

War Song 1411

Chapter 1411

Kylie had yet to remove her hairpins, and her makeup was still untouched, her face brimming with quiet anticipation.

Earlier that day, a message had arrived from the court, announcing that the king would visit the harem tonight. She had waited for hours, but had heard no news that he had sent for any concubines. In her heart, she felt a surge of joy.

If no summons had come, it meant he would be visiting her chambers.

"Lydia, go and see if His Majesty has arrived yet," she urged once again, her third time asking that evening.

Lydia was standing to the side. She smiled and said, "Your Majesty, please be patient. If His Majesty was coming, he would surely send word beforehand so you can prepare to receive him."

"Yes, you're right," Kylie sighed, brushing a loose strand of hair from her temple. "It's been so long since His Majesty visited my palace that I nearly forgot how it goes."

Her smile was soft and alluring.

"We are husband and wife, after all. What couple do not have their quarrels? But in the end, a man cannot resist his wife's charms. Now that Connor has grown, His Majesty is naturally more inclined to indulge him."

"Once His Majesty arrives, Your Majesty must be patient and avoid bringing up the matter of Prince Connor," Lydia cautioned.

Kylie nodded. "I know. Tonight is not the time to discuss it. But Connor must return soon. The royal chancellor has praised him so highly. It's unnecessary for him to remain in Serenity Palace. He can continue his studies here just as well. If he stays there much longer, I fear he will forget all about me." Lydia hesitated, then said carefully, "Your Majesty, Prince Connor has become much more obedient now. Perhaps it would be better to let him stay in Serenity Palace. If His Majesty lifts your house arrest, you will be free to visit him whenever you wish. He is dutiful, and he will never forget you."

Kylie shook her head, sadness passing over her eyes. "He is dutiful, yes, but he is young. And he is easily swayed by others."

Lydia's face shifted. "You must be cautious in your words, Your Majesty. The queen dowager would never do such a thing. She only wishes what's best for Prince Connor."

Kylie looked at her and sighed lightly. "You don't understand. Though the Quinton family is under pressure, they have been in power for many years. Their influence stretches far, and they have many supporters. The queen dowager is most wary of my family interfering in politics."

"Once Connor is crowned heir, she will make sure he distances himself from the Quinton family to prevent them from growing too strong. She sees me as a part of that-an ally to the Quinton family, and she will turn Connor against me. Don't forget, Lydia. The queen dowager has never spared even her own kin. Have you ever seen her take any interest in the politics of the court?"

Lydia thought Kylie was overthinking and didn't agree with her view. "Your Majesty, the queen dowager and His Majesty share a deep bond. As a mother, she will understand your desire to see your son succeed. She's not the kind of person who would cruelly separate you from your child. On the contrary, having people spread rumors the queen can't even raise her own son might anger both the king and the queen dowager. It's not worth the risk."

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Kylie looked at her, her expression cold. "When did you become so timid and weak? You fear this and that-how can anything be accomplished like that? Those words were meant to reach both Majesty and the queen dowager. His Majesty despises rumors. To silence the gossip, he will naturally return Prince Connor to me. And tonight, when he didn't send for any concubines, it proves I wasn't

wrong. He is coming to Everspring

Palace."

No sooner had Kylie spoken than a servant entered. "Your Majesty, His Majesty has set out for Lady Sylvia's palace."

Kylie sprang to her feet, her face draining of color. "What? He's gone to Lady Sylvia's Palace? Are you certain?"

The servant replied quickly, "Yes, Your Majesty, I saw it with my own eyes."

Kylie shook her head, feeling a surge of panic in her chest. "Why would he go to Lady Sylvia's palace? He didn't even announce anything. Could it be... He's gone to see Prince Cecil? Yes, that must be it! Prince Cecil is young, and His Majesty would want to check on him. Afterward, he will surely come to Everspring Palace."

But as the hours dragged on and Kylie waited into the night, still Salvador did not come. She sent someone to inquire, only to hear that Salvador had stayed the night at Sylvia's palace.

Kylie had hoped Salvador would visit tonight so she could soften his stance, have her confinement lifted, and regain control over the harem. But now, her confinement remained, and she was still a queen under restriction.

Chapter 1412

Among the harem, Kylie was most wary of Sylvia and Grace. Sylvia was caring for Cecil, while Grace was caring for Caden, the second prince.

Cecil was not Sylvia's biological son and was still very young, so Kylie need not worry too much. But Sylvia had once been arrogant, with an impressive family background and a sharp aptitude for power games.

In the past year, Sylvia had softened somewhat, co-managing the affairs of the harem with Grace. She

had learned how to win hearts and minds, and her support for Skye Embroidery and Gracewood Women's Academy had earned her some reputation among the common folk.

In contrast, Grace was far more restrained. She co-managed the harem with Sylvia and would occasionally seek Kylie's opinion, genuinely treating her with respect due to her being the queen.

But Caden, a sharp and well-mannered boy, was Salvador's and Victoria's favorite.

If the position of Crown Prince were to be decided now, it would naturally fall to Connor. But once the princes grew older, someone might propose making the wisest son the heir, and Connor would have a formidable rival.

At the moment, both Sylvia and Grace had joint authority over the harem, and naturally, their sons were given more prominence.

Kylie had insisted on bringing Connor back to raise him, not only because of what she had mentioned earlier but also for a far more crucial reason: the Quinton family could not be her ally, but rather a burden. If anything were to go wrong, her position as queen could easily be stripped away.

But if Connor were with her, Salvador would have no choice but to tread carefully.

She couldn't say this, and she didn't dare to think too much about it. But every time the thought crossed her mind, it sent a chill down her spine.

She spent a restless night, turning in bed, unable to sleep. The following morning, she heard the news that Salvador had granted Sylvia residence in Tranquil Palace.

Before Victoria was crowned queen, she had also lived in Tranquil Palace.

Tranquil Palace was warm in winter and cool in summer. A pond had been dug in front of the gates, filled with water lilies. In the summer, the entire palace would be filled with their fragrance.

The palace also had many varieties of peonies-the queen of flowers. Originally, only Victoria and Kylie's palace had them. While they could be found in the royal gardens, those didn't belong to anyone in particular.

The peonies in Tranquil Palace had always been there, carefully tended by gardeners and originally meant for viewing pleasure. Now that the palace had been granted to Sylvia as her residence, Kylie couldn't help but feel a growing sense of unease.

But she was still under house arrest and unable to leave. Without authority over the harem, she couldn't even meet with Salvador.

What could she do?

In a hurry, she ordered Lydia to send someone to investigate why Salvador had decided to have Sylvia move to Tranquil Palace.

Lydia personally went out, and it took her one or two hours to gather information before she returned. Kylie had been anxiously waiting and quickly asked, "What's the news? Tell me quickly."

Lydia straightened her dress and

said, "You needn't worry too much, Your Majesty. I've asked about it. It

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seems that when His Majesty visited last night, he learned that Prince Cecil has been taking medicine. It turns out that since the beginning of autumn, Prince Cecil has been suffering from a cough, and it has dragged on without fully healing.

"The royal physician says Prince Cecil is weak and that the cold weather caused his symptoms. Feeling sympathy for Prince Cecil, His Majesty decided to have Lady Sylvia and Prince Cecil move to Tranquil Palace."

Kylie sat down, her expression grave. "Since when has His Majesty shown such concern for the princes? It's just a cough. How sick can Prince Cecil be? Making such a big deal out of it and moving him to the Tranquil Palace-there's something about this that doesn't seem right."

Sensing her deep concern, Lydia

tried to reassure her. "Perhaps His Majesty feels pity for Prince Cecil, who has lost his birth mother. It's not strange if he wants to show more affection and care. Besides, despite his busy court duties, His Majesty has always shown concern for his sons and daughters. Even for Prince Connor's studies, His Majesty has sent inquiries countless times."

Kylie's brow furrowed with a dark cloud of worry. "But that's different. Connor is his eldest son. He should be the one receiving more attention."

Moreover, for Cecil to be moved just because of a cough-it seemed like much ado about nothing. Kylie suspected that Salvador was simply using this as an excuse to elevate Sylvia in some way.

Also, Sylvia's family had frequent dealings with Carissa, and Salvador had once harbored certain feelings for Carissa...

Suddenly, something clicked in her mind, and she hastily asked, "Lydia, hasn't Lady Jeanette had some connection with Carissa?"

Lydia shook her head. "I don't think so. They've only met once, at a palace banquet, and exchanged a few words while watching a performance."

Kylie shook her head. "Carissa is

proud and doesn't easily interact with the concubines. Plus, being a military general, she has a man's

temperament-she's drawn to the

weak and helpless. Isn't that why she started Skye Embroidery? I've noticed that Lady Jeanette seems delicate and soft-she may be useful to me."

Chapter 1413

When Sylvia moved to her new residence, all the concubines sent gifts. The royal relatives, upon hearing the news, hurried to send their congratulations as well.

As for what to send, other households usually left the decision to the lady of the house. But at Hell Monarch Estate, the ones in charge were Jacob and Luke.

They searched through the storerooms, but nothing seemed quite right. Either the items were too expensive, or they were just simple gold, silver, or jewels. Even the golden vases seemed too small and trivial.

As for the larger items, such as coral trees or folding screens, Jacob wasn't inclined to part with them. The coral tree, in particular, was rare. The one in the estate had been a wedding gift from the Pathfinders Guild when Carissa married.

In the end, their eyes landed on the most abundant item in the storeroom-Kyle's orchid paintings.

This would certainly make a strong impression-expensive and elegant, yet not unique to the estate. If it wasn't enough, snow would soon fall, and the orchids would bloom. So, they could just have Kylie paint

more.

However, out of respect for Kyle, they first sought his approval. Kyle saw no problem with it. After all, they had plenty of those paintings. His muscle memory with each brushstroke over the years meant that a new painting could be completed in just a couple of hours.

Upon returning in the evening and hearing this, Carissa was a little reluctant to part with it. But since it was for Sylvia and would remain in the palace, Carissa knew it wouldn't be sold off. And knowing that Sylvia would likely appreciate Kyle's art, she decided to go ahead and send it.

She personally delivered it to the palace. Tranquil Palace was bustling with activity now, with ladies from all over waiting their turn to be seen.

After a short wait, it seemed someone had informed Sylvia. Citing her busy schedule, Sylvia graciously invited Carissa in.

No one had objections after all, when the rebel forces had caused chaos in the capital, it was Carissa who had led the Mystic Army to victory, ensuring the stability and prosperity of their lives.

After a proper greeting, Carissa presented the painting.

At first, Sylvia didn't pay it much attention, assuming it was another typical gift. But when she saw Kyle's signature, she paused for a moment, then eagerly asked, "Is this one of Mr. Spencer's orchid paintings?" Carissa nodded with a smile. "Yes, it's a piece by my senior guild member. I hope you like it, Your Grace." "Quickly, send someone to call His Majesty to see this!" Sylvia was thrilled, smiling at Carissa. "Why would I dislike it? I would never! This is a treasure. Please have a seat, Your Grace."

Sylvia's mother, Gladys, was also present. Carissa took a seat beside her, exchanging a few pleasantries.

As the joy of the palace relocation filled the air, compliments flowed freely. Carissa also praised the beauty of the palace, and she had made up her mind to be more diplomatic today.

Sylvia instructed the palace attendants to show them around. It so happened that the peonies were in full bloom, and they all went together to admire the flowers.

Carissa went along with them. She

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was conversing with Gladys and was suddenly startled when someone collided with her. She instinctively reached out to steady the person before they could fall.

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The woman, clearly startled, pressed her hand to her chest and quickly thanked Carissa. "Thank you for your assistance, Your Grace. I would have fallen without it, and that would be embarrassing for a concubine like me

Carissa noted that the woman was beautiful. She was dressed in palace attire and wearing a white, silver-edged cape in the cool breeze. She seemed delicate and familiar, though Carissa couldn't place her at first.

When the woman referred to herself as a concubine, Carissa deduced she must be a member of the harem. She nodded and politely said, "It was nothing, Your Grace. No need to thank me."

The woman, who was none other than Jeanette, blinked and said, "Do you not remember me, Your Grace?"

Carissa studied her for a moment before recognition dawned, and she quickly said, "Lady Jeanette, my apologies for not recognizing you at once."

Jeanette's face lit up with admiration. "Your Grace, I have long admired you. It is truly an honor to see you again today."

Carissa smiled. "You flatter me, Your Grace."

Upon realizing Jeanette's identity, Gladys immediately curtsied. "Greetings, Lady Jeanette."

Jeanette returned the gesture with a modest half-bow. "There is no need for such formality, Mrs. Lloyd. Why don't we enjoy the flowers together?"

Gladys exchanged a glance with Carissa. Seeing that Carissa had no objection, she smiled and offered, "Dare I ask you to join us, Your Grace?"

Jeanette returned the smile, her voice soft and sweet. "It would be my utmost pleasure."

Chapter 1414

The garden at Tranquil Palace wasn't small, but it couldn't be compared to the royal garden.

If one took their time strolling along, admiring the flowers, or stood still to enjoy the view for a while, one could easily spend a good portion of the afternoon.

But Carissa was accustomed to walking briskly. Flowers didn't require her lingering attention-she could glance at them and move on, seeing little difference between one bloom and the next.

She had seen fields upon fields of flowers, all of which had left a lasting impression on her. These

meticulously tended peonies in their pots, though, hardly stirred any great interest.

By the time they finished their walk, some of the other ladies hadn't even finished their coffee. Just as Jeanette began to speak of Skye Embroidery, they found themselves back at the main hall of Tranquil Palace.

Jeanette forced a smile. "Shall we go inside and congratulate Lady Sylvia?"

Carissa shook her head. "I have matters to attend to, so I'll have to excuse myself."

"Your Grace." Jeanette's voice was hurried, and she quickly called after her.

Carissa turned. "Is there something you need, Lady Jeanette?"

Jeanette quickly masked her urgency with a smile. "No, nothing at all. I only wanted to thank you, on behalf of all women, Your Grace. Your kindness and generosity, your concern for the suffering of the people, are truly humbling to those of us here in the palace."

Carissa was left somewhat puzzled. What did she mean by "concern for the suffering of the people"? She certainly wasn't as noble as Jeanette seemed to imply.

Furthermore, while Jeanette may have felt humbled, what was with the "us" she referred to? Was she speaking of the other concubines in the palace?

Was this a genuine gesture of gratitude, or an attempt to stir resentment? To praise Carissa and, at the same time, subtly undermine the other concubines was that an act of foolishness, or something more calculated?

Gladys' expression grew tense as she quickly glanced around. Sure enough, she noticed several pairs of eyes trained on them, each gaze filled with varying degrees of curiosity and judgment.

"Your Grace, I was just about to return home as well. Shall we leave together?" Gladys said quickly, trying to divert the attention away from the uncomfortable situation.

Carissa nodded. "Very well. I'll bid farewell to Lady Sylvia."

The two women entered the room together and left together, deliberately avoiding another glance at Jeanette as they made their exit.

On the way out of the palace, Gladys remarked, "Lady Jeanette was once quite favored by His Majesty. He showered her with affection for a time. But lately, he has been too preoccupied with state matters to visit the harem.

"She probably thinks she has fallen out of favor, hence her odd behavior today. Don't take it to heart, Your Grace. I'm sure the other ladies understand as well and won't be swayed by her words."

Carissa gave a small nod. "I didn't take it to heart. I just don't understand her intentions."

She had no animosity toward Jeanette. Yet today, the woman kept approaching her first to admire the flowers, then with compliments. Then just before Carissa left, Jeanette made that sarcastic remark. It was very confusing.

The other concubines would likely find Jeanette's words strange, perhaps even a bit unsettling. However, it was unlikely to cause any significant discord. What would truly spark a conflict between Kylie and Sylvia was that Sylvia had paid attention to Skye Embroidery and Gracewood Women's Academy, while Kylie had stayed out of it and even criticized it.

However, Carissa didn't know much about the palace's complicated matters. She just analyzed it on the surface. After leaving the palace, she forgot about it and considered it a small incident that didn't need to be remembered.

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After all, palace affairs had nothing to do with her.

At Everspring Palace, Kylie learned of Jeanette's words and let out a cold laugh. "So, the little minx dares

to deceive me?"

Lydia frowned. "It seems she's throwing her lot in with Lady Sylvia. In that case, why would she have agreed with your request? She's just a two-faced, treacherous little thing."

The comment Jeanette made today

seemed like praise for Carissa. But in reality, it was a way to elevate Sylvia, making her move to a new palace even more celebrated.

Sylvia's rising prestige in the palace would soon overshadow Kylie and Grace.

Kylie was furious and said, "These despicable people see that I'm under house arrest, and now they all flock to Lady Sylvia's palace like they think I'm beneath them. Well, I'll see how long Lady Sylvia's good fortune lasts."

After venting, she sighed deeply. "In the end, it all comes down to Connor returning to my side. Only then will these people start treating me with the respect I deserve."

Chapter 1415

Salvador now regularly summoned Carissa to the royal study to discuss military matters, granting her a seat at the table where battle strategies were planned and debated. Her place in these discussions was earned by leading the Mystic Army to crush the rebels.

It was a position forged in blood and sweat, with no one daring to challenge her right to it.

The reports that shaped their discussions came from Victory Pass and the Southern Frontier. These dispatches provided the foundation for the court's analysis of the situation, guiding decisions on logistical support and strategies.

Yet, even when strategies were drafted, Salvador refrained from issuing direct commands. Instead, he offered suggestions, a gesture that showed his trust in Rafael and the Sullivan family-though that trust extended only as far as their abilities on the battlefield.

With winter approaching, the soldiers needed winter clothing and more weapons. Most of their discussions revolved around supplies.

Leroy and Victor faced similar predicaments, though their circumstances were not identical. Victor was backed into a corner with no escape and had little choice but to fight. On the other hand, Leroy still had Edmund as his ally, though that alliance was tenuous.

Edmund and Lisandra clashed on many issues, dividing the court into factions. In short, things were chaotic, and there wasn't much real help that could be given to Leroy. Still, having a potential fallback was

better than none at all.

But this escape route was a humiliation for Leroy. He originally planned to use his cooperation with Nicholas to push back the people from Starhaven and take over Victory Pass. That way, he and Edmund could gain the people's praise and win their support.

Leroy's obsession with outshining Liam had become an all-consuming fixation. This drove him to fight with unmatched ferocity on the battlefield, refusing to retreat no matter the cost.

Barrett and his companions had initially traveled to deliver birthday gifts to Dominic. However, due to Oliver's evident disdain for them, they found themselves unable to return to the Southern Frontier. They were left strategizing on how to persuade Dominic to allow them to remain at Victory Pass.

However, before Barrett and his companions could devise any plan, Westhaven launched an attack. There wasn't much to think about after that. They grabbed their weapons and prepared for battle. Barrett was no stranger to war at Victory Pass, and he owed an arm to the Sullivan family.

It was during one of the fiercest battles that fate seemed to intervene. While trying to rescue Wyatt, Barrett had his arm severed by an enemy blade. The prolonged stalemate on the battlefield left him bleeding out; he nearly didn't make it. Unconscious for five or six days, he barely clung to life and considered himself lucky to have survived at all.

Barrett had traveled to Victory Pass from the Southern Frontier with three others-Glen Yoder, Joel Conway, and Huxley Russell. They were seasoned fighters from the Southern Frontier, so they were able to kill many enemy soldiers at Victory Pass, earning credit for their achievements.

Still, the war wasn't over.

Leroy refused to retreat. As long as he stood firm, the conflict dragged on.

When Barrett recovered from his injury, he picked up a blade with his remaining hand and returned to the battlefield. He had no choice. To leave without proving his worth would disgrace his ancestors.

The Sullivan family's attitude toward him shifted somewhat-they began to respect his determination. Still, there was no deeper sentiment in their regard, only a soldier's appreciation for another's grit.

Barrett often found his thoughts wandering back to his first battle at Victory Pass. He couldn't help but regret that time couldn't be

rewound. If only he had focused on earning merit back then instead of nining getting entangled with Aurora,

perhaps his life would have turned out differently.

But life offered no second chances, and there was no magical cure for regrets.

He couldn't measure how much a wrong decision had cost him in life. He had made his decisions, and the consequences that followed were his alone to bear.

Carissa had also made mistakes,

chief among them marrying a man like Barrett. She had endured so much suffering and countless grievances because of that choice. Yet, she rarely brought it up. Instead, she focused on building her own life and career, moving forward without looking back.

"Damn that Leroy. He's one tough bastard."

Glen collapsed onto the ground beside Barrett, his face windburned and darkened by the biting cold. The winds at Victory Pass were every bit as brutal as those at the Southern Frontier.

"He keeps losing battles, yet he won't retreat. And those peace talks? He acts like they never happened. What a shameless coward."

Barrett set aside his swirling thoughts and replied, "Then, we'll fight until he retreats."

"Exactly. And now we've got the six-barrel matchlocks," Glen said with pride. "By the way, do you know who modified those matchlocks?"

"Who?" Barrett asked.

He had heard the court had sent the weapons to them and had personally tested their effectiveness, but didn't know who was responsible for their design.

"The Pathfinders Guild's leader," Glen

revealed, grinning. "And get

this-he's the mentor of the Hell Monarch's princess consort. Lady Carissa used to be your wife, right? But let's be honest, you were never good enough for her. The divorce was for the best."

Barrett didn't flinch at the jab. Long ago, he had come to terms with the truth. He was never a match for Carissa.

Chapter 1416

Carissa had known for some time that Barrett had lost an arm while saving Wyatt. Cindy had mentioned it in a letter-not intentionally, but while talking about the Sullivan family's situation and the battle, it came up briefly.

When Carissa read it, she didn't dwell on the matter, nor did she mention it in her reply.

In the chaos of war, it was often impossible to distinguish who saved whom.

She naturally wished for every soldier to return home whole and unharmed, but war was brutal and unrelenting. Blood and sacrifice were inevitable.

While Carissa had acknowledged Barrett's actions, Salvador had only recently learned of them. The latest victory report from Victory Pass detailed Barrett's courageous efforts how he had fought valiantly, saved lives, and lost an arm in the process.

The earlier reports that came back on horseback had contained only critical updates on the battle's progress, with no mention of individual achievements. Only the detailed victory reports included a list of commendations.

Salvador was pleased by the news and took the opportunity to commend Barrett's valor during a military council meeting. It almost seemed as though he was proving to the court, and perhaps to himself, that promoting Barrett had been the right decision.

Then, as if worried that praising him might upset Carissa, Salvador deliberately kept her back after the meeting and said, "People need to look forward. The grudges between you and him should be let go. Holding onto them will only make you suffer."

Carissa nodded politely. "Yes, Your Majesty."

She said no more.

Thinking she still harbored resentment, Salvador smiled and added, "If you're still angry, I won't recognize his contributions. I'll keep him at Victory Pass for another ten years or so. That should suffice as punishment."

Carissa blinked, startled by his suggestion.

First of all, personal grievances had no place in matters of military merit. If Barrett had earned recognition, he deserved to be rewarded. If he had committed a mistake, he should be dealt with according to the rules.

Secondly, was being stationed at Victory Pass truly a punishment? The Sullivan family had guarded Victory Pass for years. Would that be considered a punishment as well?

The remark left her with more questions than answers.

What puzzled her even more was Salvador's recent behavior. He had taken to keeping her behind after council meetings, often to discuss things that didn't seem urgent. Sometimes, when his concubines sent soups or refreshments, he would insist on sharing them with Carissa, leaving her feeling awkward and uncertain.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Still not satisfied?" Salvador asked with a smile.

Carissa quickly replied, "Not at all, Your Majesty. I didn't mean that. The past between me and Sentry Warren is long gone. As for rewarding military officers for their merits or assigning their posts, it's not something I can interfere with, nor should any rules be broken because of me."

Salvador chuckled, pointing at her in mock reprimand.

"You've grown quite sensible, haven't you?" he said, a fondness in his voice, almost like an elder sibling.

The words tugged at a long-buried

memory. Before Carissa had gone to Meadow Ridge, Salvador would often come to discuss strategies and battle tactics with her second brother, Nathan. Whenever they crossed paths, he had always spoken to her in this same tone.

Because Nathan spoke to her that way, Salvador had picked it up, treating her like a little sister as well. Back then, she had grown accustomed to such familiarity. But now, hearing it again after all these years left her feeling uneasy.

It was as if nothing had changed over the years, as if he was still the crown prince and she was still that carefree young girl.

But the truth was, everything had changed. Too much lay between them now-doubts, suspicions, caution, and wariness toward her and her husband.

Carissa couldn't shake the feeling that Salvador's recent behavior had been oddly inconsistent. Of course, as his subject, she couldn't accuse him of being capricious. All she could do was respond with a polite smile and endure it.

"Tell me more about Meadow Ridge," Salvador said suddenly, as though struck by interest. He motioned for Derek to bring refreshments.

Carissa's shoulders stiffened slightly. Again? Hadn't she already recounted details about Meadow Ridge just the day before? Was he trying to probe for something? Did he suspect Adrian?

"What would you like to know, Your Majesty?" she asked.

Salvador thought for a moment

before replying, "Two days ago, you told me about Kyle. Yesterday, it was the tale of how you and Violet

became friends after a scul

Today, why don't you tell me a your other senior guild member, Winona Preston?"

"Winona?"

Carissa's heart tensed immediately.

Winona had founded Skywing Spire, which specialized in gathering intelligence. During wartime, its

members often served as scouts. Much of the intelligence Carissa received on the battlefield came through Skywing Spire.

Could it be that the king truly suspected Meadow Ridge?

"Yes, Winona. I hear she's the founder of Skywing Spire," Salvador said, smiling warmly.

His expression was seemingly free of ulterior motives. Instead, he seemed like he genuinely admired Winona and wanted to hear more about her.

Carissa forced herself to remain

calm as she explained, "Actually, Skywing Spire was originally my martial uncle's idea. He entrusted

Winona to manage it. Sage Everet

has a knack for business and thought information could be profitable. But he soon realized that gathering intelligence wasn't as easy as he'd imagined. Instead of earning money, he found himself spending it. He's considering disbanding the faction now."

Salvador had been genuinely intrigued, but when he heard her quickly explain that Skywing Spire was about to disband, he paused, slightly stunned.

Realizing something, he gave her a long, thoughtful look before saying, "Alright, that's enough for today. You may leave."

Carissa immediately bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty. I'll take my leave."

Chapter 1417

This pattern continued for nearly ten days.

Back at the estate, Carissa discussed it with Jacob and Kyle, but no one could make sense of Salvador's intentions.

At first, they assumed the king was trying to gather information about the Pathfinders Guild. After all, Adrian had not only modified the six-barreled matchlock and red cannon for this battle, but had also rallied numerous martial arts guilds to defend the capital.

Given Salvador's naturally suspicious nature, it wouldn't have been surprising if he harbored doubts. But the more time passed, the more it seemed like that wasn't the case. The king didn't show much interest in the specifics of Meadow Ridge or Adrian's actions. Instead, he seemed more entertained by Carissa's childhood escapades.

In recent days, Salvador's favorite stories were those of her mischief at Meadow Ridge-brawling, causing trouble, and forcing her mentor to go door-to-door apologizing and paying reparations. Whenever she recounted those tales, Salvador laughed uncontrollably. He would lean forward with tears in his eyes from how hard he laughed.

Carissa couldn't understand what was so amusing. Those incidents had all ended with her being punished: scolded by Everett, grounded, forced to balance a heavy jar on her head, smacked on the palms, or made to kneel on nails.

In one particularly harrowing instance, she was forced to squat in a horse stance for two hours while a candle burned beneath her. It was a common occurrence for her pants to catch fire during those punishments.

She thought those humiliating stories would bore the king, given that he disliked unruly behavior. After all, when Connor had acted out in his youth, Salvador had been furious.

Yet, he seemed oddly addicted to these anecdotes. Just this morning, he had even asked if they had ever blown up cow dung in the mountains. He claimed it was the most entertaining thing a child could do. Carissa's lips twitched for a long moment before she responded, "We did, but why do you find that amusing, Your Majesty? Surely, you aren't telling me you've done it yourself."

Salvador laughed. "It was your second brother who taught me about it. He was always too slow to run and ended up covered in dung every time."

Carissa knew that Nathan never ran slow. It was likely that Salvador had been slow, and Nathan was protecting him.

As the king laughed, the light in his eyes dimmed and his expression softened. He sighed and murmured, "I miss Nathan dearly. I've dreamed of him several times lately."

Her eyes reddening, Carissa's heart ached as though an old wound had been torn open. The pain was sharp and piercing.

In a quiet voice, she asked, "What did you dream of him saying, Your Majesty?"

"It was all old memories. Nothing worth mentioning." Salvador's tone was distant now, his earlier mirth

gone. He waved a hand dismissively, signaling that he was done talking. "You may leave."

Carissa bowed and excused herself.

As she turned to go, she glanced at the king one last time. She was unsure if his mention of her brother was genuine or if it carried some hidden meaning. She didn't want to guess, nor did she want Salvador to use Nathan as a pretense for anything. If this was a matter of manipulation, what was his goal?

After leaving the royal study, Carissa didn't immediately depart the palace. Instead, she lingered, waiting until Derek emerged. Quietly, she followed him.

It seemed he had expected her. At the bend of a corridor, he paused and turned back. His expression was calm as he looked at her.

"Your Grace, why are you still here?"

"There's something I wish to ask you, Mr. Walker," Carissa said, stepping forward with a respectful nod. Her expression betrayed her unease. "There are matters I hope you can clarify for me."

"His Majesty's recent behavior has left you perplexed, hasn't it?" Derek asked, his tone gentle.

Carissa glanced around. In the distance, a few palace attendants moved about, but no one was near enough to overhear.

Lowering her voice, she asked, "Will speaking to you in private cause you any trouble?"

"It won't," Derek assured her,

unconcerned as he began speaking freely. "His Majesty's unusual behavior stems from his headaches, which have worsened lately. He's been sleeping poorly, often needing medicine just to manage an hour or two of rest. Perhaps it's his health that stirs up memories of the past. In private, he's spoken to me about many trivial things these days."

"Headaches?" Carissa's brow furrowed. "I've never heard of His Majesty suffering from such an ailment."

"They started this autumn, likely brought on by exposure to the cold wind," Derek explained.

"I see..." Carissa nodded slowly before hesitantly asking, "Has His Majesty ever mentioned dreaming about my second brother?"

"He has," Derek admitted with a quiet sigh. "Sometimes, he even calls out for General Nathan in his sleep. Since the rebellion was quelled, His Majesty has rarely visited the harem. He used to avoid idle chatter, but he now speaks of trivial things often.

"More than anything, he mentions General Nathan. The truth is, General Nathan was the only friend His Majesty ever had. When he died, His Majesty was deeply saddened."

Carissa stood frozen for a moment, taken aback. So, the king truly thought of her brother as a friend. Derek continued, "Though the kingdom isn't entirely at peace, victory is within reach, and the internal unrest has been settled. His Majesty is pleased, but this joy feels hollow-there's no one to share it with. He is alone.

"The court is full of ministers who are his subordinates, not his equals. He can't speak freely with them. But you're different. You're General Nathan's sister. That's why he seeks you out, to ease the loneliness in his heart."

Carissa pondered for a moment.

If Salvador were just a man and not a king, wouldn't he turn to his wife or concubines for comfort instead? But she said nothing. After all, she was only his subject.

Chapter 1418

Of course, Carissa couldn't share her thoughts with Derek, so she simply thanked him and left. After that, Salvador continued the same routine of summoning her for idle conversation after court meetings. Sometimes, these sessions lasted an hour, and other times, they lasted two hours. Gradually, Carissa learned to take it in stride.

As his subject, if Salvador wanted her to act like a competent friend, she could oblige. Still, she couldn't help but think about how these midday breaks, a time the king should have spent resting, were now wasted on trivial chatter.

During this period, Grace visited a few times to deliver soup. Sylvia also came by, as did Penelope and even Jeanette.

Since the royal study was off-limits to the concubines, these women couldn't enter. Instead, they had to hand the soups to Derek, who would deliver them inside. However, if they brought along one of the princes or princesses, they were allowed to step into the study for a brief visit.

Perhaps because the concubines knew Carissa was often present, they always brought along a portion of soup for her as well. She would sometimes sip her share and wonder: If someone ever plotted to poison the king and the toxin was hidden in one of these soups, would she have to die alongside him? Today, Grace came, accompanied by Caden. Salvador allowed the mother and son into the study. Carissa had met Grace a few times while in the royal study. Her impression of the woman had always been favorable. Grace carried herself with quiet elegance, and Caden-young as he was-was well-mannered, a testament to his mom's capable upbringing.

Salvador clearly had a soft spot for the boy. Whenever Caden visited, the king's face would light up with genuine warmth.

Grace smiled as she directed the palace attendants to bring in the soup. Two bowls were placed on the table, one specifically for Carissa.

"I heard you coughing a bit the other day, Your Grace. So, I asked the cooks to prepare a bowl of honey and herb-infused broth this morning. It's good for soothing the lungs and easing coughs," Grace said warmly.

Carissa offered her thanks, "You've gone to so much trouble, Your Grace."

"It was just a simple request to the cooks. It was no trouble at all. There's no need to be so polite," Grace replied with a warm smile, then gestured for Carissa to drink. "Go on now, drink it while it's hot."

"Alright."

Carissa didn't stand on ceremony. The soups in the palace were always lavishly prepared, and since her

throat had indeed been bothering her these past few days, the soup seemed perfect.

Salvador took a sip of his own bowl, then stood and leaned closer to examine Carissa's soup.

Seeing the pale yellow broth with its delicate fragrance, he smiled and complained, "Why is my soup so dark and bitter? Give me some of yours."

Both Grace and Carissa froze for a moment.

Carissa was already drinking hers, straight from the small stew pot, no

less. Since it contained barely more

than a single serving, she didn't bother pouring it into a bowl, figuring she would just drink it straight from the pot and be on her way

Salvador seemed completely unfazed and instructed, "Derek, bring a bowl. Pour some from Lady Carissa's stew pot for me."

Seeing Derek step forward, Carissa panicked and hastily gulped down the rest in one go.

Flipping the empty stew pot upside down, she grinned cheekily. "You can't steal Lady Grace's good intentions from me, Your Majesty. She made it just for me."

Salvador burst out laughing. "You little rascal. Still as possessive as you were when you were a child. Fine. Grace, you'll have to make me some tomorrow."

Grace, who had briefly looked

startled, quickly recovered with a smooth smile. "Of course, Your Majesty. But you should finish the broth you already started drinking. I made it myself-stewed game hen with valerian root and wormwood. It's a little strong with a hint of bitterness, but it's nourishing."

"A hint of bitterness is still bitter," Salvador said, glancing at Carissa with a mischievous look. "Here, pour some for Lady Carissa. I can't finish all of this.""

Carissa's expression nearly fell.

What was he doing? Why was he doing this?!

Just as the tension was about to become unbearable, Caden's hands folded behind his back like a little scholar chimed in solemnly, "Dad, you can't share the soup you've already tasted with Aunt Carissa. It's improper for men and women to share like that."

The smile on Salvador's face froze for the briefest moment before he recovered, laughing. "You're right, son. Lady Carissa is married now. She's an adult, yet I'm still treating her like the little girl she used to be. My mistake."

He sat back down and looked at Carissa, a nostalgic smile on his face. "How time flies. You've grown up so quickly."

Carissa noticed the meaningful glance Grace sent her way, and the fake smile she had been holding onto started to crack.

Bowing quickly, she said, "Your Majesty, I still have work to attend to. Please excuse me."

Chapter 1419

As soon as Carissa left, Salvador's smile vanished. He barely sipped his soup before dismissing Grace and Caden. Grace said nothing. She simply instructed the servants to clear the dishes, took Caden's hand, and curtsied gracefully before taking her leave.

Once the hall was silent, Derek closed the door and turned toward the king. "Your Majesty, it's not yet time for the next council meeting. Why don't you rest for a short while?"

In the past, Salvador had always taken a brief respite during the noon hours. But ever since summoning Carissa for these conversations, he hadn't rested at all.

Salvador massaged his temples and sighed. "Very well. My head's starting to ache."

"Should I summon the royal physician to examine you?" Derek offered.

"There's no need. Those useless quacks at the Royal Medical Department have yet to cure a simple

headache, though I've taken more than my share of their remedies."

Salvador stood and made his way into the inner chamber, lying down fully clothed. The ache in his head only seemed to worsen.

Derek tucked the blankets around him, but Salvador suddenly opened his eyes, a faint daze in his expression.

"What's wrong with me lately?"

"You're simply burdened by concerns over the war, Your Majesty," Derek reassured. "You're mentally and physically exhausted. A period of rest will do you good."

Salvador didn't seem to hear him, lost in his own thoughts. "Has Carissa ever asked why I keep summoning her to speak with me?"

"She has, Your Majesty."

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Salvador's gaze sharpened as he looked at Derek, his eyes narrowing slightly. "And what did you tell her?"

"I told her the truth. That you miss General Nathan and wish to reminisce about the past," Derek answered calmly.

Salvador fell silent, staring at the ceiling. After a long moment, he murmured, "That's true. It is true."

He closed his eyes and pressed both hands to his forehead. "Leave me. I want to think for a while."
"Yes, Your Majesty. I'll be right outside. Please call for me if you need anything."

Derek cast a worried glance at Salvador before stepping out of the chamber.

Back at the Capital Guard headquarters, Carissa couldn't shake the events of the afternoon from her mind. Derek's explanation no longer convinced her.

Something about the situation felt deeply wrong.

Grace's gaze lingered in her thoughts-a knowing look, layered with meaning. It carried no hostility, yet it chilled her to the bone.

When she returned home that evening, she skipped dinner entirely. Instead, she summoned Kyle, Violet, and Jacob to her study. Once they arrived, she recounted every detail of what had transpired in the royal study.

Kyle and Jacob exchanged uneasy glances, neither knowing what to say.

It was Violet who wrinkled her nose in distaste and broke the silence, saying, "He drank from it and wanted you to drink it after him? That's disgusting, isn't it?"

She spoke without much thought, merely expressing her revulsion at the gesture. But Kyle and Jacob- both men understood far more.

Kyle's mind was already racing.

Salvador had always been a man of reason, calm and composed in his judgments. When it came to matters

of the heart, he was indifferers

at

best. Despite sitting on the throne for years, his harem was modest and the royal lineage remained sparse.

But before he became the king, Salvador had been a spirited young man, unburdened by the weight of court affairs. Like any man of his age, he must have once entertained dreams of love and romance.

He had always felt a certain unspoken emotion toward Carissa, something he couldn't quite put into words. He had even suggested once that she become a concubine in the palace.

It was clear that Salvador once had feelings for her.

During the rebellion in the capital, Carissa took the lead in quelling the unrest. Her boldness and skill were undeniable, and her efforts relieved Salvador of his pressing difficulties. He couldn't help but admire her, and that respect only grew stronger.

But no, it wasn't just respect-it was something more.

It wasn't really surprising that it happened.

What was surprising, however, was how Salvador allowed those feelings to develop. He kept her in the royal study every day to chat, which was far from his usual way of doing things.

Though Carissa was his subject, she was also a married woman and his sister-in-law. If word got out, even if it was just idle gossip, it could cause trouble if anyone used it to stir up conflict and drive a wedge between the brothers, that would be a much bigger problem.

"Your Grace, you must feign illness. For a time, at least," Jacob said firmly, his tone brooking no argument.

Jacob had considered every possibility-from malicious gossip to manipulation and even the risk of Carissa becoming a target for the royal concubines. None of these outcomes was acceptable to him. The simplest solution was to distance her from the palace. There were no pressing matters that required her personal attention. If there was something urgent, people like Michael would report it to her. As the men discussed the situation, Violet's eyes widened in sudden realization. She shook her head, aghast.

"You don't think he's harboring feelings for his sister-in-law? Is he trying to emulate-"

"Enough!" Kyle cut her off sharply. "Speak no further of this. Regardless of his intentions, meeting with her so often in the royal study is inappropriate. Feigning illness is the wisest course of action. Once Rafael

returns to the capital, the king

should have come to his senses by then."

Chapter 1420

Feigning illness was no simple task. Carissa couldn't just immediately claim she was too sick to handle official duties after today's awkward incident in the royal study. That would be too obvious, and would make future encounters between them awkward, with unspoken tensions lingering.

For those in high positions, that might not matter much. But since Carissa and Rafael were officials, they couldn't afford to be disrespectful.

After some discussion, it was decided that Carissa should go about her routine as usual the next day- returning to the Capital Guard headquarters and leading a team outside the city to maintain order. A few days later, they would stage a minor incident.

Due to the recent chaos caused by bandits, many people had flooded into the capital seeking refuge. However, without proper documentation, they were unable to enter the city and were left stranded outside. Following Zoey's lead, many noble families and wealthy merchants had set up temporary relief efforts, offering food, medicine, and warm clothing. Because of this, many refugees were reluctant to leave. Life was tough, but it was still better than traveling home in the freezing winter.

As a result, fights and disputes broke out almost daily outside the city. Carissa even sent the Garrison Unit to maintain order. It wasn't a difficult problem to handle.

For the next two days, Carissa personally led troops outside the city to patrol and keep things under control. There were indeed many refugees. However, with the Garrison Unit keeping things in check, they were able to line up in an orderly manner to receive porridge.

Carissa spent half the day outside the city, then returned to the palace in the afternoon to discuss military affairs with the court officials. Once the discussions were over, she left with the others as usual.

Salvador used to have her stay for lunch, but after that, he typically wouldn't keep her any longer. After dinner, he would review official documents late into the night before finally returning to his chambers to rest.

According to the plan, while Carissa was patrolling outside the city, her horse was startled and she was thrown off, injuring her leg. She was sent back to Hell Monarch Estate by the Garrison Unit guards. Once back, she called for Ivy to tend to her injury, then sent word to request time off. Upon hearing the news, Salvador immediately sent Robert to treat her.

Sticking to the plan of making the incident look real, Carissa had indeed hurt herself in the fall, but it wasn't serious. After all, Robert could only check her pulse and couldn't assess her actual injuries. And anyway, Ivy had already stabilized her leg with a splint. Based on the examination report, Robert returned to the palace to give his own report.

Naturally, the examination report Ivy provided was slightly exaggerated. When Robert delivered his report to Salvador, the latter became quite concerned. He immediately ordered Robert to send some of the palace's special medicinal ointments to Hell Monarch Estate.

Once the ointments were delivered, Robert didn't return, and everyone at Hell Monarch Estate breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Everyone knew Salvador may not have that kind of intention toward Carissa, but they couldn't let the palace consorts and officials misunderstand or exaggerate the potential problems of a woman holding a high position.

When Ryan returned on his day off, Victoria summoned Helen to accompany him into the palace to offer their greetings and also to visit Trevor.

Victoria knew about Carissa's injury but didn't ask further. The older woman simply told her to rest and recover for a while.

However, Helen found it odd.

Victoria was usually quite anxious about Carissa, always asking after the latter whenever Helen entered the palace. Yet now, with such a serious injury, she wasn't even inquiring about the details? Helen jokingly said a few words, but seeing that her sister wasn't smiling at all, she stopped herself. When Victoria wasn't smiling, her presence was commanding and intimidating, making people hesitant to speak.

Victoria had someone take Ryan to the study to meet Trevor, then dismissed Helen.

"If you want to visit any of the palaces, go ahead. Just come back after you're done and have lunch with me."

Helen stood with a grin. "You know me so well."

A smile finally touched Victoria's lips as she looked at her sister. "You're wearing new clothes today. Don't you want to show them off?"

Helen turned with a bounce in her step, eagerly heading off with Gillian.

Victoria watched her sister leave, a soft smile lingering on her face before a faint sigh escaped her lips.

Her head chamberlain, Keith, was puzzled by her intentions and asked, "Your Majesty, why let Lady Helen visit Lady Josephine and Lady Dakota? Aren't you afraid she'll overhear something?"

"If she hears something, then she hears it," Victoria replied with an unreadable look. "I'm actually curious

to know what they say when no one's around."

Victoria knew what her sister was like. Helen couldn't keep anything to herself. If she heard something, she would come straight to Victoria to talk about it.

Keith pursed his lips. "I fear it won't be anything good. But it's clever of you, Your Majesty."

"She didn't have a choice; she had to hurt herself for no reason. The king was really inconsiderate this time," Victoria said with a calm expression.