used to that place. If he offends the queen dowager, it could make things worse," Lydia hurriedly suggested.

"Go quickly!" Kylie urged, her voice tinged with anxiety.

Chapter 1309

Lydia wasn't able to see Connor herself. Instead, she heard from the servants of Serenity Palace that Connor was busy copying the Thousand Verses. Victoria had forbidden anyone from interrupting him. Lydia knew well that Connor had always despised writing, so how could he quietly obey such an order? News from Serenity Palace was hard to come by, and no amount of bribery would help there were strict rules in place. Lydia had no choice but to persist, and after much effort, she finally got a vague answer: Victoria had commanded that Connor would eat only once he finished his copying for the day. Lydia was taken aback. "Prince Connor hasn't eaten since entering Serenity Palace?"

He had left for Goldleaf Palace at first light and hadn't had breakfast. It was now well past noon, yet no food was in sight?

But no one answered her. After standing outside for a long time, Lydia had no choice but to return to Everspring Palace to report.

Upon hearing that Connor hadn't even been fed in Serenity Palace, Kylie's heart tightened with pain. She clenched her fists in anger.

"That's her grandson! How could she be so heartless? This will not do! I'm going to Serenity Palace to bring him back. When has he ever had to endure such hardship?"

Lydia quickly stopped her. "Your Majesty, you're still under house arrest. You cannot go. If you anger His Majesty again, who knows how long the house arrest will last?"

Tears sprang to Kylie's eyes as she glared at Lydia. "Do you expect me to just stand by and watch my son suffer?"

"As you said, Prince Connor is still the queen dowager's grandson. If he's truly hungry, she will not allow him to suffer. I believe the queen dowager hopes he will become more diligent. Perhaps under her guidance, Prince Connor will change for the better," Lydia replied.

Seeing Kylie's expression soften a little, Lydia continued, "Your Majesty, do not worry too much. His Majesty has entrusted Prince Connor to the queen dowager's care, which means His Majesty still holds him in favor.

"If Prince Connor suffers a little now, the rewards in the future will be immeasurable. Not only should you refrain from resentment, but you must also express gratitude and respect toward the queen dowager." Kylie wiped her tears and paused to think carefully. After a moment, she realized that Lydia's words had some merit.

A little hardship now would be worth it in the long run. What mattered most was securing Connor's future position early on, so that she wouldn't have to worry about his future prospects later.

Her family had fallen from grace. Her parents were no help, and her grandfather had stirred up too much trouble-she couldn't rely on them any longer.

She gritted her teeth and said, "Go once more, and thank the queen dowager on my behalf."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I'll go immediately." Lydia gave a quick nod before leaving again.

However, when Lydia returned, she brought with her news that left Kylie stunned.

"What did you say? The Hell Monarch has requested permission to go to the Southern Frontier? Didn't he have a heart ailment?" Kylie asked in disbelief.

Lydia nodded. "It seems he's been recuperating at Meadow Ridge. When he heard about Mr. Prince's desertion, he sent a letter by carrier pigeon to Lady Carissa, asking her to request a royal edict. His Majesty has granted it."

Kylie sat in a daze, her mind reeling. "So that means, His Majesty won't lead the campaign in person?" "It seems that way," Lydia replied, letting out a small sigh of relief. "This way, His Majesty doesn't have to risk his life."

Kylie glanced at her sharply. "What's there to be happy about? If His Majesty doesn't lead the campaign himself, it means the matter of the crown prince is still far off!"

"We must take our time with these things. Nothing is more important than His Majesty's health right now. There are dangers on all sides internal strife and external threats. Without the king's presence in the capital, who knows where this kingdom might end up?" Lydia said gently, her tone placating.

Though Lydia's words held truth, Kylie could not quell the dissatisfaction burning within her. It seemed they were so close, yet so far.

Why did Hell Monarch send his letter now, of all times? Why not wait-even just a day or two later? If the letter had come after Salvador had made his decision to lead the campaign personally and formally named the crown prince, that would have been better.

Even if the crown prince title wasn't officially granted yet, just mentioning it to the ministers would have made Salvador's intentions clear. The ministers would know where his favor lay and adjust their loyalties accordingly.

It had been so close-so very close!

Chapter 1310

Before Caspian was brought to the Royal Citadel, he had already gathered his family and delivered the worst of the news in Silverstone Estate.

With a critical battle looming, Oliver's desertion had shaken the army's morale and unleashed a storm of rumors. If they lost the war, the fate awaiting the Earl of Silverstone's family would be nothing short of total annihilation.

Even if they won, it would still be inevitable-confiscation of titles, house arrest, or even exile would follow.

Evelyn nearly fainted upon hearing this. Once she regained her composure, her eyes, filled with expectation, turned to Zoey, waiting for her to speak.

In the past, no matter the situation, it was Zoey who had always found a way forward.

Now, Evelyn continued to place her hopes on Zoey.

But this time, all Zoey offered was silence an endless quiet that gave nothing away. There was no shock or surprise in her face, as if she had anticipated this outcome from the start.

Evelyn's voice trembled. "Is there no way out? You're so familiar with the Hell Monarch's princess consort -go to her! Maybe there's still a chance!"

Zoey shook her head and calmly said, "There's nothing to be done. Whatever is coming, we must face it." "How can there be nothing to be done?" Evelyn's heart raced with fear. "How can you say that without even asking? Go quickly and ask her!"

Caspian's face was filled with sorrow. "Mom, Zoey's right. It's useless to ask anyone now. Our family... It's over."

"Impossible! It can't be," Evelyn gasped, clutching her chest as if she might collapse at any moment. "Oliver has been stationed at the Southern Frontier for so long. He's endured hardships. Surely, he must have some merit, right?"

"None," Zoey said flatly.

She watched her mother-in-law, who was clearly on the brink of collapse, and thought of her children. Her throat tightened, and there was a bitter taste in her mouth.

"Oliver didn't suffer in the Southern Frontier. In fact, his life was easier there than in the capital. We do have one path left. If he's caught and executed, we may have a chance to survive."

Evelyn stared at Zoey in disbelief, as though she couldn't comprehend the words. "What did you say? Do you actually hope for his execution? He is your husband!"

"How I wish it were not so," Zoey answered, looking around the room at the faces filled with panic. How innocent they all seemed.

"Where is Viola? She returned after her divorce-she's a member of the Earl of Silverstone's family. We should inform her, or else she may end up in prison without knowing what's happening."

Caspian gently squeezed Luna's hand, his voice soft. "We've already sent word to her."

Evelyn still couldn't bring herself to accept such a hopeless fate. "Someone, think of a way! In the past, you all knew powerful people. Go and ask them-surely someone can speak on our behalf before His Majesty!"

No sooner had she spoken, hurried, disordered footsteps echoed from outside. Servants rushed in, calling urgently, "Madam Zoey, Mr. Caspian! The Royal Citadel's governor has arrived with his men. He says they are here to seize the estate!"

Evelyn clutched her chest, a sharp pain cutting through her as she slid off her chair. Caspian rushed to catch her, holding her steady.

Her hands pressed against her chest, tears streamed down her face as she wailed, "How could it come to this? How could this happen?!"

Instantly, the main hall was filled with cries.

Zoey held her children tightly, feeling both anger and sorrow. Though she had expected something would

go awry, she never imagined it would be this-Oliver fleeing the battlefield just when the war was about to begin.

Perhaps all her efforts had been in vain.

Anthony entered with his guards, his gaze sweeping the room before resting on Zoey's face.

Zoey forced herself to stand, awaiting the final verdict.

Anthony sighed deeply, then announced loudly, "Take everyone from Silverstone Estate to the dungeons and await further orders. The rest of you, come with me to seize the estate."

"No!" Evelyn cried, her body giving way as she fainted.

Zoey grasped her children's hands tightly, her voice trembling with forced calm. "Don't be afraid. No matter what happens, I'm here. I will stay with you."

Courtney gripped her mom's hand in return, her demeanor much steadier and calmer ever since she started attending Gracewood Women's Academy. "I'm not afraid, Mom."

Cedric stood tall, his chest out with determination. "I am not afraid, either."

Zoey pulled them both into a tight embrace, tears falling freely.

They were both trembling-how could they not be scared?