

War Song 1401

Chapter 1401

Gerald and Clifford met in the Supreme Court's interrogation room. They sat across from each other, an old wooden table between them.

Carissa sat behind the scribe's desk, not far from them. Even if they spoke in hushed tones, she could hear every word clearly.

The only sounds in the room were the quiet rustle of breath, the steady beat of hearts, and occasionally, the almost imperceptible sound of a sigh.

Yet, no words passed between them.

Neither of them exchanged even a fleeting glance. It was as if they were two strangers who were forced to sit together-distant, indifferent.

Carissa wondered if it was her presence that made things so strained, though she could not leave. All she could do was endure the awkward silence alongside them.

At last, Gerald asked, "Why?"

Gerald was truly baffled, struggling to reconcile the person before him with the image of someone he thought he knew. No matter how he looked at Clifford, he could not align the two.

Clifford clasped his hands together and shook his head. "Why bother asking? History is written by the victors."

"Is there not always a reason for things?" Gerald asked, his voice hoarse with emotion.

Clifford paused to think before responding, "I've realized that the things I've always wanted to do in life are out of reach. Didn't King Sigmund say it? I'm a rebellious person. I think my thoughts were never truly rebellious enough, so I resolved to do something truly reckless. Once that was done, nothing else seemed worth mentioning."

Gerald's eyes narrowed as he focused on him. "You led a rebellion this time. There are thousands dead, and countless more wounded. The stench of blood still hangs in the air. I don't believe this is something you would do. When did you start valuing human life so cheaply?"

Clifford pursed his lips and remained silent. He looked completely numb.

"Clifford, you're not like this," Gerald said. "What is it that has led you to this point?"

"I am exactly like this," Clifford replied, his tone tinged with bitterness. "The man you knew is nothing more

than a facade you created for me. You blindly believed I was as you imagined me to be."

Gerald stared at him for a long time, a bitter look creeping across his face. "We three were once such good friends."

Clifford seemed to find the

statement amusing, a genuine laugh escaping his lips. "You count a king as a friend? It seems the years have treated you well. Yes, a wise wife; obedient children, grandchildren aplenty-what more could you ask for in life? You have no regrets, do you?"

Gerald's lips parted, as if struggling for words. "Clifford, we're already at this age now. What's the point of saying such things?"

Clifford's expression darkened. "Our life's purpose is for the family. Some things are beyond your understanding. There's nothing more to say. Just go."

"But no matter what, you cannot bring ruin to the people!" Gerald said, his face pale as death.

It seemed that in Clifford's presence, he always felt weaker.

Clifford didn't respond to him.

Instead, he turned his attention to

Carissa. "Lady Carissa, you entered the court, and started Skye Embroidery and Gracewood

Women's Academy. Clearly, you saw how oppressive this world is for women. But tell me this-if women truly had no path forward would you rise up, take action, and fight for them?"

Carissa met his gaze, momentarily stunned.

The question seemed aimed at convincing Gerald, but it also set a trap for her.

Seeing her silence, Clifford's sarcasm deepened. "I once had some respect for you. You knew how to resist, which proved you weren't a fool. But now, it seems your resistance is all for the sake of fame. How utterly hypocritical."

Gerald understood his intentions and frowned. "Why make things difficult for Lady Carissa? This has nothing to do with her."

Clifford shot Carissa a provocative look. "The most disgusting face is the one that feigns sincerity. Can't you speak for yourself? Do you need someone to defend you? What kind of commander are you? Not even brave enough to answer for O yourself? Are you mute? You live off your dad's and husband's military achievements, yet you strut about as if you're the one in power."

"Clifford, that's enough!" Gerald stood abruptly, anger flashing in his eyes. "I came here out of old friendship, not to let you torment others!"

Carissa calmly motioned for Gerald to sit, then turned to Clifford.

"Honestly, I don't owe you an answer. But since you've gone this far, it would seem like I'm hiding something if I didn't respond."

Chapter 1402

Clifford's eyes gleamed with a sharp light. "Very well. Let's hear some of your self-righteous words." Salvador, ever the suspicious soul, had always been wary of the Hell Monarch's household. Even if Carissa hadn't risen for women's rights, Salvador would still remain cautious of her.

How could Carissa not know Clifford's intentions? From the moment he asked, she knew it was a trap. Before she could respond, Clifford sneered and added, "You can always start by flattering King Salvador. Praise him for how he treats women under his rule. As long as your conscience is clear, feel free to do

So.

Carissa was infuriated, but she wasn't willing to be baited. She met his mocking, challenging gaze. "Don't make assumptions. That's not the same thing at all. You think people are ignorant and narrow-minded as they can't understand your preferences, so you resort to extreme measures to gain their approval. But that's your personal problem. You can't speak for others like you, and you're not fighting for their well-being. You're only bringing them hatred and resentment. If people knew what you were doing, they'd condemn you even more."

Clifford's face paled instantly. For a moment, his expression twisted into a malicious grin. "You still haven't answered. If women are oppressed to the point of being unable to survive, would you not have done the same as me?"

Carissa's response was firm. "If it's just a hypothetical, then it's not a reality. I don't need to consider it." "In the end, you're just too afraid to answer," Clifford sneered.

Carissa retorted, "To equate 'unable to survive' with 'not being understood by the majority' is absurd, don't you think?"

She locked eyes with Clifford, her gaze unwavering.

"The majority doesn't understand you. And yet, you've lived for decades, enjoying a life of comfort and freedom. So why do you feel the need to go all out for everyone's approval, understanding, or even admiration before you're satisfied?

"You can face your own heart and stay firm in your choices. As long as you have enough courage and confidence, you don't need to care about how others see you. But instead, you've turned this into some noble struggle for the 'greater good'. But at its core, it's nothing more than resentment born from unrequited love."

She paused for a moment, then continued, "People like that-whether men or women-we call them resentful souls."

Ignoring the shock in Clifford's eyes, Carissa turned to Gerald. "Do you have anything else to say?" Gerald gazed at Carissa for a long moment, his thoughts swirling in a complex mix of emotions. She had struck right at the heart of it.

In the end, it was all just resentment from unrequited love.

"Let's go." Gerald stood up, his posture hunched with weariness.

Clifford suddenly turned to face them, as if he was about to say something. However, Carissa's words kept echoing in his mind. His lips parted, yet no sound came out.

He slumped into his chair, as if all the life had drained out of him. His face was pale, and his gaze grew distant and vacant.

Carissa and Gerald walked out.

Behind them, Clifford's voice echoed

a haunting mix of laughter and sobs. Gerald paused for a moment, his lips turning an even paler shade.

"He was setting a trap for you with that question... He's despicable," Gerald finally said, his voice heavy with disappointment.

Carissa nodded. "I know, but those questions don't require my answers."

Gerald sighed. "You're smart-you

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know just how to hit where it hurts. But that's life, isn't it? You can't always get everything you want. If things don't go your way, going to extremes like that only ends up hurting both yourself and others."

Just before he got into the carriage, Carissa suddenly asked, "Did you already know what Clifford was up

to when you asked me to find him?"

Gerald didn't answer. He pulled the curtain down and signaled to the coachman to move.

Carissa watched the carriage leave. The reason she asked was simple-she knew, with Gerald's abilities, there was no way he couldn't find Clifford.

But there was no need to delve further into it.

The traitors accused of treason were being sent into the capital one by one. On a cold autumn day, even Lennon had arrived in the capital.

The family, except for Leona, was reunited in Astral Prison in this grim fashion.

Chapter 1403

Now that everyone had been gathered, the long-awaited reckoning could finally begin.

After thorough investigations by the Supreme Court and the Ministry of Justice, in cooperation with the Capital Guard, it was confirmed that Yuvan, Nicholas, and his associates were indeed guilty of treason. The charges were indisputable. After such a long delay, it was time to list all their crimes for the world to

see.

Yuvan's entire family-except for Randall, who had provided valuable information-was sent to Astral Prison. However, Randall was also removed from the royal registry. He remained in his post at the Supreme Court, still serving as warden. Despite that, it was clear that any prospects for promotion were now out of reach for the next ten years.

Matthew had ordered Randall to take a temporary leave, telling him to stay away from Astral Prison and reflect quietly at home while the matter was sorted.

Matthew thought Randall was a bit slow, but at least the latter was honest and willing to learn. Over time, he had grown more decisive and was starting to think things through, which Matthew appreciated. So, Matthew was still willing to look out for him.

Matthew had mentioned Randall to Carissa before. Carissa had said that Randall had grown up with a timid nature, never daring to resist when faced with challenges. Fortunately, he had been raised by Avis, who had taught him well. This prevented his nature from being spoiled.

Carissa advised Matthew not to give Randall too much special attention. "Let him stay in the capital and live an ordinary life. Only then will the king feel at ease."

Matthew understood this. Randall had only managed to get out of the situation because of the lead he had provided about Yuvan's private army. But once everything settled down, Salvador would no doubt feel uncomfortable every time he thought of Randall.

That was why Salvador hadn't stripped Randall of his post-he was being kept close, under constant surveillance. If he ever harbored thoughts of leaving the capital, he wouldn't make it far.

In the morning court, Salvador announced the charges against Nicholas, Yuvan, and their co-conspirators. The list of offenses was staggering-over a hundred in total.

They were accused of plotting to overthrow the throne, fabricating royal attire reserved only for the king, training private soldiers, hoarding weapons and secretive escape techniques, inciting the people, spreading rumors about the court, embezzling taxes, supporting bandits, and raiding villages...

The charges were all grave, some of them almost unfathomably severe.

The people might not have cared much about power struggles or rebellion, but when bandits began plundering and terrorizing the common folk, the situation took a turn. That was when the people's anger truly boiled over, for it became personal. The public's fury was such that they cried for blood, wishing nothing more than to see the criminals meet a gruesome end.

The fury was so intense that the people called for the harshest punishments.

Nicholas and Yuvan were to be executed with Torso Cleaving, and the officials involved-Clifford, Wayne, Saul, and Samson-would all be beheaded.

The families

the traitorous nobles

and officials were not spared, either. The men were branded on their faces and exiled, never allowed to return to the capital. The women were forced into the laundry house, living their lives as slaves.

Many officials were involved, and heads fell one after another at the execution grounds. Each time, they

made Nicholas, Yuwan, and others watch the executions, forcing them to see their trusted subordinates

die.

They also wanted those officials

who had conspired in the rebellion

to realize, just before they died, how they had been deceived by the wrong people. They needed to know that their actions resulted in the near destruction of their entire families.

Even someone as mentally strong as Nicholas and Clifford couldn't withstand such torment.

The days and nights they spent

plotting together, the faces full of

ambition, and the hopeful eyes-now all turned to hatred. The rebel

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officials glared at Nicholas and his group, looking as though they

wished they could burn holes into

their bodies.

On the day of their execution, Nicholas and the other main conspirators were paraded through the streets, exposed to the jeers and curses of the people.

That day, the main streets of the capital were blocked off. Wherever the prison carts passed, they left behind a mess. The people couldn't bring themselves to throw eggs. Instead, they threw rotten vegetables, mud, and waste.

Anything that could express their hatred, they threw.

Before their execution, there was widespread discussion about the bandits causing chaos and harming the people. Their cruelty angered everyone.

Clifford was no longer the calm figure he once was. His composure finally cracked.

He had always thought that no matter how much people insulted or cursed him, it wouldn't hurt him. His heart had become numb.

But as the filth and mud rained down on him—dirty, repulsive, and degrading—he felt something shift

deep inside him. It was as though all the blood in his body rushed to his head, and his face turned a deep, livid shade.

This was what true public disdain felt like. This was the weight of universal contempt.

Chapter 1404

As Nicholas was paraded through the streets, the weight of his downfall crushed him entirely. His sanity fractured and he screamed curses at the people, accusing them of ignorance and foolishness.

He raged at the masses, claiming they had been deceived by the court, that they had mistaken a foolish king for a wise ruler. He claimed that only he was the true sovereign-the one destined to bring justice and prosperity.

His hoarse cries were drowned out by the roar of the crowd. The people shouted for his death, calling for him to be torn apart. They said that the execution by Torso Cleaving was far too merciful. They demanded he be cut into pieces and slowly tortured to death, as punishment for his evil deeds.

On the other hand, Yuvan stayed silent the whole time. Inside, he was filled with resentment and hatred for Nicholas. He believed that if Nicholas hadn't turned his people against him, he could have succeeded. Nicholas was like a poisonous snake, hiding in the shadows. When Yuvan didn't know, it struck, and that strike was deadly.

Because of Nicholas, Yuvan was no longer just a rebel. He was now a fool-a fool who had destroyed his own empire. Everything he worked so hard for was handed over to others, and the people who turned against him had sent him to the king's army.

The disgrace would be Yuvan's for all time. His name would live on in history-not as a great ruler, but as a traitor. He would be a man who lost everything and earned only contempt and mockery. He had worked hard his whole life, first for power and second for fame, but it all ended up being for nothing.

When he was dragged to the execution platform, his whole body was shaking uncontrollably. As he took one last look at the world, all he saw were eyes filled with hatred and mockery.

He suddenly burst into tears.

What had he worked so hard for all these years? For the so-called great cause, he never did anything as he wished. He couldn't let himself indulge in love-every marriage and concubine was just for his gain. When he met a woman he liked and wanted to be reckless for once, that led to the betrayal of Wayne and his subordinates.

In the end, Yuvan had nothing.

Through his tear-filled eyes, he caught sight of a woman in the crowd-Violet. She was stunning in her purple attire, full of energy. Her presence was similar to Carissa's, but she was livelier, more carefree, and full of joy.

Unfortunately, the look she gave him was filled with disgust and hatred.

Blood stained the execution platform as the remains of Yuvan writhed in agony, half of his body still alive. He screamed in a pitiful, broken voice. He clawed desperately at the ground, dragging himself forward, leaving behind twisted trails of blood.

It was late autumn, and the cold set in with a biting chill. Rain began to fall, gradually intensifying. It

washed the bloodstains from the platform like a small stream trickling down the sides.

The rain only deepened the cold. Autumn had arrived in full force, and the air grew bitter.

During the siege, some of the rebellious soldiers had escaped, infiltrating the homes of the citizens to rob and kill, leaving a trail of innocent victims in their wake.

Now, seeing the rebels meet their end and witnessing their suffering before execution helped ease the pain and anger the people had been carrying.

The corpses of the traitors were strung up on display at the execution site, their bloodied remains exposed to the elements. The rain fell, slowly washing away the blood, but the faint red stains remained. As the crowd slowly dispersed, it signified the end of the rebellion.

Carissa stared at Nicholas, hanging on the execution platform. His face was unrecognizable. There had been a mishap when he was executed, and the executioner had to strike him 18 times before his body was severed.

The pain drove him mad, and he clawed at the ground, scratching his face until it was a bloody mess.

None of the charges against

Nicholas were related to the Sinclair

family's massacre. It wasn't even

mentioned. The massacre had to be

pinned on Westhaven, for it had been used as leverage in

Starhaven's negotiations with them.

In truth, it had been spies of Westhaven who had carried out the killings, not Nicholas. If it hadn't been the Sinclair family, it would have been the Sullivan family.

But no matter the truth, the hatred Carissa felt for Nicholas remained deep and unyielding. Even seeing

his dismembered body couldn't quell the fire of her resentment.

Violet stood beside her, holding an umbrella to shield them both from the rain. She said softly, "Don't worry. Death isn't the end for him. He will be cast into the deepest circles of hell, tormented day and night by the fires of damnation."

Carissa wiped her face, unable to tell whether it was rain or tears mingling on her skin. She felt something lodged in her throat, and she couldn't say a word.

She wanted to say that no matter how terrible Nicholas' end was, the people he had killed would never come back.

She stood there for a long time until Adrian arrived through the rain. He wrapped her in his arms and sighed heavily. "Crazy girl, come home. You don't have to be so obedient anymore."

Carissa buried her face in her mentor's chest and cried out loud.

She had once been the crazy girl from Meadow Ridge. But no matter how wild she had been there, coming home had always meant she would return to being obedient.

Chapter 1405

Adrian had been in the capital for some time now.

In the past, he had been consumed with his studies on sacred firearms, leaving little room for anything else. But now, with some free time, he used the excuse of being unable to let go of the business in the city to extend his stay.

The truth was, he was concerned for Carissa.

His interest in sacred firearms had begun with his trip to Nerathia to study their methods. He had done it for the Southern Frontier, then Hector, and ultimately, for Rafael and Carissa.

As a mentor, Adrian knew that they each had their own paths to walk. He couldn't prevent them from forging their own futures, but he could help them however he could and act as their support.

Adrian often claimed he wasn't cut out to be a teacher. But the truth was, his apprentices were exceptional. Each one of them was a person of great character.

None of them needed his constant concern-except for Carissa.

She had always been wild and carefree. But even so, she had mastered the martial arts to a remarkable degree, her natural talent shining through.

Seeing the bright, carefree smile on her face each day always brought a deep sense of happiness to Adrian.

As time passed, Carissa had been forced to grow up quickly. Her heart was always on edge, and she never relaxed. The joyful, genuine smile she once wore so often had disappeared. Adrian felt a profound ache seeing her carry such a burden.

But those wounds of hers-only time could heal them, and there was little anyone else could do.

Rafael could give her happiness and make her smile, but there was always a piece missing-something no one could ever truly fill.

Adrian had spent the entire night drinking. He slept until late afternoon before finally heading to the palace to meet with Salvador.

Once, the Russell family had been at the height of their power. But now, only Adrian remained. He had no children, so he obviously had no grandchildren either. His only legacy was his apprentices.

Blake Russell, the Annara Monarch, had once commanded a powerful army. He had been accused of wielding too much power, which threatened the throne. There were probably some grudges and unresolved matters from those days, but even Salvador couldn't say for sure.

Regardless of the past, the Russell family had contributed greatly to the Sanford family.

Salvador treated Adrian with the utmost respect-not only because of Blake's contributions, but also because Adrian had improved the six-barreled matchlock and the red cannons that had been brought in but not yet used. These would become valuable weapons for Starhaven.

Adrian stayed in the royal study for about an hour, and Derek personally escorted him out of the palace. Adrian had not received any official rewards, but he had spoken of the Russell family's past-of the misunderstandings that should never have existed between ruler and subject, all born from a lack of trust. Had anyone else said such words, Salvador might not have taken them seriously. He might have been angry, even. Yet, his feelings toward the Russell family were complicated. Plus, Adrian and Carissa made significant contributions to the recent stabilization of the kingdom.

So, Salvador listened.

At least, for now.

As Adrian rode back from the palace, the shadows on his face remained, and he wasn't optimistic. Salvador had acted like he believed in Adrian and Carissa, but he avoided talking about Rafael.

The situation at the Southern Frontier was nearly decided. When Salvador thought back to Rafael's unapproved departure from the capital, he couldn't shake the discomfort in his heart.

Moreover, this battle proved that regardless of whether Rafael had the military command emblem, the command of the Southern Frontier army would always be in his hands.

In the next two or three years, things might be peaceful enough. But after that, it was hard to say.

Instead of returning to Glimmering

Tower, Adrian went to Hell Monarch

Estate first. He didn't find Carissa there, so he headed to the Capital Guard headquarters. As he had expected, she was there.

He had thought that after her tears the previous night, she might have let herself grieve more fully. But

she had woken up as usual, unbothered, and was already back to business as usual.

The two of them sat across from each other in an unusual moment of quiet seriousness.

"After the Southern Frontier conflict is settled and Rafael returns, you two should resign and come back to Meadow Ridge," Adrian said.

Carissa's voice was still hoarse, but she asked, "What did the king say?"

She knew Adrian had gone to the palace today. He hated the capital, and he hated the palace even more.

If he had gone there, it would surely have been for something related to her and Rafael.

"He didn't say much," Adrian replied,

his tone serious, "but he doesn't trust Rafael: He's wary of Rafael. Eventually, something will happen. If you leave, they'll remain brothers and subjects. But if you stay it will lead to conflict."

Carissa understood what he meant. Rafael's unauthorized assumption of command at the Southern Frontier had already crossed a line. Especially with the battle successes he had achieved, his reputation was now greater than ever.

It was a direct threat to Salvador's position.

Adrian continued, "If you don't want to leave the capital, you could resign and become a nominal prince.

Just remember-no children. If you do want children, you must leave the capital."

Carissa was silent for a moment.

A part of her resented the idea. As the first woman to serve in the court, to give that up felt like she was abandoning everything.

Would there ever be another chance like this?

But Adrian's concerns were the same as hers.

Chapter 1406

Salvador summoned Eustace to the palace for an audience.

Eustace had come prepared. Though he had led his bodyguards and the merchant convoys to quell the unrest, the connection between the Spencer family's collateral branch and Nicholas couldn't be easily dismissed.

Even if Salvador publicly declared their merits balanced with their faults, it was not something that could be swept aside without consequence.

However, Salvador's attitude towards Eustace was surprisingly warm. The former even praised him for his loyalty to the throne and his patriotic spirit, noting that he resembled his late father in his unwavering commitment. The previous head of the Spencer family had been generous to the court, contributing substantial funds during times of war.

Eustace understood the underlying message and quickly offered, "With both the Southern Frontier and Victory Pass embroiled in battle, the Spencer family is willing to contribute in whatever small way we can. We will donate 300,000 silver coins to help provide winter clothes and improve the rations for our soldiers."

Salvador appeared pleased. He smiled and said, "Good. With your contribution of 300,000 silver coins, I am confident our border forces will withstand the enemy and end this war sooner rather than later."

Eustace was quick to express his gratitude, "You're wise and compassionate, Your Majesty. The heavens will surely bless Starhaven for generations to come."

Salvador chuckled and allowed Eustace to leave after a brief conversation.

300,000 silver coins could buy safety for one's family, but it also served as a valuable lesson.

Not everyone could become a royal merchant, but it also didn't have to specifically be the Spencer family who took on the role.

Doing business with the court didn't offer great profits, but the prestige of the title alone ensured that other ventures would flow in with ease.

When Eustace returned home, he spoke to Violet. "If you plan to stay in the capital, you cannot act as you did before. The Spencer family is large. While we have many strong branches, some are withering. After this, I must make sure to prune those branches. You need to be cautious and keep a low profile. Don't flaunt your wealth. From now on, I'll reduce your spending on clothes and luxuries."

Violet didn't mind. She already had her small stash of money, and she stayed at Hell Monarch Estate, where her basic needs were met. Her clothes were simple throughout the year, and she rarely wore gold or silver jewelry.

"Don't worry, Dad. I understand. But is 300,000 silver coins too much for our family? Will it hurt us?" "It's fine," Eustace replied, looking at his daughter.

He realized just how much she had grown. She was more mature and composed than many of the young men in the Spencer family. A sense of pride swelled in his chest, and he couldn't help but sigh inwardly. He had always planned to pamper his little girl, but she had developed a passion for martial arts. So, he had supported a guild for her, allowing her to obtain a privileged role in it.

When she reached the right age, he thought he would find her a husband from a lower-status family and

let her live a life where she could do as she pleased. That would have been a good future.

But he never expected that she

would end up on the battlefield, earn military honors, and later assist the Hell Monarch's princess consort with her duties. During his time in the capital, Eustace had heard many people speak highly of Violet, all full of praise.

What father wouldn't be proud? It was an unexpected turn of events. Who knows, she might even be the one to carry the weight of the Spencer family one day.

On a warm, sunny day, Eustace departed the capital with Conrad and a few others.

At Carissa's insistence, Adrian also decided to return to Meadow Ridge with the members of the Pathfinders Guild.

Adrian had originally planned to stay longer, but Carissa made it clear she preferred his absence. With a resigned shake of his head, he chastised her for being ungrateful and reminded Kyle and Isaac to take good care of her.

After Adrian left, Isaac poked Carissa on the forehead. "You ungrateful little one! Sage Adrian wanted to stay longer with you. Why did you just send him off? He's been nothing but worried about you."

There was still a trace of reluctance on Carissa's expression, and she sighed deeply at his words. "Sage Adrian has never liked the capital. He's too accustomed to freedom. If he stayed in the capital just for my sake, that would have been selfish of me."

Throughout his time in the city, Adrian had scarcely smiled.

Moreover, when Adrian was around, she always depended on him. She wasn't as sharp in her actions as before and often found herself wanting to be close to him, even when there was nothing important going

on.

Chapter 1407

Thomas and Rosalind's wedding had been postponed time and time again, but finally, they found a favorable day to celebrate. The event wasn't extravagant, but as the granddaughter of the royal chancellor, it still carried the necessary dignity.

Victoria led the way, and the other palace ladies followed suit, each offering generous gifts to Rosalind for her trousseau. The students of Gracewood Women's Academy also rallied to show their support, presenting Rosalind with handmade wedding gifts.

Most of the girls at the academy came from humble backgrounds. Though their gifts weren't costly, the thought and effort they put into embroidering and crafting the items was the most meaningful part. Rosalind's wedding dress had been commissioned long in advance from Camila. The gown had

previously been displayed in Skye Embroidery, where it had caught the eye of many young women. They all dreamed of wearing such a beautiful dress for their own weddings.

Camila was already well-known, but now, even the royal chancellor's granddaughter was wearing the wedding dress she made.

Who would still think Camila was a bringer of bad luck because of her past?

For a time, the doors of Skye Embroidery's shop were worn down by visitors-some seeking wedding dresses, others looking for everyday garments.

On the day of the wedding, Carissa, along with Violet and the others, went to the Farrell family's residence to attend the celebration. The Farrell family had many men, and since Thomas was a military general, they naturally enjoyed lively events. So, they said they would have a First Light Revelry.

The guests anticipated seeing a shy bride. To their surprise, the bride confidently stepped forward and said, "The First Light Revelry sounds great, but it must begin with a poem. The theme will be marriage alliance. If it's good, you'll receive blessing gifts. If it isn't, you'll have to put on a display of swordplay and martial arts."

So, Thomas and Rosalind sat on the porch, watching displays of martial arts one after another, enjoying round after round of swordplay. Not many blessing gifts were given out.

The First Light Revelry ceremony, typically a time for guests to liven up the celebration for the newlyweds, took an unexpected turn as the newlyweds playfully turned the tables on the guests—something never seen before.

At Highstone Estate, where guests were gathered to celebrate Rosalind's wedding, most of the guests were civil officials. Trevor, in his excitement, suggested that the officials perform sword dances and martial arts to liven up the event.

This proved to be quite a challenge for the guests, who scrambled to find something to contribute. Some painted, others wrote calligraphy, and a few composed poetry. Beaming with pride, Trevor collected their works with great satisfaction, unable to hide his delight.

The Farrell family's residence was alive with energy, filled with clinking glasses and cheerful laughter that echoed through the estate.

Carissa and Violet took advantage of Thomas and the others being occupied with the guests to make their way to the newlywed suite. Rosalind looked radiant today, more so than ever before. Typically reserved, her happiness was so apparent today that she couldn't hide it, no matter how hard she tried. She had even gone to the trouble of sending Violet away, leaving Carissa behind, and shyly asking if she could inquire about a few matters.

Carissa blinked in surprise at the questions Rosalind posed. "Well... Didn't anyone tell you about these things before you got married?"

"Of course, they did," Rosalind's cheeks turned a deep red. "My older maid gave me advice."

"Then what's the problem?" Carissa chuckled. "It'll come naturally, nothing to worry about."

Rosalind's hands fidgeted, and her face flushed with heat. "But she said that the wedding night is always painful for women. I'm afraid I be able to bear it. If it hurts too

much, won't I lose my 199

What if I make a fool of myself? Is there something I can do? Oh, I'm being so rude."

Carissa smiled softly at her, understanding that Rosalind wanted to present her best self to the man she loved. "If it hurts, just admit it. He'll understand. He'll take care of you."

"But what if I look terrible? What if I grimace in pain and scare him?" Rosalind's lashes fluttered as she cast a quick glance at Carissa, her worry evident.

Carissa chuckled. "I doubt that'll happen."

"But my maid said it would happen." Rosalind looked at her anxiously. "Your Grace, wasn't it painful for you?"

Carissa felt a strange stirring in her

chest, a flush creeping across her skin as she recalled her own wedding night. There were

those

moments, especially when thinking about Rafael, when her mind wandered to intimate matters, and

she felt a deep desire to be closer to

him.

A person's body was very honest.

"Your Grace? Did I offend you?" Rosalind noticed Carissa's brief moment of distraction and quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, I was out of line to ask such things."

Carissa snapped back to the moment. Clearing her thoughts, she smiled reassuringly. "Yes, it's painful the first few times, but it's bearable. After that, it becomes something indescribably wonderful."

Hearing that, Rosalind's tense posture began to ease, and her cheeks flushed. "Thank you, Your Grace. I'll do my best to be a perfect wife."

Carissa took her hand gently, her

voice sincere. "You don't need to be

perfect. Just be yourself. In

marriage both the good and the bad will be seen by your partner, and you'll have to learn to accept each other. No one is truly perfect. Do you expect him to be flawless?

Rosalind shook her head. "No."

"Then you don't need to demand perfection from yourself either. No need to stress about everything," Carissa advised.

Rosalind paused, her eyes thoughtful.

Did she really not need to strive for perfection in everything?

Chapter 1408

After the lively wedding banquet, Carissa returned to Hell Monarch Estate, only to be struck by an unexpected chill in Orchid Hall. Her thoughts turned to Rafael, who was far away in the Southern Frontier. She hadn't counted the days since they had parted, but it felt like an eternity.

She was about to head out to the Glimmering Tower as usual to see Adrian, but then she remembered that he had returned to Meadow Ridge.

A pang of emptiness settled in her chest.

She thought back to how Rosalind had seemed tonight. Carissa realized that when a woman got married, her heart was filled with so much joy, excitement, and bashfulness. The happiness just radiated from Rosalind.

Carissa thought back to her own two weddings-both had been too calm and quiet.

Lulu helped remove her makeup and was about to prepare a bath, but Carissa stopped her, pulling her down to sit beside her instead.

"Lulu, I've mentioned before that we need to talk about your marriage. Have you thought about anyone in particular?" she asked.

Lulu glanced at her, amused. "Did you enjoy the wedding feast so much you want another helping?" Carissa laughed lightly. "Am I really that greedy? I'm doing this for your sake. If you don't decide soon, you'll become an old maid. You're not planning to follow in Vivi's footsteps and decide not to marry, are you?"

Lulu shook her head. "No, that's not it. I'll get married. Even if I do, I'll stay by your side after."

Carissa reached out to tap the tip of her nose. "How is it that you're going to get married but not live with your husband? Instead, you'll stay with your natal family?"

Lulu's eyes immediately welled up with tears when Carissa said she was her natal family. Her voice trembled as she said, "My lady, you're my only family now. I have no one else. No matter what, I'll stay by your side. If a suitable servant or guard comes along, someone with good character and loyalty to the household, I'll marry him."

Tears rolled down her face as she spoke.

Carissa gently wiped away the tears, her voice soft. "No, Lulu. The most important thing is that you marry someone you love. When I saw the happiness and joy in Ms. Young's face today, I realized that the real meaning of marriage is being with the one you truly love. Of course, character matters too."

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Lulu, still stubborn, replied, "Regardless, I just want to stay with you."

She didn't have a family or home anymore. Wherever Carissa was, that was where Lulu's home was. Carissa smiled warmly. "Alright, we'll make sure you stay in the capital."

"You mean by your side, my lady," Lulu reiterated with quiet determination.

Carissa gently pushed her toward the bath. "Go to the bath chambers."

At Redstone Manor, Rafael received a letter from Carissa and read it several times, unable to suppress the smile that kept creeping up on his face.

Carissa had written she missed him-she had actually taken the time to write it down.

She missed him!

Timothy and the others had been waiting outside for quite a while and were beginning to get anxious. They knocked once more. "Marshal Sanford, may I enter?"

Rafael folded the letter carefully, smoothing his expression to appear more serious. "Come in."

The reason they were summoned today was because Victor had been sitting idle-neither retreating nor advancing and that kind of stalemate couldn't go on forever.

So, they had made contact with the Wolf Chief of the grassland tribes, Balin Storm, hoping to form an alliance.

Originally, the tribes had been

reluctant to ally with any side. But Victor had been hoarding troops, and his supplies were running low. He had been engaging in sneaky tactics-stealing sheep from the grasslands-which greatly angered Balin.

Anger aside, there was a sense of worry.

They understood Victor's situation-if he was defeated, he would be punished once he returned home.

So, his only option was to go all in. If he couldn't take Simonton City, he would have to take control of the grasslands.

Originally, Victor had only sent someone to negotiate. But now he had lost all sense of pride, resorting to stealing sheep and killing cattle. This couldn't be tolerated any longer.

They had to make a choice.

Just as this tension mounted, an emissary from the Hell Monarch arrived. Balin had readily agreed to meet and was willing to enter the city and negotiate. This showed genuine intent to discuss matters, as they knew the generals of the Southern Frontier Army couldn't leave the city freely, and Victor's current tactics were despicable.

Because of this negotiation, Rafael called Timothy and the others to join him.

"They are willing to enter the city, so according to our customs, they are our guests now," Rafael said, looking at the gathered men. "General Farrell will handle their reception-prepare the best food and drink."

Timothy nodded. "Yes, Marshal Sanford. I'll make sure it's properly arranged."

Louis spoke up. "Sir, do you think an alliance with the grasslands tribes is possible? Could we get them to send troops?"

Rafael shook his head, his gaze firm. "No need for that. As long as the grasslands tribes allow us on their land, we can pursue Marshal Crow directly. We must take his head As long as he breathes, he will never surrender."

The others nodded in agreement. Sandoria's troops were already demoralized and lacked the will to fight.

It was only Victor's stubbornness that kept them from retreating.

Once he was gone, Sandoria's forces would crumble.

Chapter 1409

Balin entered the city with just a dozen men. They were all strong and sturdy, with curved blades at their waists, looking fierce and intimidating.

But when they sat down to eat and drink, their tanned faces broke into wide, radiant smiles.

Balin was in his fifties, with skin as dark and shining as his men's, his eyes sharp and intelligent. He was a man of great wisdom and was meticulous in his thinking. In other words, he remained cautious and never fully trusted the Hell Monarch.

His one demand was simple: this would be a one-time alliance. After driving back the Sandorians, the Southern Frontier Army was to withdraw from the grasslands swiftly. No one was to step foot in the heart of the grasslands again without permission.

Rafael agreed, and the treaty was signed immediately.

Once the agreement was made, they didn't linger any longer than necessary and left.

The grassland tribes held little fondness for Starhaven, as the endless warfare often spilled over into their territories. However, with so many tribes scattered across the land, they weren't united, which meant they couldn't oppose either Starhaven or Sandoria directly.

Timothy escorted them out of the city, then returned to Redstone Manor to discuss how best to conduct the upcoming pursuit.

The grassland tribes had offered their land, allowing the Southern Frontier Army to press forward in pursuit. However, a pursuit was very different from a siege. Logistics were crucial—supplies, food, arrows, weapons—all had to be accounted for. Medical care, stretchers, and support for the troops were also necessary.

It was a large-scale operation, complicated by the harsh winter cold. The risks were significant, but the rewards could be great. If they succeeded, it would deter Sandoria for at least the next ten years. The generals deliberated through the night, crafting a strategy. By morning, the basic plan was ready, and orders were issued. Naturally, they also sent an urgent report to Salvador. As usual, a letter for Carissa was included with it.

When on the battlefield, there were no secrets between husband and wife, and fewer complications were always better.

When the court received the report, some officials felt Rafael's decision was overly ambitious and reckless. With the harsh winter looming, leading a large force into pursuit seemed a risky move. Plus, they still had to guard against the grasslands tribes seizing the opportunity to attack Simonton City.

The officials petitioned Salvador to order the Hell Monarch to retreat and defend Simonton City, arguing that holding the city would be sufficient to keep the Sandorians at bay.

However, some believed that simply holding the city would cause more problems in the long run. Soldiers unable to farm would increase the burden on the court, and military supplies would drain the treasury. Even their families had to be supported.

If they let Victor drag things on, who knew how long it would take?

Plus, he might never return to his homeland. With a group of soldiers with no food or clothing, they would likely resort to raiding, occasionally harassing border towns, killing civilians, and looting. It would be a real nightmare, and the people would live in constant fear, never truly having peace.

In the court, the two sides argued back and forth, each expressing their opinions, but Salvador remained mostly silent.

It wasn't until the officials

supporting Rafael gained the upper hand that he slowly said, "I trust the Hell Monarch's judgment and military ability. For true peace in the Southern Frontier, we can't continue dragging things out like this agree with the Hell Monarch's decision to end this quickly."

With Salvador's endorsement, and the opposition unable to counter the arguments of Rafael's supporters, all those present knelt in unison and praised the king's wisdom.

Jeremiah understood Salvador well. Firstly, the king fully trusted the Hell Monarch's military abilities. Secondly, he knew that Salvador wouldn't allow the Hell Monarch to lead the troops in the Southern Frontier for too long.

Carissa paid no attention to the court's debate. Like Jeremiah, she knew Salvador would approve of Rafael's battle plan. Right now, she just wanted to find a quiet place to read the letter he had written to her.

The seal on the letter had been broken, though carefully resealed afterward. With a trained eye, one could see the marks of tampering. But Carissa wasn't bothered by that. After all, the letter usually contained usual greetings, with maybe a line saying how much he missed her.

Yet that one line "I miss you"-was enough to soothe her longing.

When she opened the letter this time and read the first two lines, her eyes widened in shock.

She quickly placed a hand over her chest and muttered angrily, "How shameless... Only someone like that would sneak a peek at a couple's private letters."

Her heart raced, a mix of embarrassment and anger, as she started reading from the beginning again.

"My dearest Carissa, winter has

come to the Southern Frontier. Without you beside me in the bed, I feel a bone-deep cold. I miss holding you close, breathing in the fragrance of your hair as we drift off to sleep. That believe, is the greatest happiness in the world. I realize now I've never told you this, but on the day I married you, I knew I was the luckiest man alive..."

The words that followed grew more passionate and unrestrained, declaring his love for her in the most vivid terms.

Carissa held the letter up, studying the handwriting. It was undoubtedly his, but he knew Salvador would have read it first-how could Rafael have written such an intimate, heart-pounding letter?

Was there some other meaning behind it?

Or perhaps... Was it the effect of her simple line in the letter saying she missed him that had caused such a reaction?

In the royal study, the braziers still hadn't been lit, and the cold crept in like a quiet intruder, spreading its chill across the room.

The reports had been reviewed and signed long ago, yet Salvador lingered, his hand resting idly on the pile of documents. His gaze was fixed on the dim flickering of the lamp's flame, his mind adrift.

He read the letter Rafael had written to Carissa, filled with endless longing and heartfelt emotions. It was as if they had just gotten married, and they were deeply in love and inseparable.

This wasn't the first time Salvador had read their letters. While there had been expressions of longing in the past, none were as bold and reckless as this.

Such words would feel awkward to say out loud, let alone write down.

Salvador thought his younger brother's actions were inappropriate and too careless.

There were far better ways to win a woman's affection-why resort to this?

And yet, despite his disapproval, something within him stirred, like a stone tossed into a still pond. Salvador's thoughts rippled, and he couldn't make them stop.

What had he given up to wear this crown?

He had never dared to think much on matters of the heart. There had been moments of infatuation, fleeting glances of desire-but he had always dismissed them as temporary, passing whims. They would fade, like everything else.

He had once felt drawn to Carissa. She was a remarkable woman-who wouldn't be moved by her strength and grace?

But his attraction was never more than a passing feeling. In the grand scheme of things, she was a brilliant political tool. Marrying her off to Rafael had been the perfect move-neutralizing a threat and dissolving his military influence.

In the end, the king's emotions and his desires were just another means to an end.

"Your Majesty, where are you going tonight?" Derek asked softly when he noticed Salvador had finished reviewing the documents and hadn't spoken for a while.

Salvador's eyes refocused, and he shook off the reverie. "Has anything happened at the queen's palace lately?"

Derek bowed slightly, speaking carefully. "Your Majesty, Her Majesty has been sending soup these past few days, and she also sends people to Serenity Palace daily to visit Prince Connor, bringing him some snacks. The people at Everspring Palace say she misses Prince Connor and often cries alone at night." Salvador, rarely thinking about marital affection, felt his heart harden upon hearing Derek's words. "She should be grateful that the queen dowager is taking care of Connor. Crying every night? Who is she crying for? Did we force mother and son to be separated?"

Kylie's crying and missing Connor and being unable to sleep were only spoken about by those at Everspring Palace. Who were these words meant for?

Of course, they were meant for Salvador.

Such short-sightedness!

With Connor staying by Kylie's side, he would eventually be spoiled.

Salvador's voice turned cold. "What else did the people at Everspring Palace say?"

Derek replied, "The people at Everspring Palace didn't say much more, but some gossiping servants mentioned that the queen shouldn't personally raise Prince Connor. There's talk it will invite criticism from the court, questioning the authority of the queen."

Salvador felt an indescribable sense of disappointment.

Those servants dared to gossip about his decision, and he was certain someone had been fueling these

murmurs.

He still couldn't fathom why Kylie was so intent on keeping Connor by her side. It was clear to anyone watching that now that he was living at Serenity Palace, his progress was undeniable.

Why on earth would she want to turn him into a spoiled, undisciplined child?

If her reason was simply that she couldn't bear the separation from him, then her perspective was too narrow. He had expected better from her-after all, she came from a distinguished family, and such a shallow view wasn't in line with her background.

When Connor was first sent to Serenity Palace, her reluctance had been understandable. But now that he

was showing improvement, why insist on bringing him back to her side?

Now, even Trevor said Connor had made progress, and it was thanks to Ryan entering the palace and setting a good example.

But now, Ryan had returned to the academy. He would re-enter the palace after the New Year to accompany Connor in his studies.

Salvador had begun to feel a glimmer of hope for Connor's future. But as always, Kylie seemed intent on complicating things.

"I've heard Sylvia has been unwell lately," Salvador said suddenly, his voice now firm and authoritative. "I will go visit her. Prepare the carriage."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Derek bowed respectfully. "His Majesty is leaving!"

Sylvia knew that since the treason

case was over, Salvador would enter

the harem. But she thought that since Trevor had praised Connor, this should lift Kylie's house arrest, and Salvador would go to visit Kylie first.

So, she had put the third prince, Cecil, to sleep early. Even though he wasn't her biological son, he had

been in her arms since he was an infant. To her, he was as good as her own.

When she heard the palace maid report that Salvador was on his way, Sylvia quickly got up, dressed, and went to greet him.

She couldn't help but wonder-was Salvador still unwilling to go to Everspring Palace?