

## War Song 1431

### Chapter 1431

Salvador seemed much more clear-headed now, no longer as muddled as he had been in the palace. He smiled. "There's no need for formality. Please relax. I only came here to the estate to see Mr. Spencer and have a chat. I was feeling a bit restless."

Carissa replied, "In that case, I won't keep you from your conversation with Kyle. We shall take our leave." "Don't rush off," Salvador said, his gaze turning toward her with genuine concern. "Since you're here, stay and talk for a while. How is your injury? Are you feeling better?"

Carissa lowered her hand again, which she had just propped up, and answered, "Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty. It's getting better, but the physician insisted I rest in bed for a few more days." "I see." Salvador nodded, his expression thoughtful. "Injuries to the muscles and bones need proper care."

He said this, but he didn't allow Carissa to leave. Everyone in the room stayed, either sitting or standing, and kept them company.

After a moment of silence, Salvador spoke first. "Is there any supper? I'm feeling hungry."

Hearing this, Derek quickly said, "His Majesty didn't have dinner. I'll make arrangements right away." Everyone immediately became more lively, asking Salvador what he wanted to eat. However, Salvador simply asked what was available.

"Your Majesty, you may have whatever you wish. If we don't have it here, we can have someone bring it from the Glimmering Tower," Kyle answered.

Salvador thought for a moment before replying, "No need to go to all that trouble. Just make me a bowl of noodles."

Lily herself took to the kitchen, preparing a steaming bowl of chicken noodle soup with shredded meat, fresh parsley, leeks, and a poached egg. The fragrant bowl of noodles was soon placed before Salvador. Salvador had only intended to break the silence, not really hungry at first. But as the smell of the fresh parsley and leeks reached him, his appetite stirred. He finished the whole bowl, drinking most of the broth too. Then, he leaned back, clearly satisfied.

"These noodles are quite good. A reward is in order."

Lily was overjoyed and eagerly accepted her reward. After all, when the king bestowed a gift, how could a servant not be delighted?

Salvador was generous as always and handed her a silver ingot. Lily thanked him profusely before leaving in high spirits.

Afterward, Salvador made another request. "I'd like to see Mr. Spencer paint."

Jacob knew it wouldn't be

appropriate to invite Salvador to the study. There were things in there

that would be better left unseen net

Instead, he had a writing desk set up with the usual tools-brushes, ink, and paints.

Kyle stood beside the desk, rolling up his sleeves. "What would you like painted, Your Majesty?" Salvador sat upright and replied, "Myself."

Kyle paused for a moment, taken aback. "You wish for a portrait? Why not wait for a sunny day and ask one of the royal artists to do it?"

It was a big deal, after all-choosing a favorable day, wearing formal robes or a crown, sitting on the royal throne, or even posing together with Kylie for the painting.

But to casually show up at a subject's home late at night, sitting in their chair and having a portrait done? That was unheard of.

"This is fine. Let's begin." Salvador adjusted his tunic and gave a small nod. "It doesn't need to be too formal. Just paint me as I am right now-no need for any extra embellishments."

Salvador's gaze shifted to Carissa's face, his eyes softening without him even realizing it. His lips, which had been pressed tight, now curved slightly.

Carissa felt his gaze and lowered her eyes, avoiding his stare.

She almost spoke again, ready to suggest her departure, but Salvador had been watching her intently. Before she could say a word, he spoke first.

"Commander Sinclair, don't speak. Just stay there and watch."

Carissa swallowed her words, nodding quietly in acknowledgment.

She turned her attention to Kyle,

watching as his brush moved swiftly

and skillfully, drawing a series of

lines that gradually took shape. Then, he connected the lines, adding detail or leaving gaps. Soon, the outline of a face that strongly

resembled Salvador emerged.

The room was eerily silent, with nothing but the sound of controlled breathing from everyone present.

Violet usually couldn't stand such a

dull scene, but she stayed, sitting on

the small table in front of Carissa.

She leaned against Carissa, occasionally adjusting the thin

blanket on the latter's lap.

Carissa fixed Violet's hairpin, making sure it was in place. Then, she gently supported Violet's shoulder as she adjusted the latter's posture.

Salvador watched the little details of their interaction, his gaze softening and growing distant. He suddenly said, "It's nice to have friends."

His unexpected words surprised everyone in the room. However, Kyle remained focused, his brush moving swiftly across the paper.

Once Kyle was in his zone, no one could disturb him except for Everett.

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Kyle's painting was truly impressive-his brushwork brought the image to life with remarkable detail. Everyone in the room gazed at the figure on the paper, then looked at Salvador, who still sat in his chair without showing any sign of fatigue. It was as though the man had stepped right into the canvas. Even his earlier expression was captured perfectly.

The fine lines near his eyes, the few strands of white hair at his temples, the small black mole at the corner of his mouth, and the subtle creases on his lips-all of it was there, down to the last detail. Though the colors had yet to be applied to his clothes, the intricate patterns were already outlined, and it was identical to the real thing.

Salvador seemed like he was seeing such a clear version of himself for the first time. He stared for a while, then touched his face and said, "I really have gotten older."

He rarely even looked into a mirror. When he did, it was never this clear.

"You're not old, Your Majesty," Derek said, offering a compliment. "In my eyes, you look just over twenty." Salvador glanced at him and chuckled. "I do share quite a few similarities with my younger brother."

He turned to Carissa. "What do you think, Commander Sinclair?"

Carissa had been yawning continuously, her eyes red from it. When he asked, she nodded and said, "Yes, Your Majesty and His Highness do look somewhat alike."

Salvador's smile grew wider, the shadows of his earlier gloom seemingly swept away in an instant. However, Rafael was much more handsome, and his features were sharper-that was what Carissa added silently in her mind.

Indeed, Rafael and Salvador's facial features were somewhat alike. After all, they shared the same dad, and their mom had been the sister of the other's. Yet, it was never something one would notice, for their temperaments were so different.

Salvador was not one for smiles. His face was usually stern and commanding, and the lines of his face seemed much more rigid.

On the other hand, Rafael had softened considerably after his marriage. If his harshness was stripped away, he became the picture of a refined gentleman.

Salvador stared at the painting for a long time, his gaze lingering on the eyes. Finally, he dismissed everyone, leaving only Kyle behind. Even Carissa was allowed to return and rest.

In the quiet of the hall, Salvador remained seated, his gaze fixed on Kyle, who sat to his lower right. "Mr. Spencer, you've painted exactly what is in my heart."

Kyle lowered his head, his eyes full of quiet resignation. "I have no knowledge of your thoughts, Your Majesty."

Salvador's lips pressed into a thin line, his expression darkening. "You do know. Carissa knows as well. I shouldn't have come here. I've never been one to act impulsively in my life, but I wanted to, just once.

"But as soon as I sat down, I

regretted it. I've never let myself act on my desires, and the

consequences of doing so are than I can bear. I know how to

control myself. You need not bet

MrSpencer. This will not happen again."

"You're very noble, Your Majesty. I admire you," Kyle said, his heart finally easing a bit.

He had been afraid Salvador might end up like Yuvan-saying he wanted to act recklessly just once, then throwing all caution to the wind.

"I'm not noble. I simply know that some things can't be done," Salvador replied, furrowing his brow. After a moment's thought, he continued, "In fact, many things are best left undone. However, some things must be done."

Kyle's eyes reflected a hint of confusion, as if he was pretending not to understand what Salvador was saying.

Salvador smiled faintly. "I don't want to be a tyrant ruler, but I'm also afraid of becoming a foolish one." Kyle's gaze remained puzzled, but he replied, "You're neither a tyrant nor a fool, Your Majesty."

"Who can say?" Salvador said, weariness creeping into his voice. He raised a hand to his forehead, as if to steady his thoughts. "I can't figure it out, nor can I predict it."

"If you can't figure it out or predict it, why not simply observe? Even if you can't see everything, you'll see something. A nobleman judges by actions, not thoughts," Kyle replied.

Salvador was momentarily startled, then said, "You're right. Observing will reveal something. But being in a position of power and surrounded by so many who wear masks-it's hard to tell. Who could have guessed before that Nicholas harbored treasonous thoughts?"

Kyle answered calmly, "One cannot judge everyone the same way. People are different. Throughout history, men like Nicholas have always been the rare exception. You should also look at the many loyal and honorable lords, Your Majesty. They are the majority."

Salvador fell silent for a long moment, then finally looked up and said, "I should return to the palace."

## Chapter 1433

In the study, the lamps were still lit.

Hearing Kyle's words, Carissa let out a long sigh of relief. "Then, my injury should heal faster. I've been feeling utterly stifled."

"Tonight was truly terrifying," said Jacob.

Kyle glanced at Carissa and sighed softly. "If the king really follows in Yuvan's footsteps, then Rafael would take after Nicholas."

"He'll weigh the consequences," Jacob said.

"I just don't understand him. When I was a child, the king was close to my second brother and the others.

He treated me like a younger sister. After I entered court, he regarded me as a minister. So, why this sudden change of heart?" Carissa vented, deeply frustrated.

"Sudden? Have you forgotten that after the Southern Frontier was reclaimed, he once considered making you his concubine?" Jacob reminded her.

"I always thought he only meant to use me to force Raf to relinquish his military power," Carissa replied. Back then, her being Hector's daughter had also played a role-marrying her and bringing her into the palace would have prevented ambitious suitors from taking her hand.

Kyle thought for a moment, then said, "Perhaps even then, he already had feelings for you. But after weighing his options, he chose the greatest advantage and let you go."

He turned to Carissa, adding, "If he had insisted on bringing you into the palace back then, would you have agreed?"

Carissa shook her head without hesitation. "Impossible. I would have packed my things and gone straight back to Meadow Ridge."

"Because you don't want to enter the palace, or because you don't like him?"

"Isn't that obvious? I don't want to enter the palace, and I don't like him."

Kyle's eyes glinted with amusement. "But back then, you likely didn't like Rafael either. So, why did you marry him without hesitation?"

His gaze turned teasing. "Or could it be that you already had feelings for Rafael at the time-only you didn't realize it, or refused to admit it?"

Carissa rose to her feet and stepped out of the room on tiptoe, refusing to answer.

Who knew? Back then, she hadn't thought much of it. She only knew she didn't feel unwilling. In fact, there was even a hint of anticipation.

Violet steadied her as they walked back, grumbling in frustration. "Has the king lost his mind? Coming to the estate in the middle of the night-if word gets out, who knows what kind of gossip will spread?"

It was bad enough that Salvador had kept Carissa in the royal study for so long, already stirring up whispers. She had deliberately injured herself to avoid him, yet he had come straight to the estate anyway.

Even if he claimed he had come to see Kyle, no one would believe it.

Kyle was a commoner. If Salvador truly wished to see him, he could have summoned him to the palace. Why trouble himself to come in person in the dead of night?

"The way he looks at you..." Violet shuddered. "It makes my skin crawl. I can't even describe it. It's not the same as the way Yuvan used to leer at me, nor is it as gentle and natural as how Prince Rafael looks at you."



"Let's not talk about it. Just pretend it never happened," said Carissa.

"If His Highness finds out, he'll be very upset," Violet added.

Carissa wanted to say she wouldn't

let Rafael find out, but after a moment's thought, she realized there was no need to hide it, nor could she. The only thing that

mattered was keeping it from the net

for now. Out on the battlefield, life and death hung in the balance. There was no need to burden him

with such troubles.

Ever since Rafael had set out to lead the troops in pursuit, her heart had not known a moment's peace. She wished she could be there at his side, fighting alongside him.

"I wonder when this war will finally end," Carissa murmured.

At dawn, Jacob and Luke summoned the household staff to the front courtyard and ordered them to keep their mouths shut. Not a word of what had happened last night was to be spoken outside the estate, under pain of severe punishment.

The Hell Monarch's household was

strict, and normally, no one dared spread rumors about what went on within these walls. But the true

danger lay in those with ulterior net

motives, who might try to pry information from the servants. A little money could loosen any tongue.

And so, Jacob made sure to warn them first, making it clear that greed would only lead to their downfall.

As for Jacob, Carissa, and the others, they did their best to push the night's events from their minds, treating it as nothing more than a fleeting nightmare.

Yet, within two or three days, half the court and harem had already heard about it.

The king leaving the palace at midnight was impossible to conceal. Someone was bound to have seen him, be it the Garrison Unit, the Capital Guard, or even the night patrol officers of the Royal Citadel. Even though Carissa and Anthony oversaw these forces, control did not mean absolute loyalty.

Especially within the Garrison Unit, where some officers were the sons of nobility. They had strength and ability, but family interests always came first. Of course, they would report back to their households, trying to make sense of Salvador's late-night visit.

#### Chapter 1434

Just as Jacob feared, many people secretly tried to pry information from the servants of Hell Monarch Estate. Fortunately, they had been warned in advance, so no matter what was asked, they all claimed to know nothing.

But the tighter the people in the estate kept their lips sealed, the more fueled suspicion. This entire affair was far too unusual.

A king leaving the palace was nothing like stories depicted-where a ruler could simply disguise himself and slip into the streets with a handful of guards to observe the lives of his people.

Even when visiting the households of nobles for a joyous occasion, the king's arrival would be announced well in advance. The host family would have time to make proper arrangements. Some even built new gardens or refurbished their homes, laying down soft carpets, planting fresh flowers, and preparing lavish feasts to welcome him.

For a king to leave the palace in the dead of night to privately visit a vassal's estate, traveling by carriage and accompanied by only a small entourage, was utterly unthinkable. Especially when its master, the Hell Monarch, was away at the Southern Frontier.

And during this time, the Hell Monarch's princess consort, Carissa, was recuperating at home. Previously, the king had frequently summoned her to the royal study under the guise of discussing state affairs. But had it truly been about matters of governance? It was impossible not to let one's mind wander.

Yet in matters like these, blame rarely fell upon the man-let alone the king.

If Salvador had done anything improper, then surely, it was because he had been bewitched. It was no wonder that during all those nights spent alone with Carissa in the royal study, he had never once stepped foot into the harem.

No one dared to speak of such things openly, but behind closed doors, the whispers were endless. Naturally, the women in the harem had caught wind of the situation. Salvador might not have visited them in some time, but an event as significant as his secretive midnight departure could never be kept under wraps.

That day, during the morning gathering at Everspring Palace, Sylvia and Grace who normally refrained from reporting harem affairs-spoke in detail about the matter.

When they finished, Sylvia hesitated for a moment before cautiously adding, "Your Majesty, have you heard about His Majesty leaving the palace in the middle of the night? Please advise him to prioritize his safety and not give wrongdoers a chance to take advantage."

The gathered concubines immediately knelt, echoing Sylvia's plea.

Kylie took her cup and sipped the coffee slowly, allowing the warmth to settle her racing thoughts.

She had been searching for an excuse to question Salvador. Now that the concubines themselves had come to her with their concerns, it was only right for her, as the queen, to ask him directly-if only to put the hearts of the women in the harem at ease.

Kylie deliberately remained silent, watching as the tension in the hall grew. A few lower-ranked

concubines had even begun to sob. Even so, the queen simply frowned and continued sipping her coffee. Finally, someone blurted out, "For His Majesty to visit Hell Monarch Estate in the dead of night when the Hell Monarch himself is at the Southern Frontier... Surely, this will stir up rumors."

The cup landed sharply on the table.

Kylie's expression darkened as she snapped, "Silence! There's nothing going on between His Majesty and the Hell Monarch's princess consort! Who dares to spread such slander?"

The room fell into an immediate hush.

Seizing the moment, Kylie pressed further, her voice sharp with indignation as she said, "Who has been gossiping behind closed

doors? Is this what you whisper net

about in secret? Outrageous! These accusations not only insult His Majesty's wisdom but also tarnish Lady Carissa's reputation.

"His Majesty visited Hell Monarch Estate to consult with Mr. Spencer on important state matters. If you doubt me, then go ask His Majesty yourself! But in Everspring Palace, I will not tolerate such reckless talk."

With that, Kylie dismissed them all.

Sylvia and Grace exchanged

glances, finally feeling somewhat reassured, Having spent years in the palace, they knew Kylie's

temperament well. No one can

more about this matter than she did; she was merely looking for the right excuse to act.

That afternoon, Kylie took Lydia with her to the royal study to request an audience. Since the queen's house arrest, she had not seen Salvador This was her first time formally seeking an audience after having been released.

Salvador had just finished drinking his medicine when he granted her entry.

Kylie stepped inside, curtsying properly as she apologetically said, "During my time in confinement, I have reflected on my mistakes. I will not make the same mistake again."

Salvador knew she had visited Connor and had merely been reprimanded by Victoria, so this so-called reflection was nothing more than a formality.

"Sit," he said flatly, neither accepting nor rejecting her words. He would hear her out first.

Kylie thanked him and wasted no time in recounting the morning's events. She repeated the harem's gossip but with a carefully exaggerated twist-implying that Carissa harbored improper intentions. When she finished, she sighed, her face full of worry. "I have already silenced the women, but I fear that while I can quiet their tongues, I cannot ease their troubled hearts."

Salvador's expression darkened. He hadn't expected his reckless decision to bring Carissa such trouble. He slammed his hand on the table, his voice thundering through the hall, "Absurd. Absolutely absurd! What nonsense-they dare suggest Carissa has improper intentions?"

#### Chapter 1435

Kylie flinched at Salvador's outburst and quickly lowered her head. However, a flicker of anger flashed in her downcast eyes.

She hadn't expected the harem's gossip to provoke such a reaction-that Salvador's first instinct would be to defend Carissa so fiercely, his thunderous wrath reserved for anyone who dared to question her.

If Carissa never harbored such intentions, then it could only mean that Salvador himself had made this choice. In that case, he would shoulder all the criticism alone.

Kylie couldn't understand it. Salvador had always valued his reputation above all else. In a situation like this, shouldn't he have seized the opportunity to shift the blame onto Carissa to preserve his own name? Why was he protecting her instead?

If he insisted on defending her in public as well, then the entire court would see this as nothing but a reckless scandal of his own making.

A storm of emotions surged through Kylie's heart as she recalled Salvador's previous mention of bringing Carissa into the palace.

Could it be that he had truly fallen for her?

That would be utterly absurd.

From the moment Kylie married Salvador, she had understood that he would never belong to her alone. Compared to power and status, love and affection held no weight.

But the condition for this balance was simple: he was never meant to truly love anyone.

Over the years, new favored concubines had come and gone in the harem, but Kylie had never been jealous. The king's so-called favor was fleeting nothing more than a few extra nights spent in a favored concubine's bedchamber, which was hardly a sign of true affection.

Yet, when Salvador had spoken of bringing Carissa into the palace, Kylie had been displeased.

For one, the selection of concubines had always been her domain. Salvador had never taken interest in such matters, leaving it entirely in her hands. Carissa had been the only exception, the only woman he had personally named.

How could Kylie not feel jealous?

Beyond that, she knew Carissa was different.

Carissa had military achievements of her own, and her lineage as Hector's daughter and Dominic's granddaughter made her even more formidable. With such a powerful backing, she commanded the support of many within the military. If she ever bore a royal heir, the balance of power would shift dangerously in her favor.

Kylie had only felt relieved when Carissa married Rafael, allowing Salvador to reclaim military authority without opposition.

But Carissa had never been one to stay quiet.

Serving as the sole female official, founding an academy for women, establishing the workshop, and now, achieving an even greater military victory by repelling the rebels. Her prestige had only grown stronger. And if, on top of all that, she had truly won Salvador's heart...

Then, there would be no one left who could curb her rise.

Kylie even began to wonder whether Rafael had already fallen in battle at the Southern Frontier. That cursed place swallowed soldiers whole; anyone sent there was as good as dead.

If that were the case, then Carissa's entry into the palace was a real possibility.

Thinking of this, a sharp sense of crisis gripped the queen.

Ignoring Salvador's fury, Kylie

pressed on and urgently said, "Your Majesty, since both the court and the harem are full of whispers, this matter must be given a proper resolution. Why not let Commander Sinclair take responsibility? I have always believed that women serving as officials is improper, especially a woman of exceptional beauty navigating the political arena. I fear such a woman would surely have an easy rise to power...."

She didn't even get to finish.

"Silence!"

Salvador's roar struck like a thunderclap over her head.

The outburst came so suddenly that Kylie barely registered when he had risen to his feet, towering over

her. She looked up in shock, her breath catching in her throat. His face was contorted with rage, veins standing out in stark relief.

"For someone born a woman-and

queen of the kingdom, no less-you dare to speak such disgraceful words? You insult not only women, but also your own father, the Civil Minister! Do you take the court's system for a joke? Do you think our officials are selected at random, that a woman can rise in rank merely by using her looks and body? Do you take me for a foolish ruler?" he thundered.

Terror gripped Kylie. She dropped to her knees, her lips quivering as she tried to form a response.

"Your Majesty, please " she choked out. "That wasn't what I meant..."

She bit her lip, her shoulders shaking as tears began to spill down her cheeks.

"Your Majesty, you know full well that it was improper to visit Hell Monarch Estate in the dead of night. Why did you go?" she asked, her voice raw with desperation. "I am your wife-I cannot stand by while the court brands you reckless and foolish.

"Lady Carissa is your subject, bound

to serve and bear your burdens. Let the blame fall on her. Regardless of what happens, she will still be the Hell Monarch's princess consort. At worst, she loses her command over the Mystic Army, which is hardly a significant loss."

Salvador's fury cooled into something even more chilling.

Instead of erupting again, he simply asked, "Then, tell me. Would it be no great loss if you were to lose your title as queen?"

Kylie's blood ran cold. "Your Majesty, how can you even compare the two?"

"There is no comparison," he said, his tone devoid of warmth. "This kingdom has had more than one queen, but only one woman has ever served in court.



"Stop acting like you're so generous at someone else's expense. Since you keep saying you're doing these things for my sake, then step down from your position. With that, I will announce to the world that my visit to Hell Monarch Estate was so I could see Violet.

"Step aside, and I will take Violet as my queen."

Chapter 1436

Kylie stumbled back to Everspring Palace, Salvador's words asking her to relinquish her position as queen echoing endlessly in her mind. Each word crashed down like a bolt of lightning, striking her heart with relentless force. Her head spun and her limbs felt numb.

"Your Highness, His Majesty was merely speaking in anger. Please don't dwell on it," Lydia said anxiously. With her face drained of all color, Kylie looked like a ghost of herself, her spirit seemingly shattered.

She struggled to breathe, clutching at her chest as tears streamed down her cheeks. "In anger? Does that mean he can just dispose of me with a few careless words? His Majesty never speaks rashly. He meant it."

"How could that be? How could His Majesty ever consider making Ms. Spencer-a merchant's daughter -his queen?" Lydia tried to reassure her, having overheard Salvador's furious outburst from outside. Kylie's tears fell faster. "Don't you see? It was never about Violet. It's Carissa."

Lydia shook her head. "That's even less likely. Lady Carissa is the Hell Monarch's princess consort. Even if His Majesty has lost his senses, he wouldn't make his sister-in-law the queen. It defies all reason and propriety. If he did such a thing, scholars and officials across the land would condemn him. His Majesty wouldn't do it."

"The issue is that he wants to do it." Kylie wiped away her tears, her eyes darkening with resentment. "Carissa knows better than anyone the consequences of such actions. When Barrett tried to take another wife, she raised hell. She should be the first to understand the importance of propriety, yet she allows His Majesty to continue down this foolish path."

"Perhaps Lady Carissa isn't even aware of it," Lydia suggested.

Kylie blew her nose, her nose reddened from crying. "Even if she didn't know at first, she must know by now. If she truly is a loyal subject, she shouldn't drag His Majesty's name through the mud. She should resign from her post and return to her duties as the Hell Monarch's wife."

Lydia advised Kylie to stay out of it. The king would handle it however he saw fit.

But Kylie saw things differently. This scandal could tarnish Salvador's reputation, so if she could quell the rumors and protect his honor, Victoria might see her in a new light. Perhaps then, control over the harem would return to her hands.

Also, Salvador would think twice before speaking of deposing her.

Of course, she couldn't be too forceful. The key was to appeal to Carissa's emotions and reason with her. Kylie thought she understood Carissa well. The latter was the type who believed herself to be loyal and patriotic, willing to endure hardship for the greater good.

So, persuading her wouldn't be difficult. The real challenge lay in bringing her into the palace in a way that appeared proper and justified. After all, she was still recovering from her injuries and rarely left her residence.

Naturally, Kylie also had to ensure Salvador didn't find out.

She recalled that Ryan had once

entered the palace as Connor's study partner, so she used the pretext of bestowing a reward on the boy to extend an invitation. She asked Carissa to come and admire the orchids—a simple gathering between sisters-in-law, nothing more.

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Since the queen wasn't issuing a direct edict, she anticipated that Carissa might find an excuse to decline.

So, she sent Lydia in person with a message consisting of two simple sentences.

Carissa would come after hearing them. Of that, Kylie was certain.

At Hell Monarch Estate, Carissa sat in silence after hearing Lydia's words, her expression grave. It was

the most composed expression she could manage at the moment. If she were to truly reflect her feelings, she would be baring her teeth.

At that moment, she understood Rosalind.

She clenched her jaw so tightly that

she nearly shattered her own teeth before finally forcing out a calm response, saying, "My husband is not handsome enough to stand in the way of a young lady finding a better match. Please convey my thanks to Her Majesty for her kindness."

Having never expected Carissa to reply in this manner, Lydia was momentarily stunned.

In situations like this, the typically

expected response was to first

express gratitude for Kylie's

generosity. Then, Carissa should enter the palace, exchange

pleasantries, and gently remind Kylie that Rafael was still at war in the Southern Frontier, making it inappropriate to discuss taking a secondary wife. The queen would then drop the matter with grace, leaving all parties satisfied.

But Carissa had outright refused, citing Rafael's appearance as her reason. This could only be seen as jealousy, and among noble wives, there was no greater shame than being accused of jealousy. With such a blunt refusal, wasn't she afraid of offending Kylie? If the queen truly went through with arranging a match for Rafael, what then?

After all, Kylie was not just any noblewoman-she was the queen and Rafael's sister-in-law. If she insisted on finding him a secondary wife under the guise of concern for his household, others would only praise her for her thoughtfulness.

Before Lydia could recover from her shock, Carissa's voice, now laced with cold amusement, rang out once more.

"If Her Majesty is so fond of playing matchmaker, perhaps she should focus on selecting more concubines

for His Majesty during the upcoming flower-viewing banquet. The affairs of our estate need not trouble her."

Chapter 1437

And just like that, Lydia was sent out of the estate. She received more than a few pointed stares on her way out.

On the journey back to the palace, she remained unsure whether Carissa would actually come. The latter hadn't agreed, but hadn't outright refused either.

Of course, Kylie had no real intention of finding a secondary wife for Rafael. The remark had been meant to unsettle Carissa, to push her into resigning from her post. Even if she refused to resign, the queen would never actually force a concubine upon the Hell Monarch.

But it was unexpected for Carissa to react with such unrestrained fury-so much so that she hadn't even bothered to maintain appearances before throwing Lydia out.

And if Carissa refused to enter the palace... How would this misunderstanding ever be resolved? But then again...

Lydia sighed. Was it really a misunderstanding?

Truth be told, she rather liked the idea of female officials in court. If Carissa were to resign, she would actually feel a tinge of regret.

The thought left her feeling guilty. She was no longer as unwaveringly loyal to Kylie as she had once been.

Back at Hell Monarch Estate, Carissa was livid.

She had already been troubled enough by Salvador's late-night visit, which had sparked all manner of gossip. And now, Kylie was making things even worse.

Truly, Salvador and Kylie were a perfect match-each as insufferable as the other.

In the main hall, Jacob and Kyle sat in silence, watching as Carissa limped forward on her own, refusing any support. That solitary figure, dragging her injured leg step by step, was pitiful to behold.

As if it hadn't been bad enough that she had injured herself to avoid suspicion, Salvador had gone and made a spectacle of himself, arriving at the estate in the dead of night. Now, the entire court was abuzz with rumors, and more than half the officials had likely heard the tale. Most of them undoubtedly cast judgment upon Carissa.

Why was Kylie doing this? What was her real motive?

First, she sent Lydia to reward Ryan. Then, she brought up the idea of Rafael taking a secondary wife. She invited Carissa to the palace to admire the orchids, and while she was at it, Kylie wanted her to look at portraits of eligible young ladies.

The queen fretted over all the wrong things. The matters that deserved her concern she ignored entirely, while the things that were none of her business she obsessed over to no end.

"The queen probably said it on purpose. She wants to force Lady Carissa into visiting the palace," Jacob murmured.

Kyle scoffed. "Who cares? She said what she said, and that's that. No need to go. Nothing good will come of it."

Kyle thought there was no need for Carissa to overthink it. When faced with something like this, it was best to just get angry.

To hell with the king and queen.

Violet had gone out early in the morning and was unaware of the situation. When she returned in the afternoon, she had the kitchen prepare a few of Helen's favorite dishes, intending to dine with her and Carissa.

She went to inform Helen first before fetching Carissa, only for the former to wave her off.

"I won't be dining with her today. Go on and eat with her yourself," Helen said.

Violet was surprised. Helen enjoyed lively company and was always pleased when she and Carissa joined her for meals. Why was she refusing today?

"Did she offend you?" Violet's expression darkened, immediately ready to stand up for the older woman. "I'll go teach her a lesson."

Helen hurriedly intervened, saying,

"Don't be ridiculous. She didn't offend me; someone else offended her. She's in a foul mood and I don't have the right words to soothe her. If I say the wrong thing and upset her further, this household will fall

apart."

Violet frowned. "She hasn't even stepped out of the estate. Who could have possibly offended her? Don't tell me Rod has been acting up again."

"No, it was the queen," Helen sighed. "She sent someone over, claiming to have picked out a few young ladies for Rafael. It set Carissa off."

Helen hesitated, then added in a softer tone, "To be fair, if a few well-mannered girls entered the household, it wouldn't be such a bad thing. But seeing how upset she was... I didn't dare say a word." Violet's expression darkened. Without another word, she stormed off toward Carissa's courtyard. That wretched woman!

By the time Violet arrived, it was

already late. Fallen branches and scattered leaves littered the ground,

evidence of some earlier St. A

whip and a sword had been

carelessly tossed onto the

inside the main hall, but Carissa

herself was nowhere to

be seen.

Violet searched the room and called out a few times, but there was no answer.

Instead, Lulu hurried over and hushed her with a finger to her lips. "Don't shout. She worked up a sweat practicing and went to soak in the hot spring."

"And you're not attending to her?" Violet asked.

"She kicked me out," Lulu muttered, clearly aggrieved.

Violet clicked her tongue. "Her injuries aren't even fully healed and she's already soaking in hot water? She acts like she's made of iron."

Shaking her head, she made her way toward the small hot spring.

Steam curled through the air, blurring the edges of the tranquil pool. Carissa reclined against a cushioned stone ledge, eyes closed, her body half-submerged in the warm water.

Violet crept forward on silent feet, snatching up a towel. With a grin, she spoke in a fawning tone, asking, "My lady, would you like this humble servant to scrub your back?"

Before Carissa could reply, Violet rolled up her sleeves and began scrubbing vigorously. "Let's wash away all the bad luck-bad people, bad words, bad omens. None of it will stick to us."

Chapter 1438

Carissa was still fuming when Violet's playful comment broke through her anger, causing her to laugh. "Let go. Come down here and join me."

Violet chuckled, giving a quick curtsy. "At your command, my lady."

With a swift motion, she discarded her clothing and tossed it aside before slipping into the hot spring. The two women splashed water at each other in a playful, light-hearted manner before settling down, resting their chins on the soft cushions by the edge of the spring.

Violet spoke first, saying, "The queen is an idiot. Why bother with her? It's not worth getting upset over." "She's acting like there's something wrong with her. She definitely doesn't seem like someone raised by the Quinton family." Carissa paused for a moment, then added, "Well, I guess the Quinton family has more than its share of troublemakers."

Violet nodded. "True. Malcolm kept a mistress, and who knows what to make of the whole thing with Gerald. At least Marjorie is a bit more normal-poor thing."

Carissa folded her hands, resting her chin on her knuckles, her gaze distant. "Yeah. Vivi, do you know what it felt like hearing those words from Lydia?"

Violet tilted her head slightly, mimicking Carissa's posture. "You were angry, of course. What else could you have felt?"

-

"Anger, yes, but more than that... disappointment," Carissa said, rubbing her eyes as the steam from the hot spring swirled around them. "The queen may not actually want to find a secondary wife for Raf, but she's probably using this excuse to force me to come to the palace. She knows exactly how to make a woman's heart ache-like a knife right to the chest."



Violet hadn't given it much thought. But after hearing Carissa's words, she couldn't help but scoff. "What's she playing at? She can't seem to sit still for a moment. On one hand, she's rewarding Ryan, and on the other, she's threatening you. What does she think she's going to gain from this?" Violet mused. Carissa also found it confusing. Kylie's actions made no sense.

Was it to win her over? If that were the case, the queen wouldn't have resorted to such vile tactics. Was it to punish her? Then, why not just directly send a secondary wife to the estate? As the queen, she could do it if she truly wanted to. No one would question her motives, and she could claim it was for the sake of Rafael's lineage.

Carissa thought long and hard but could only come to one conclusion-Kylie was using this as leverage. But to what end? Perhaps Kylie had already learned about Salvador's condition and was trying to force Carissa to help Connor?

Whatever the queen's reasoning, Carissa knew one thing for certain: she would not enter the palace. If Salvador's illness were to be made public, it would undoubtedly cause a great uproar, and the previous kings' concubines would each have their own plans. This turbulent situation would be best avoided if possible.

At Everspring Palace, Lydia reported what had happened. Upon hearing it, Kylie was so enraged that her face twisted with fury.

"She really said that?"

Lydia nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. As soon as I finished speaking, she flew into a rage. I was startled by how suddenly she snapped."

Kylie sneered. "So, Carissa thinks so highly of herself?"

"Your Majesty, now that there's a misunderstanding, what should we do? Lady Carissa likely thinks you truly intend to send someone to Prince Rafael's household. Perhaps I

should go and explain things net

tomorrow, then invite her to the

palace?" Lydia suggested carefully.

Kylie's eyes narrowed as she coldly said, "I was acting out of good intentions for Rafael's lineage. That's why I suggested he take a

she

secondary wife and possibly a concubine. If she's against it, should come to the palace and speak with me. I wouldn't have forced her. But how dare she lash out at you like that? How can someone so jealous be fit to be a royal woman?

"Go ahead and spread word about what happened. Let's see if she still has any shame." Stunned, Lydia quickly said, "Your Majesty, this will surely sour your relationship with Lady Carissa." "So what? I'm the queen. Do you think I'm afraid to make an enemy of her?" Kylie responded coldly. Lydia was concerned. The Quinton family was no longer supportive of Kylie, and openly offending the Hell Monarch's princess consort would not be wise, especially for Connor's sake.

"In the end, you're both still family, Your Majesty. There's no need to make things so ugly. I'll go tomorrow and speak plainly. If she agrees to come to the palace, the misunderstanding can be cleared up," said Lydia, trying to reason with the queen.

Kylie waved her hand dismissively. "No need for more words. If I say you should go, you go."

She paused, a calculating look

crossing her face. "I've heard that the Earl of Southstead has a daughter named Janelle Xavier.

unmarried. Tell the world that

She's over twenty and still

intended to have her be Rafael's secondary wife, but Carissa refused."

Chapter 1439

Lydia hesitated for a moment before saying, "But if we spread word of this, Lady Xavier's reputation will be ruined, and the other young ladies of the Earl of Southstead's family will suffer as well."

Kylie's eyes gleamed coldly. "She's just the daughter of a concubine with an inflated sense of her own worth. She looks down on everyone, likely dreaming of a marriage that's beyond her reach. A girl so lofty in her ambitions deserves what she gets."

"Besides, I've heard she has a fiery temper and is unafraid of anyone. It would be best if she went and caused a scene with Carissa. Let people see the spectacle, and soon, no one will be talking about His Majesty anymore."

Lydia fell silent, unsure of how to respond.

"Now, when I say something, you resist at every turn. You constantly find fault. Tell me, how do you suggest we put an end to this uproar? Should we allow His Majesty to remain in the public eye, constantly criticized and ridiculed?" Kylie snapped, her patience running out.

Lydia wanted to argue that even if Janelle went to cause a scene, her antics wouldn't help silence the rumors surrounding Salvador. It would simply be treated as a trivial matter—a young woman causing a fuss would hardly be capable of quelling a political storm.

But seeing Kylie's anger flare, Lydia held her tongue and obediently left to carry out her orders. With the year drawing to a close, the social season was in full swing, and people were exchanging news at a rapid pace.

Soon, it became common knowledge that Kylie had intended to have Janelle become the Hell Monarch's secondary wife, only for his princess consort to reject the proposal.

Janelle was the daughter of the Earl of Southstead. Though she was born to a concubine, she was the favored child of the matriarch of the family. From a young age, she excelled in music, chess, calligraphy, and even horsemanship and archery.

However, her temperament was as fiery as they came.

When Janelle came of age at 15, matchmakers began visiting. However, she refused every proposal, no matter how suitable the family or the match. Over time, the matchmakers began to speak of her

with thinly veiled sarcasm. However, Janelle was not one to uphold the delicate demeanor expected of a noble lady. She would berate the matchmakers without hesitation.

It wasn't just the matchmakers she offended. She had a habit of criticizing older relatives who spoke ill of her, and didn't hesitate to scold them as well.

Her blunt, outspoken nature had earned her a reputation. As a result, she was seldom invited to noble gatherings in the capital, for fear of her sharp tongue causing embarrassment.

Her temperament had earned her many enemies, and there was no shortage of gossip about her. Most often, people said she aimed too high, looking down on families of lesser status. Some even claimed she aspired to enter the palace as a concubine. They mocked her behind her back, saying the palace had no place for someone so unruly.

Such a temperament would normally earn her the disdain of most in her household, yet both the matriarch and the Earl of Southstead were particularly fond of her.

The reason was simple enough-Janelle was sharp and capable.

She handled the family's business affairs and managed the household with ease. Her stepmother, the lady of the household, was often ill. Thus, Janelle took charge of both the external business dealings and the inner workings of the estate. Though many of her relatives disapproved of her fiery nature, they had no choice but to rely on her.

Despite holding a noble title, the Earl of Southstead's family maintained a low profile among the capital's aristocratic circles. Not a single member of the family held an official position in court. Instead, they quietly amassed wealth.

Even with their lack of political influence, their noble status ensured that no one dared to slight them. However, they were rarely the talk of the town, only receiving invitations during weddings or funerals.

Now, there was news that Kylie had intended to arrange Janelle's marriage to the Hell Monarch as a secondary wife, only to be refused by Carissa. In an instant, rumors about the Earl of Southstead's family spread like wildfire across the capital.

Everyone eagerly awaited to see whether Janelle, with her brash and bold nature, would dare to confront Carissa and demand an explanation. After all, the position of secondary wife to the Hell Monarch was one that many noble ladies yearned for.

Janelle was already 20 years old and had a bad reputation. With Kylie's help, she could have married the Hell Monarch, someone many people admired. But Carissa's jealousy had ruined her chances. Even the most patient person would be outraged, wouldn't they?

While the common folk speculated,

the court officials saw this as a clue to the king's late-night visit to the estate. After all, there had been

you

similar situation in the past. When Carissa was still Barrett's wife, she had caused a scene over him taking another wife, leading to their divorce.

Now, Carissa's refusal to allow the Hell Monarch to take a secondary wife raised questions: Would she demand a divorce again? More importantly, since this matter was initiated by Kylie, did it reflect Salvador's intentions?

If that were the case, then the initial assumptions might have been wrong. Perhaps it wasn't Carissa who had ulterior motives, but the king who had been coveting something else...

Those with sharp minds began piecing together the truth. Considering Salvador's private meetings with Carissa in the royal study, her injury, and his late-night visit to the estate, the narrative became clear. He was the one who had developed feelings.

Seeking to avoid him, Carissa had deliberately injured herself. When the king couldn't see her, he had gone to the estate in the dead of night to check on her.

Chapter 1440

Once the speculation began to spread, some court officials encouraged Malcolm to approach Kylie for an answer.

If these rumors proved true, it would be a matter of great consequence!

The Hell Monarch was still embroiled in war at the Southern Frontier. If his wife was the subject of such rumors, how could he possibly remain focused on the battle?

Even Davis was deeply concerned. He sought out Malcolm personally and explained the serious implications.

"The Hell Monarch is fighting for his life out there. This could not come at a worse time. We cannot allow such a scandal to derail his efforts," Davis said.

After a brief pause, he added, "I hear Lord Wright intends to make an Oathbound Plea for His Majesty to clarify matters at court tomorrow."

An Oathbound Plea was when a court official made a desperate, unwavering petition to the king, sometimes at the risk of their own life or career.

"The situation hasn't even been investigated and they're already resorting to such an extreme move? Lord Wright can't be that reckless, can he?" asked Malcolm, startled.

Davis gave a wry smile. "He's forcing His Majesty's hand. If this continues, the rumors will reach the Southern Frontier and Victory Pass soon enough. If that happens, the damage will be irreparable!" Despite his personal flaws, Malcolm had the sense to recognize the gravity of the situation. He couldn't ignore the growing momentum behind these rumors.

What made matters more complicated was that this whole affair had started with Kylie sending someone to Hell Monarch Estate. If the king's intentions were truly behind it, the queen would certainly know. Malcolm knew he needed to speak with Kylie directly to clear up the matter.

However, as a court official, he was not permitted to enter the harem without royal orders. He decided he would have to go home and explain the situation to Marjorie, hoping she might be able to get to the bottom of it.

Marjorie had also heard of the rumors, but what she had heard were the whispers of the common folk. Some claimed that Carissa was simply a jealous woman, while others quickly countered that the Hell Monarch had long sworn he would never take a concubine.

There were also those who criticized Janelle, calling her a woman of ill repute and lacking in virtue. They believed it was her infamous character that led to Carissa's rejection, suggesting that had it been another noble lady, the match might have been approved.

When she first heard the news, Marjorie had thought Kylie was being underhanded. As a woman, she felt that the worst thing one could do was interfere in another's marriage.

But when Malcolm mentioned that it might be Salvador's will, Marjorie found it hard to believe. The king was not a man driven by weakness or lust. He would never be foolish enough to covet his own brother's wife.

Still, when she heard of Salvador's late-night visit to Carissa after her injury, she became uncertain. Regardless, when she learned that Irvin was preparing to risk his life to make an Oathbound Plea at court, it was clear that the situation was escalating. She agreed to go to the palace herself to see what could be done.

The mother-daughter pair had not been on the best terms lately, but the queen knew that she could not afford to alienate her mother. So, when Marjorie finally agreed to visit the palace, Kylie thought it was a perfect opportunity to mend their relationship.

However, she was taken aback when her mother asked about Janelle and whether Salvador's will was behind the match.

With a self-assured smile, Kylie responded, "Mom, before we discuss that, could you tell me if anyone from the Earl of Southstead's family has gone to Lady Carissa to seek justice?"

Marjorie thought for a moment, considering the rumors she had heard, then replied, "I haven't heard anything of the sort."

Kylie frowned. "There hasn't been anything?"

Surely the people of the Earl of Southstead's family weren't so weak, right?

"Then, has anything been said about Lady Carissa's jealousy?" Kylie asked.

"Of course. But with her military achievements, those who speak ill of her are few. Most people actually praise the bond between her and Prince Rafael, saying they share a deep and loving marriage. They said it was best for His Highness to not have a secondary wife disrupting their relationship. Most of the criticism is directed to Lady Xavier," Marjorie replied.

"How could this happen?" Kylie mused, disappointed.

"So, was this His Majesty's will? Does he want to give the Hell Monarch a secondary wife?"

That was all Marjorie cared about. Gossip could be dealt with, but if Irvin made an Oathbound Plea, things would spiral out of control.

Kylie couldn't understand why no one was calling Carissa jealous. Hearing her mom's question, she was momentarily stunned.

"How could this be His Majesty's will? Why would he meddle in the inner affairs of Hell Monarch Estate?" Marjorie straightened up. "So, it's not His Majesty's will, it's yours?"

Kylie clenched her handkerchief tightly, her voice calm but firm as she replied, "It was my idea. Lady Carissa and Prince Rafael have been married for a while, yet there's no sign of a child. For the sake of the royal family's future, I thought of finding one or two suitable women to help preserve Prince Rafael's lineage."

She didn't dare admit that it was just an excuse to bring Carissa into the palace and convince her to resign. And if that failed, she planned to use it as leverage against her.

Marjorie's eyes widened at her

daughter's words. "You did this on your own? Do you realize what a disaster you've caused? The court officials all think it was His Majesty's decision to find the Hell Monarch a secondary wife. And now they

believe he and Lady Carissa..."



She sighed. "This misunderstanding is huge. Because of this, you might end up getting Lord Wright killed!"