

## War Song 1421

### Chapter 1421

Before long, Helen stormed back into Serenity Palace, her temper flaring.

Ignoring Keith's presence, she angrily exclaimed, "It's as if those living in the palace have no world beyond their own little corner! Narrow-minded, petty, with hearts as small as the tip of a needle! They can't stand to see anyone else succeed.

"Carissa has earned His Majesty's favor and is always by his side during discussions. But what do those people say? They talk about the so-called 'propriety between men and women' and even suggest it's improper for her to be alone with him in the royal study.

"How ridiculous! Have they forgotten that Carissa is a court official? Where else is she supposed to be if not in the royal study? In the harem, competing for His Majesty's favor?"

Victoria slowly sipped her coffee. "Is that what they're saying?"

Helen's eyes practically bulged with fury. "At first, I didn't know. They praised Carissa endlessly, saying she had changed and was always accompanying the king in the royal study. I was proud for a while. "But the more I heard, the more off it seemed. They said they hoped no unpleasant rumors would come up, and even hinted that Carissa might be trying to climb the ranks... Oh, it makes me furious! And they covered their mouths and laughed like gossiping village women!"

Keith handed Helen a cup of coffee and offered some comfort, "Don't let it trouble you too much, Your Grace. They're just jealous. They envy you for having such an accomplished daughter-in-law. That's why they speak so recklessly."

"I know," Helen replied, her anger still simmering. "I gave them a piece of my mind, though. After I scolded them, they said I should go back and think things over. They even suggested that poor Rafael had been made a fool of behind his back and doesn't even know it."

Victoria smiled, but her eyes were cold. "Who said that?"

"Lady Josephine," Helen reported loudly.

Victoria gave a brief hum of acknowledgment. After finishing her coffee, she turned to Keith. "It seems the ones talking to Helen today have too much time on their hands. Pass on my royal edict- have them copy The Eternal Wisdom Scriptures ten times before the New Year."

Helen's mood lightened instantly. "The Eternal Wisdom Scriptures? That will wear their hands out!"

The Eternal Wisdom Scriptures had over five thousand words, and they were to copy it ten times. Victoria knew the punishment would leave them little time for gossip.

She glanced at Helen with cool indifference before continuing, "Since they're copying scriptures, they should clear their minds. No distractions. I'll have their allowances withheld, and they are to be forbidden from wearing gold or silver jewelry or any fine silks."

Helen gasped. For her, both punishments were unbearable. Copying scriptures was hard enough, but being forbidden to wear jewelry or fine clothes meant she couldn't adorn herself. It was a severe punishment, indeed.

She silently reaffirmed that her sister was not to be trifled with.

After Helen left the palace with Ryan, the royal edict had already reached the other concubines. The entire harem fell into a sudden, uncomfortable silence. No one dared to utter a word.

Victoria had long known that the people in the palace gossiped incessantly. No matter how strict the rules,

they couldn't stop the rumors. Only severe punishment could serve as a deterrent.

That was why she had summoned Helen, knowing that every time her sister came to the palace, she would end up chatting with someone. Those people, thinking Helen simple-minded, freely spoke of all sorts of things in her presence, including gossip.

It was the perfect opportunity to strike back and make an example of them.

If even noble concubines were punished, would Victoria show mercy to the others? In other words, the people in the palace were free to continue their gossip if they didn't mind the consequences.

This measure would likely quell the rumors for now.

However, still concerned, Keith said, "Your Majesty, His Majesty hasn't been going to the harem. That can't go on forever."

"Some things can't be forced. If he doesn't want to go, should I send someone to drag him there?" Victoria replied.

She waved her hand dismissively.

"Don't worry about it. I don't want to bother with it either. It's just that he's being foolish and doesn't realize it or he knows but is deceiving himself. He's damaging Cariss reputation and the reputation of the female officials in court.

"I only acted to suppress these rumors because of that. I let my guard down, thinking he always saw Carissa as a subject. Who knew he had changed his mind? I didn't catch it in time, and now rumors are running wild."

"Even so, it shouldn't be possible for

such ugly rumors to spread in such a short time, Keith said in confusion. "After all, Lady Carissa is the commander of the Mystic Army, and Prince Rafael is fighting at the Southern Frontier. Even if she enters and exits the royal study, outsiders shouldn't be spreading rumors. At least, they shouldn't spread so quickly."

"Someone spread the rumors deliberately," Victoria said softly.

The queen dowager knew the dirty tricks that could be used in the harem. But this situation was

judgment. His long absence from the harem, along with the constant company of his sister-in-law, only gave people more to talk about.

caused by Salvador's own lack of et

How could that not raise suspicions?

## Chapter 1422

After leaving the palace and returning to Hell Monarch Estate, Helen brought Ryan over to visit Carissa. Once the boy had finished speaking to his aunt and was sent on his way, Helen couldn't help but immediately blurt out everything she had overheard in the palace, including the harsh punishment Victoria had decreed.

After hearing this, Carissa comforted her mother-in-law, saying, "The people stuck in the harem have nothing to do all day. They can't go out like you, strolling through the streets or attending plays. Of course, they make up stories to pass the time. Otherwise, how would they get through such long days?"

"But that doesn't give them the right to speak like that! To say such ugly things-that Rafael has been made a fool of behind his back? Is that the kind of thing people should say? Is that what elders should be saying? It's disrespectful!" exclaimed Helen, livid.

Carissa sighed.

She couldn't help but wish she had seen the signs earlier and gotten "injured" sooner. Before the soup incident, she had suspected something was off but hadn't fully realized the extent. At the time, she thought the king might just be trying to gather information about the Pathfinders Guild.

But honestly, she wasn't sure what Salvador was thinking. He was always scheming. Even when she thought she had figured him out, he would end up thinking something completely different.

Right now, things were peaceful for her. But since she couldn't take part in military discussions, she had to rely on Winona to gather news from the front lines.

Still, things at the estate weren't exactly quiet. Word of Carissa's injury had spread, and plenty of people came to visit. It was strange. Before she had been injured, she hadn't realized how vast her network of connections was. Now that she was unwell, people came to check on her constantly.

They took turns visiting her, bringing gifts and medicinal herbs. While the visits weren't long, the constant stream of guests made her feel as though her peace had been interrupted. She had to thank each visitor and see them off with polite pleasantries, day after day.

It wasn't until several days had passed that she could finally enjoy some true quiet.

As for Gracewood Women's Academy and Skye Embroidery, they had asked Violet for permission before coming. However, not everyone came-only representatives were sent.

From the workshop, it was Camila and Leona. The latter had visited before, but now she returned with the former. Since her cousin was injured, Leona was the most upset.

From the women's academy, it was Rosalind who brought gifts from everyone. She smiled as she placed them on the table.

"This is from Mrs. Ashford. And this one is from Ms. Wright."

Despite each person only sending a single gift, the table was soon overflowing.

Since her marriage, Rosalind's face had been bathed in a glow of happiness. Her smile was sweeter than ever, and there was a subtle flush to her cheeks. There was also the warmth of love evident in her eyes. Talking to Rosalind was always a pleasure. She spoke of her students with great fondness, pride gleaming on her face as she recounted their progress and the joy they brought her.

She said that in comparison to her previous class, these new students were much easier to teach, even joking that they were easier to teach than Trevor's pupils had been. They understood how rare the opportunity to learn was, so hardly any of them slacked off.

Carissa listened, her smile never fading.

After a pause, she asked, "How is your husband treating you?"

A blush crept over Rosalind's fair face, and she fiddled nervously with her handkerchief. "He's good... wonderful, even."

"On your wedding night, didn't you worry your face might turn frightful with pain?" Carissa teased. Rosalind was immediately flustered. "Your Grace!"

Carissa laughed softly. Most

newlyweds worried about whether their husband would treat them well or how difficult married life might be. But Rosalind had been worried about whether the pain on her wedding night would make her face turn frightful.

Rosalind stomped her foot in mock frustration. Thinking back, she regretted it deeply. She shouldn't have asked that or worried so much for nothing. Now she had only made herself the subject of Carissa's teasing.

As they shared a lighthearted moment, Lulu entered, bringing word that Zoey, along with Luna and Viola, had arrived.

Carissa was a bit surprised. "Viola is also here?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

Upon hearing this, Rosalind quickly moved to stand. "I should take my leave now, Your Grace. Please take good care of yourself."

Carissa nodded. "Of course. Lulu, please see her out."

Lulu added, "Mrs. Farrell, Mr. Kyle asked you to come to the study. He's compiling teaching materials and wishes to discuss them with you."

Rosalind rose to her feet. "Very well, I'll go immediately."

As Lulu led her out, they met Zoey and the others as they entered.

Lulu frowned slightly and glanced at

Joy, who clearly hadn't thought too much about it and simply brought Zoey and her group in since everyone knew each other. Now that the two sides had met, Joy finally remembered the history between them. Thinking of Viola's past behavior, a hint of concern crept into her expression.

Fortunately, Rosalind remained gracious and composed.

She smiled as she approached them. "Ms. Stark, Mrs. Prince, Ms. Prince, it's lovely to see you all."

Smiling warmly, Zoey quickly

responded, "It's lovely to see you too, Mrs. Farrell. We've been meaning to come earlier, but we didn't want to disturb Lady Carissa's recovery. We thought it best to wait until she was feeling better."

Luna also greeted Rosalind with a respectful nod.

On the other hand, Viola surveyed Rosalind with a cool eye. Unable to bring herself to address her as

Mrs. Farrell, she simply nodded and smiled stiffly.

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Rosalind nodded and said, "Then, I won't keep you any longer. Farewell."

"Safe travels!" Zoey smiled as she bid her goodbye.

Once Rosalind left, Zoey glanced at Viola. She noticed the light had completely drained from her sister-in-law's eyes, leaving behind a shadow of regret. Zoey understood immediately-Viola was lamenting the past again.

"There's no use in dwelling on things that have already passed. Let's go inside."

Viola had summoned all her courage to come and visit Carissa, to whom she owed an apology and a thank you. Though she said she was accompanying Zoey and Luna today, she was actually here to face the past.

She had told herself she was ready, but all her resolve seemed to shatter when she saw Rosalind.

It felt as if something had struck her hard in the chest. Her mind went blank, and that forced smile she had tried to wear now felt like a mask she was afraid would crack. She was terrified she might break down in front of them.

As Viola followed her sisters-in-law into the side hall, her eyes were already brimming with unshed tears. Carissa glanced up at her, then smiled and invited all of them to sit as refreshments were brought in. Noticing Carissa's leg was wrapped tightly in bandages, Zoey's concern grew. "Is it serious? It must hurt terribly since it's a severe injury, right?"

Carissa could tell that Zoey genuinely cared.

She laughed off her concern with a casual wave of her hand. "It's just a small injury, nothing to worry about. Doesn't hurt at all."

"How could it not hurt?" Zoey pressed. "I heard you broke your bones. How long will it take to heal? Will it affect your walking in the future?"

"No, it won't," Carissa reassured her with a slight raise of her leg, as though to prove her point. "It's really nothing. Compared to the injuries I've sustained on the battlefield, this is just a scratch."

Zoey looked at her with genuine sympathy. "You've also taken quite a few hits on the battlefield, haven't you?"

"It's only natural for it to happen sometimes. I've healed from those," Carissa said with a soft smile. Standing nearby, Luna added, "This time, it was all thanks to you, Your Grace. If not for you, we don't know how much more the people would have suffered."

"It was only my duty," Carissa replied modestly. She then shifted the conversation and asked, "His Majesty has granted you a residence. When do you plan to move in?"

"In a few days. We didn't plan on moving at first, but it's a royal gift, so we can't refuse it," Zoey answered. "Yes, it's His Majesty's kindness. You should accept it," Carissa agreed.

The Prince family's situation was still somewhat delicate at present. They couldn't simply do as they pleased, especially since the money they had gotten from selling family assets was still not available for use just yet.

Zoey subtly gestured to Viola several times, and she finally stepped forward to bow.



"While I was in Astral Prison, I was truly grateful to you for sending the physician and medicine. Without that, I fear I wouldn't have survived. Please accept my deepest thanks, Your Grace."

She paused, taking a breath before continuing, "And also, I know I have done some foolish things in the past. I ask for your forgiveness."

Carissa didn't stop her. She accepted the bow with grace and replied, "Please have a seat, Ms. Prince."

Viola thanked Carissa and sat down, breathing a sigh of relief. She found that expressing her gratitude and apology wasn't as hard as she had imagined. Sometimes when she looked back, she realized how unnecessary her past actions had been.

What was the point of all those comparisons?

Viola had thought that Barrett cared for her during their marriage. But after reflecting, she realized it had never really been about her. Though she had gotten caught up in her own assumptions and expectations, the issues in their marriage were mostly due to Barrett's own flaws and mistakes.

In the end, it was his fault.

Now that Viola could face everything calmly, she realized that perhaps she had never had much affection

for Barrett in the first place. But when she thought of Thomas, a sharp pain stabbed at her heart.

Perhaps it was love, or perhaps guilt-she wasn't sure which.

Earlier, she had seen how Rosalind's face was rosy and glowed with happiness. With that, Viola knew the other woman was happy now.

Though Thomas didn't understand

romance or sweet words, he treated

others with such kindness and devotion. Unfortunately, Viola had thought that as the third daughter of the Earl of Silverstone's family, it had been beneath her to marry him. She had always hoped he would flatter and pamper her with words of

affection.

However, Thomas wasn't skilled in such things, and had never been able to speak such sweet words. Because of that, Viola started entertaining all sorts of thoughts that led to her actions back then.

Now, everything was irreversible.

#### Chapter 1424

After all the expected visitors have returned, Carissa could finally rest and focus on her recovery. Robert still made occasional visits, bringing medicines for healing and scar treatment. Jacob would always be by her side. He would thank Robert each time and ask him to pass on their gratitude. On this particular day, Robert arrived with Derek. Seeing an opportunity, Jacob decided to take Robert aside to discuss the treatment for the scars, giving Carissa the chance to speak privately with Derek. Carissa gestured to a seat across from her, inviting Derek to sit. "Was it His Majesty who sent you?" Derek settled down, and then cast a glance at the guards standing just outside the door. "It was His Majesty who sent me, though I had planned to come anyway. How is your injury, Your Grace? Have you been feeling better?"

Carissa hesitated before meeting his gaze directly. "Do you think I'm healed, Mr. Walker?"

He sighed. "Your Grace, you're quite perceptive. Your injury has improved, but you're not yet able to walk without assistance."

Carissa gave a wry smile. "As you said, there's been improvement, but I'm still not able to walk."

"Do not rush, Your Grace. Take the time you need to rest," Derek said.

Carissa sighed. "Of course. I'm impatient, but there's nothing I can do. Sebastian said bone and muscle injuries take a hundred days to heal, so I'll have to rest properly for all those days."

At that moment, Violet entered the room. She glanced at Carissa and Derek, then at the two rigid guards stationed just outside. With a playful smile, she stepped forward. "From a distance, I thought you were Galen. But upon closer inspection, I see I've made a mistake."

The guards, recognizing Violet as Kevin's teacher, immediately saluted respectfully.

Violet asked for their names. When they introduced themselves, she laughed heartily. "What a coincidence! My apprentice mentioned you both have some impressive martial skills. Since you've come at such a perfect time, I'll have a go at showing you a few moves and give you some pointers."

The two guards' eyes lit up at the chance to receive Violet's guidance. The prospect of learning from her would surely benefit their martial skills. They quickly expressed their gratitude before following her to the training grounds in the outer courtyard.

Once they were out of earshot, Derek turned to Carissa with urgency in his voice. "There's something you need to know, Your Grace. The Royal Medical Department has diagnosed that His Majesty might have a lung disease."

Carissa's eyes widened in shock, her voice tense. "A lung disease? Is it the Black Veil? Have they confirmed it? I thought they said it was just headaches?"

Derek's eyes reddened slightly, his voice heavy with concern. "The Royal Medical Department believes it's a possibility, but they didn't confirm it. The head physician and several others have all come to the same conclusion-it's likely, though not certain."

Carissa stared at him. "Does His Majesty know?"

"The diagnosis was only made today," Derek replied softly. "They'd previously thought it was just an abscess but now they suspect it's more serious. His Majesty knows, but neither the queen dowager nor the queen are aware. Among those in the court, only the prime minister knows about it."

Carissa's face drained of color. The Black Veil disease was notoriously difficult to treat, and it was often fatal. When it progressed, it brought excruciating pain-leading some to call it a vicious disease.

"One year!" Derek's voice faltered, his eyes glistening with tears. "The head physician said...perhaps a year."

Carissa's heart dropped, and she could hardly believe her ears. "A year?"

She couldn't fathom it-Salvador still hadn't declared the crown prince.

Tears welled up in Derek's eyes as he tried to speak through the grief. While serving a ruler was often a dangerous and unpredictable affair Salvador had treated him well. Though Derek didn't always agree with the man's decisions, he had no right to voice objections. He could only quietly make up for it in his own way.

Today, he had come to Hell Monarch Estate knowing that if Salvador were to pass, only Rafael could stabilize the situation for the new king.

The sooner the people in the Hell Monarch household knew, the sooner they could prepare.

Derek wiped away his tears, his voice hoarse. "Your Grace, you need a hundred days to recover, maybe even more. But whatever the case, you can't get better right away. His Majesty is anxious, and that worry may lead him to make decisions none of us want to see."

Carissa's mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, her emotions tangled. She nodded slowly. "Thank you for telling me, Mr. Walker."

Derek's expression turned somber. "This must remain a secret. If word gets out, some people may start thinking thoughts they shouldn't."

Carissa nodded absently, her mind still reeling. "I know."

Derek suddenly remembered something and broke into tears again, covering his face as he sobbed for a moment.

Finally, he said, "His Majesty

mentioned something in passing a few times, when he dreamt of General Nathan. He joked that with how often the general appeared in his dreams, maybe the general was trying to take him with him think His Majesty might have had a

feeling about this all along."

## Chapter 1425

The weight of the situation was immense, and for a moment, Carissa's mind seemed incapable of processing it all.

If Salvador were to pass, Connor's ascension to the throne would be nearly certain, and it wouldn't be long before he was declared Crown Prince. A young king would need regents, and not just one, which would lead to factions forming within the court.

In that case, the balance of power would inevitably be thrown into turmoil.

If regents weren't appointed, it was likely that either Victoria or Kylie would take charge and rule behind the scenes.

Kylie was ambitious, and even in her confinement, she was plotting for Connor's future. The Quinton family, though suppressed by Salvador, held vast power. If Salvador were to die and Connor took the throne, their influence would soar.

Who wouldn't want that kind of power?

Jeremiah was aging, and though he had already entertained thoughts of stepping down, he was still willing to support the new king. But once the power struggle began, there would be little he could do to control the situation.

However, that was a worry for later.

What truly sent a chill down Carissa's spine was the fact that if Salvador only had a year to live, he would undoubtedly take every measure to eliminate all obstacles and threats for Connor before his death.

And in Salvador's eyes, the Hell Monarch's faction posed the greatest threat.

Derek, too, suddenly realized the gravity of this possibility. His face suddenly went pale.

When he first learned of Salvador's illness, he had only thought that the Hell Monarch might be the one to assist the young prince in stabilizing the court. But now, seeing Carissa's worry, he was pulled out of his sorrow and horrified by this terrifying reality.

In fact, it wasn't a mere possibility-it was something that would likely happen.

"Your Grace, perhaps you should consider leaving..." Derek started to say.

Carissa raised her hand, silencing him. "Don't say anymore, Mr. Walker. The physicians haven't even

made a clear diagnosis yet. It could just be a headache, or even an abscess."

She didn't want Derek offering advice. If he did, he might always carry guilt with him-guilt that he hadn't been loyal enough to Salvador.

Derek clenched his fists, understanding her unspoken words. With a heavy sigh, he said, "Then I shall take my leave, Your Grace. Please take care of yourself."

"Have a safe journey back," Carissa replied, watching him leave. But even after he was gone, her mind still couldn't make sense of things.

After Derek and the guards left, Carissa sat in the side hall, lost in thought for a long time.

Violet entered and noticed her distant demeanor, and asked, "What's going on?"

Carissa looked up at Violet, shaking her head. Her voice was dry as she replied, "It's nothing. Mr. Walker told me to keep resting. Being cooped up in the estate all day is driving me mad."

"Do you think the king really has such intentions?" Violet asked.

"From what Mr. Walker said, it seems like that's the case." Carissa forced herself to focus, recalling

Derek's suggestion to continue resting, which only confirmed that Salvador still held onto those twisted ideas.

Violet muttered a curse under her

breath, but then stopped herself. She thought back to what her dad had said before he left the capital how the Spencer family needed to be careful of their words and actions. She bit her tongue, unwilling to speak further,

There was a reason Carissa hadn't told Violet about this. Even though Violet understood the gravity of the situation and knew better than to speak carelessly, Carissa could only confide in her people. She had a lot of them-Travis, Bun, Cynthia her mentor, and her guild members. They were all her people. Now, even Helen was someone she considered her own.

In the study, Carissa informed Kyle and Jacob about what she had learned. Both of them were equally stunned and remained silent for a while.

They each ran through all the possibilities in their minds, but none of them led to anything good. After some time, they concluded that Salvador's illness hung over the Hell Monarch's household like a blade. When it would fall depended on when Salvador's condition got worse.

But Salvador would likely be aware of this. The blade might not even strike the Hell Monarch's household directly. Instead, it could provoke a counterattack-more threats to Salvador, and ultimately, his throne. At least, that was how Salvador would see it.

There was also the possibility, as Derek had suggested, that Salvador might consider appointing Rafael and several other ministers as regents to balance power and ensure mutual oversight.

After listening to their analysis, Carissa said, "Right now, our priority should be to figure out what we need to do. What can we do? How can we act in a way that benefits our nation and us the most, while also ensuring the war isn't affected?"

Everyone fell silent, each lost in thought and unsure of where to start.

Finally, Kyle said, "We need to first confirm whether the king really has the illness and if it's truly untreatable. Although our situation isn't great and he keeps us on edge, we can't deny that he's the healthiest ruler in Starhaven."

Salvador might not be the perfect king, but he always put the people first when implementing policies. Also, with the war at a standstill, the people could finally look forward to a period of peace and stability.

Once the power changed hands, the uncertainty would be overwhelming. However, it was clear there would be a period of power struggles, efforts to strengthen influences, and forming factions for personal gain. All of this would leave the well-being of the common people to be treated as secondary.

It was like a merchant family in turmoil, where the head of the household had no real power, and each family member had their own motives. Each would seek to gain power and benefits, even at the cost of damaging the family business.

Eventually, the family would fall apart from within, and other businesses would swallow it whole.

Chapter 1426

That evening, Jeremiah chose to stay in the palace.

Salvador still hadn't visited the harem, nor had he returned to his chambers. Instead, he had made his bed on the couch within the royal study.

Jeremiah watched as Salvador finished his medicine and then offered him a piece of candy.

Salvador accepted it, but he didn't eat it right away. His expression softened, and he smiled.

"I still remember. When I was younger, my dad would punish me here in the royal study. Afterward, you would always give me a piece of candy and say a word of encouragement."

Jeremiah glanced at Salvador. "Yes, I remember that as well. You used to tell me that you wished to be a wise ruler one day."

Salvador's smile faltered, and he bit into the candy. His voice grew muffled as he spoke. "Have I disappointed you, Mr. Murray?"

Jeremiah shook his head. "No, not at all. In my heart, you're a wise ruler, Your Majesty."



"I am not," Salvador said, his eyes darkening with a hint of regret. "I still have many ambitions, but I fear I may not have the chance to achieve them."

"The Royal Medical Department hasn't made a definitive diagnosis. You shouldn't be so disheartened." Jeremiah's words felt thin, lacking the warmth they were intended to carry.

Salvador sighed, his expression clouded. "I am disappointed, yes. But more than that, I am planning."

He reclined deeper into the couch, his gaze distant. "First, we must decide on the Crown Prince. What do you think of Connor, Mr. Murray?"

Jeremiah considered the question. "Prince Connor is the eldest prince, and he's the son of the queen. He has matured greatly under the tutelage of Mr. Young. He is no longer the mischievous boy he once was. With time, I am confident..."

Salvador cut him off. "Time is something I don't have. What of Caden?"

Jeremiah paused, deliberating. "Prince Caden is sharp and capable. Though he is just beginning his studies, his diligence is evident. But whether he can maintain that effort, we cannot yet say. People and children especially are complex. I don't know enough about him to make a judgment."

Salvador's gaze grew more intense. "And what of the Quinton family and Grace's natal family? Which poses the greater threat?"

Jeremiah remained silent. Did Salvador truly need to ask? How could Grace's family possibly compare to the Quinton family?

Still, with Salvador's eldest son in the picture, the second prince would always be in a questionable position-unless Kylie was deposed and Grace was made queen instead.

If that happened, Connor would become the son of a deposed queen, while Caden would be the son of the new queen.

But that would cause a storm of turmoil, wouldn't it?

If Salvador only had a year to live, his methods would undoubtedly be ruthless. It was hard to imagine how many heads would roll to calm the resulting chaos.

"Do you not favor Prince Connor, Your Majesty?" Jeremiah asked directly. "Is it a problem with Prince Connor, or is it the Quinton family?"

"Connor is my eldest son, born from my queen and not concubines," Salvador replied, his voice steady but carrying a weight. "I value him the most."

He paused, then exhaled slowly.

"But he is the kind of person who

only moves when forced. Right now, he's not unruly, but he's not even average, let alone exceptional. His improvements are measured only against his past behavior. And even then, it took a great deal of effort from Mr. Young and the queen dowager to shape him into what he is now."

After another pause, Salvador smiled bitterly.

"With the power of his maternal family growing, his personality makes him, the perfect puppet. Even if he manages to rule on his own at 18, his laziness and stubbornness are things he'll never change

"Mr. Murray, you know that some people simply aren't meant to be king. Over the years, I've been too busy with state affairs—wars, reforms, constant policies. I

neglected Connor's upbringing and left him to Kylie, who spoiled him too much. That's how he ended up like this.

"It's my responsibility... If I could live to my forties or fifties, there would still have been time for him to change. But now, that's no longer possible."

"Your Majesty..."

Salvador didn't want to hear any comforting words. He had already sorted through his many thoughts in a single day. His mind was sharp, focusing on the core of the matter.

"What about the Hell Monarch?"

Jeremiah's weary eyes raised slightly. "What aspect do you mean?"

"Regency. Rebellion!" Salvador drew his blanket tighter around him, his brow furrowed with concern.

Jeremiah hesitated, thinking carefully before responding. "Expecting a rebellion from him is impossible." "Why do you say that?" Salvador asked.

"To reclaim the Southern Frontier is an unparalleled achievement. He has no need to usurp the throne and commit the acts of a traitor that would forever tarnish his name."

"Should he take the throne, the history books will say what he wants them to," Salvador replied flatly.

Jeremiah couldn't prove Rafael's loyalty, so he asked instead, "Do you truly believe he would do that, Your Majesty? What makes you think he would seek to replace you?"

"Everyone has ambition. Who doesn't want to be king? He commands a powerful army and has the people's support. If I were him, I would!"

"That's just you projecting your thoughts onto him. It's not objective," Jeremiah replied.

"At the very least, I see that you also defend him and appreciate his abilities," Salvador retorted.

"The Hell Monarch is a loyal minister. As such, it's only natural that an old minister like me supports a loyal one," Jeremiah said.

Salvador studied him for a long moment, then smiled. "Well said. He is a loyal minister. If I had no heir, I would trust him to serve as regent."

## Chapter 1427

The following day, Jeremiah went to the Royal Medical Department.

All the court physicians, including the head physician, were present. Jeremiah sat, his gaze heavy as he surveyed them all.

"I have only one question for you," he began. "Do you have any hope of curing His Majesty's illness?" The physicians fell into a long silence. After what seemed like an eternity, the head physician, Desmond Walker, looked up with tired eyes. The red veins around them were a testament to sleepless nights. He shook his head.

"No, we do not."

"Not even a glimmer of hope?" Jeremiah asked, his voice tinged with disbelief. "Not even the smallest chance, a method, anything?"

Once again, the room was filled with silence. Jeremiah's eyes dimmed, his expression sinking until it was devoid of light. With a deep sigh, he finally spoke, his voice heavy with resignation.

"Can you extend his life for two more years if we gather the full strength of the Royal Medical

Department?"

Desmond bowed his head, his face filled with shame. "Mr. Murray, this illness is fierce once it flares up. Forget two years-even a single year...would be difficult."

This time, it was Jeremiah's turn to fall silent. After a long pause, he finally spoke, his voice sharp with authority. "Keep your mouths shut about this."

He slowly walked out of the Royal Medical Department, pulling his cloak tighter around himself. The chill in the air was biting, a reminder that the year was drawing to a close. The cold seemed to seep into his very bones, relentless and unyielding.

Victoria might have seemed indifferent to the things around her, but the lights in the Royal Medical Department had been on all night, and none of the royal physicians had left during that time.

She knew something had happened.

She claimed she was feeling dizzy and called for Desmond to attend her. After he arrived and examined her, he said, "It's likely because you didn't sleep well, Your Majesty."

He stood stiffly as he already understood-Victoria had sensed something. Now, he was just waiting for her to ask. He had served in the palace long enough to know that very little could truly be kept from Victoria-unless she chose not to know.

Victoria dismissed everyone from the room, leaving him alone with her. The sunlight was faint, tempered by the sharp, cold wind that made even the rays of light seem frigid.

"Speak," she ordered, sitting straight, her eyes trained on the dark circles beneath Desmond's eyes. "What illness does the king have, that it requires so many physicians to stay up all night discussing?" Desmond hesitated for a moment before responding. "Your Majesty, His Majesty has only been-" "No nonsense," Victoria interrupted sharply.

Desmond's shoulders sagged slightly, and his eyes reddened. He choked out the words, barely above a whisper. "A lung disease."

Victoria trembled violently at the words. Her fingers tightened around the armrests, the tips turning white from the pressure. Her voice, though steady, held a barely noticeable tremor.

"How will it be treated?"

Desmond lowered his gaze, his voice almost a whisper. "We are...still trying to find a solution."

Victoria closed her eyes, her complexion draining of color, her lips turning pale. For a long moment, she sat in silence. Finally, she asked, "How long?"

Once she had her answer, Victoria

stood abruptly. Tears filled her eyes but she held them back fiercely, refusing to let them fall. She

someone to ask where Salvanet

dismissed Desmond and called for

was. When she learned he was still in the royal study, she quickly made her way there with Keith.

Her usually straight posture now appeared slightly hunched, weighed down by the news she had just learned.

As soon as Salvador saw Victoria enter the royal study, he understood that she knew.

He stood to greet her, even offering a smile. "Is something wrong? Why not just send someone to call me

for dinner? There was no need for you to come all the way here yourself."

The study was filled with the smell

of scented candles, though it couldn't quite mask the lingering faint smell of medicine. Victoria's eyes landed on the empty medicine bowls still sitting on the desk, and the dam holding back her tears finally broke.

Salvador's heart twisted at the sight, and he immediately sent his attendants away. He moved to help her

sit before he knelt in front of her. His voice cracked as he spoke.

"I have failed you, Mom."

Victoria gazed at him, her eyes drawn to the few strands of white in his hair. She whispered softly, "My son, you already have white hair."

Salvador smiled, but tears rolled down his face. "It means I've grown up."

Victoria quickly wiped her tears away and gently helped him back to his feet. "Sit. Stay and keep me company."

He sat beside her, and they clasped hands. The sorrow in Victoria's eyes was undeniable, though she tried to hide it.

"Since I turned ten, I've never held your hand like this," Salvador said, his gaze lingering on their joined hands, a hint of nostalgia in his eyes.

Victoria tightened her grip on his

hand. "Yes. Right after your tenth birthday, you told me you were a man now. You said you couldn't always cling to me, that you had to work hard and become a son your dad could be proud of."

Salvador's eyes dimmed, and he said softly, "Dad would never be proud of me."

Chapter 1428

The mother and son pair spoke in the royal study for nearly two hours.

After Victoria left, Salvador issued an edict lifting Kylie's house arrest. However, the authority to manage the harem was not immediately returned to her.

Upon hearing Derek's message, Kylie was at first hesitant to believe it. How had the house arrest been lifted so suddenly?

But then she remembered-it must have been the rumors she had people spread earlier. The queen was still alive, yet they wanted to send her son to be raised in the queen dowager's palace? That went against tradition.

So, after the house arrest was lifted, Kylie didn't immediately go to express her gratitude. Instead, she headed to the study to visit Connor.

Upon seeing his mom, Connor's face lit up with joy. Ignoring the fact that Trevor was still giving a lesson, he sprang to his feet and ran straight into Kylie's arms. "Mom, I've missed you so much! When will you come and take me back?"

Kylie bent down, resting her hands on his shoulders before gently running her fingers through his hair. She looked him over carefully-he wasn't wearing his fur cloak, and he had lost some weight. His chin looked more pointed, and a pang of sorrow struck her heart.

"Why have you gotten so thin? Haven't you been eating well in the queen dowager's palace?"

Connor pouted, his voice tinged with grievance. "Every day after returning from the study, Grandmother makes me recite scriptures. If I can't memorize them, she won't let me eat. I don't want to stay there anymore! I want to go back."

Kylie knew Victoria was strict. Since she had only just been released from confinement, she couldn't risk confronting Victoria head-on.

Instead, she gently reassured him, "Just bear with it a little longer. I'll convince your dad."

Connor was about to protest further, but he stopped himself when he saw Trevor step into the room. He instinctively took a step back, holding his tongue.

Trevor gave a respectful bow to Kylie. "Your Majesty, Prince Connor is in the middle of a lesson."

Kylie knew how highly Salvador regarded Trevor, so she couldn't afford to offend him. She simply nodded slightly and said, "I understand. I only came to check on him for a moment. His hands are so cold. Why hasn't he been given more layers of clothing?"

Trevor glanced at the thick cotton garments Connor was wearing and replied, "You need not worry, Your Majesty. His clothes are sufficient. His hands are cold because he has been writing."

Kylie cast a lingering glance at Connor, reluctant to leave. "Go back to your lessons now. I'll come see you at Serenity Palace later."

Although Connor was reluctant to return, he dared not defy Trevor, fearing the older man would report to Victoria once again.

As Kylie left the study, she turned her ire upon those waiting outside to attend to Connor, including the nanny, Elena.



"I don't expect you to take exceptional care of him, but at the very least, do the basics properly. It's freezing out, and not one of you thought to bring him a small hand warmer? Or to have warm food ready for him?"

"You all know better than anyone how he was raised with the utmost care and privilege! So why is it that the moment he steps into Serenity Palace, you stop treating him like your master? You disappoint me the most, Elena. Connor was raised on your milk. How can you not feel a shred of sympathy for him? Look at what he's wearing today-still in his autumn jacket!"

The servants knelt before her.

Elena trembled, her voice faltering as she pleaded for forgiveness. "Your Majesty, please forgive me. Every morning when Prince Connor rises and changes, it's the queen dowager who is by his side. She insisted that he shouldn't wear too many clothes. She said this coat was enough. If he felt cold, he could run around after class to warm up..."

"Enough," Kylie interrupted, her face a cold mask. Her displeasure was palpable. "What time is it now? It's mealtime, not a time for running around. Do you think he's not exhausted enough already?"

Elena fell silent immediately, her eyes darting around nervously, fearing that someone might overhear and report back to Victoria.

Those words were clearly a direct accusation against the queen dowager.

Why was Kylie this angry?

In the study, Connor listened to Kylie's scolding, his tears falling in heavy drops. He had endured much lately but dared not speak of it. Now that his mom was standing up for him, the injustice he had endured felt even greater.

Trevor closed his eyes and let out a barely audible sigh.

Naturally, word of this also reached Serenity Palace.

Victoria's face remained impassive as she listened to the report.

"Useless," she muttered coldly.

Keith cautiously said, "Your Majesty, perhaps the queen is just worried from not seeing Prince Connor for a while. Please don't let it upset you."

"What do you mean by that? During her house arrest, I allowed Connor to visit her several times." Victoria's tone was sharp, tinged with an edge of anger. Had it been another time, she might not have been so upset, but things were different now. Connor absolutely couldn't be ruined under her watch.

Chapter 1429

Kylie timed her visit perfectly and made another trip to the study to personally retrieve Connor. Together, they returned to Serenity Palace to offer their greetings to Victoria.

The procession was grand, with a whole entourage following behind. Even Connor was carried back by a young chamberlain, only being set down once they reached the palace gates.

Kylie straightened her appearance and held Connor's hand firmly as they entered.

After performing the proper gestures to greet Victoria, Kylie remained on her knees and maintained perfect decorum throughout the entire time.

However, Victoria made no motion to let her rise. Instead, she turned her attention to Connor, gesturing for him to approach. "Did your tutor praise you today?"

Connor hesitated, shrinking back slightly. He cast a cautious glance at Victoria before answering in a timid voice, "The tutor forgot to praise me today."

Still kneeling, Kylie quickly interjected. "Mother, Mr. Young is strict and doesn't hand out compliments lightly."

Kylie had no idea that Victoria had made a deal with Trevor. If Connor behaved well and showed diligence that day, Trevor would offer some praise at the end of the lessons. Otherwise, there would be none. This simple system allowed Victoria to immediately gauge Connor's behavior on the day.

Victoria ignored Kylie's explanation entirely. Her gaze remained on Connor as she asked evenly, "Do you remember the rules?"

Connor's face paled, and he quickly tried to defend himself. "Grandmother, it's because Mr. Young was unhappy that Mom came to see me. That's why he didn't praise me!"

"Oh? Then tell me," Victoria said with measured calm, "who should be punished for this-yourself or your mom?"

Without missing a beat, Connor pointed at Kylie. "Punish Mom! She loves copying books the most." "Yes, of course," Kylie chimed in quickly, eager to shield him. "I'll do the copying. I don't mind. It's my failing for not teaching him properly. I deserve the punishment."

Victoria cast a cold glance at Kylie before turning to the nanny. "Take Connor inside for his meal, then send him to the study. He isn't to leave until his copying is done. If he doesn't finish by nine in the evening, he may stay the night in the study."

Connor's face fell immediately, and he turned pleading eyes to Victoria. "Grandmother, you promised we'd play hide and seek today!"

Victoria looked at his miserable, crestfallen face. It seemed like he was perpetually upset the moment he stepped into Serenity Palace.

It was only through strict supervision that he had managed to develop a semblance of discipline and focus

in his studies. Yet the moment Kylie appeared, all that progress unraveled, and he reverted to his careless, lazy ways.

To put it plainly, even if they gave Connor a push, he wouldn't take a single step unless forced. To entrust great responsibility to such a child-was it asking too much of him?

"Tell me honestly-do you truly not want to go to the study?"

Connor wanted to say yes. Every

part of him longed to shout that he hated the study, the endless lessons, and how harshly Trevor treated him. But when his gaze met Victoria's—those deep,

ovel.

unfathomable eyes that seem ve

pierce straight through him—the words caught in his throat.

Instead, he turned toward Kylie and Elena with a desperate, pleading look.

Kylie laughed awkwardly. "Mother, he's still young. It's only natural for children to want to play. Perhaps he could use a little rest..."

Victoria cut her off sharply. "Rest?"

Certainly. Starting tomorrow, I'll

instruct the royal tutor to teach only Caden. But you should think carefully, Kylie. Connor is the eldest son of the king. If he doesn't become Crown Prince—if he isn't the future king—do you know what his fate will be?"

Victoria's words were very straightforward, with no hints or indirectness that could lead to misunderstanding.

Kylie stared at her, disbelief flashing in her wide eyes. Her voice wavered as she replied, "What do you mean by that, Mother? He's the eldest son of the king! It's his rightful place to—"

"Rightful?" Victoria let out a cold laugh. "No wonder you've been indulging him so recklessly. You think everything will fall into place simply because of his birth? He may sit on the throne, but without any ability, he wouldn't even see his downfall coming."

Kylie's face turned pale. She wanted to say Grace wouldn't dare do anything.

But if Grace wouldn't, did that mean Sylvia wouldn't either?

Victoria's tone turned even colder, cutting through Kylie's thoughts. "The position of Crown Prince isn't a shield. On the contrary, it's very fragile. He needs the ability and skill to hold onto it. If he can't, it will lead to his death."

The weight of Victoria's words struck Kylie like a physical blow. Her lips moved, but no sound came out. Of course, Kylie had always known that the royal family's affairs were a constant battle-a perpetual struggle for power. Yet, she had clung to the belief that her son was different. After all, he was Salvador's eldest son from the queen, not a concubine.

Surely, that alone set Connor apart.

Finally, Kylie lowered herself fully to the floor. "It was my foolishness and shortsightedness, Mother. Please guide Connor and plan for his future. I won't interfere again, nor will I indulge him as I have." Victoria looked at her, unimpressed. She had seen this cycle from Kylie too many times-momentary clarity followed by the same old habits. Kylie would only change when the consequences of her actions became too dire to ignore.

"Go back," Victoria said coldly. "And hear me clearly-without my express permission, you are not to disturb Connor's studies again."

Kylie looked up at Connor, whose eyes were filled with tears. Though her heart ached, she had to hold back her feelings. If Victoria sent Caden to Trevor, it would be like telling everyone that Caden was also a candidate for the throne, and people would naturally start picking sides.

## Chapter 1430

The events in the study and at Serenity Palace were quickly reported to Salvador, leaving him restless and irritable. Coupled with days of intense planning, the strain weighed heavily on him, and the relentless headaches only worsened.

Lifting Kylie's house arrest had been part of Salvador's preparations for Connor. If Connor was to be Crown Prince, his mom couldn't remain under the shadow of punishment.

Salvador had hoped Kylie's time in confinement would lead her to reflect and understand the dangers of indulgence that spoiling a son was no different from harming him. Yet, Kylie had emerged with an even stronger determination to keep Connor close, convinced that his presence was the key to securing her own position.

Salvador pushed his dinner away, his appetite nonexistent. He forced down a few bites to keep his stomach from aching and sipped the bitter medicine prescribed.

He had no choice but to drink it. Every day he managed to hold on felt like a small victory.

But the looming specter of death shadowed his thoughts more heavily than ever. As he pulled away from his plans and schemes, fear began to set in.

He knew everyone had to face it eventually, but he had always thought death was far off. He never realized it could come so suddenly and without warning.

What Salvador wanted more than anything at that moment was someone to talk to-not about heavy matters of state or the endless calculations for the future, but something simple. He longed for a conversation about trivialities, something that could ease the suffocating weight in his chest.

Yet, as he searched his mind for someone to confide in, only one name surfaced-Carissa.

-

Carissa had been recovering at Hell Monarch Estate and hadn't come to the royal study for several days. Calling for Robert, Salvador endured another round of needle treatment to dull the pounding in his head. It brought some relief, but the dizziness and anxiety that followed was worse. It made the dark sky outside look like a giant whirlpool, almost pulling him under.

At that moment, an absurd and undeniable idea gripped him-one so urgent that he couldn't resist it.

At Hell Monarch Estate, the stillness of the evening was shattered by Luke's hurried steps. His round face glistened with sweat as he rushed through the courtyard, his urgency written in every movement. "What's going on?" Jacob asked, stepping out of the study, alarm evident in his voice.

Luke climbed the steps quickly, lowering his voice as he spoke. "His Majesty has arrived. He says he wishes to see Lady Carissa."

Jacob froze. "This is absurd!"

Leaving the palace late at night to visit a minister's residence was shocking enough, but doing so when Rafael wasn't even home? Only Carissa was at the estate, and she was still recovering from her injuries. Did Salvador not understand that a woman in recovery should remain in her quarters? What was Salvador expecting-Carissa to emerge, wounds and all, to greet him? Or worse, was he planning to visit her chambers directly?

"We've already welcomed him inside." Luke sighed heavily.

"How many people did he bring?" Jacob asked.

"Mr. Walker, Deputy Commander Ziegler, and Deputy Commander Kimber," Luke replied, his brow furrowed deeply. "And he came in a carriage."

Jacob began pacing, his anxiety spilling over. He's lost his mind. Absolutely lost it! The rebel's uprising may have been quashed, but who's to say there aren't remnants of Prince

s facet

lingering in the capital? If someone with ill intent is watching and sees this, wouldn't everything fall apart?"

"Tell me about it! This is truly frightening," Luke said, looking at Jacob. "Do you have any ideas? Think quickly. Should we have Lady Carissa go out to meet him?"

Jacob groaned and rubbed his

temples, his frown even deeper than

Luke's. "Have someone carry Lady Carissa, Out. When the king visits no minister can refuse to greet him. If we don't follow protocol, who knows what rumors might spread or what chaos might ensue?"

And so, Carissa was lifted from her quarters and carried outside. Whether it was the chilly night air or the sheer shock of the situation, she felt completely dazed.

By the time she was brought into the main hall, where Salvador sat at the head of the room, her disbelief had only grown.

Violet and Cynthia had accompanied her, whispering to each other in hushed tones the entire way. Now, they helped her stand up to greet Salvador.

"No need for formalities," Salvador said gently, his voice calm but tinged with hoarseness. "You can remain seated.

Carissa thanked him and returned to her chair, though her gaze instinctively flicked to Derek, who stood by Salvador's side. His hair was messy from the wind, and his face alternated between pale and ashen. He gave no indication of what was going on.

Jacob and Kyle had already taken their seats nearby, both with complex expressions in their eyes.

Even though Salvador had traveled

in a modest disguise, there was no mistaking the royal carriage that bore him from the palace. It had passed through the palace gates, crossed the Royal Street, and carried the unmistakable mark of royalty.

Who could have failed to notice?