

War Song 1441

Chapter 1441

Kylie laughed dismissively. "Mom, what are you saying? How could this have anything to do with His Majesty? He's busy with state affairs. Why would he bother with something like this? And what about Lord Wright? When did I try to get him killed?"

Irvin was Meredith's father-in-law, and Kylie had no intention of making an enemy of the Wright family. Marjorie sighed deeply. "You're truly foolish. The Hell Monarch is away at war, and you're trying to arrange a secondary wife for him? People are still waiting for an explanation about why His Majesty kept Lady Carissa in the royal study after court for days and even visited her late at night. Now, this scandal breaks out. How can you expect people not to jump to conclusions?"

"They're just overthinking it and making wild guesses," Kylie replied.

Marjorie studied her daughter's dismissive expression and shook her head in disappointment.

"Forget all those details that form the bigger picture. When His Majesty frowns or speaks a single word, the court officials speculate endlessly. And it's not just at court. Within the harem, if the king gives you a certain look, wouldn't you try to figure out what it means?"

She paused, her voice growing stern as she continued, "Moreover, you've only just been released from house arrest. You should be reflecting on yourself and keeping a low profile. If something can be avoided, it should be.

"But instead, you're trying to be the center of attention, getting involved in something that offends people. Now, you've not only dragged Lady Carissa into this mess, you've also ruined the reputation of a young lady from the Xavier family. We don't know if His Majesty is aware yet, but if he finds out, do you think he'll easily forgive you?"

Listening to Marjorie's words, Kylie realized the gravity of the situation and felt a twinge of fear. However, she didn't want to show any weakness in front of her mother. Instead, she straightened her back and spoke with a sense of righteousness.

"Since you're here to speak about this matter today, I'll speak frankly. The whole point of this was to persuade Carissa to resign and leave to calm the situation regarding His Majesty's late-night visit to Hell Monarch Estate.

"But she didn't even come to the palace. She outright rejected the idea in a very rude manner. It was as if she didn't take me seriously at all. I was only thinking of His Majesty's reputation and wanted to protect him from being talked about. I don't think I did anything wrong."

Marjorie's voice turned even harsher, scolding, "You wanted Lady Carissa to resign? Do you truly believe that would resolve anything? What kind of reasoning is that?"

"If she resigns, she won't be around His Majesty as much, and such situations won't happen again," Kylie said with a dismissive wave.

Marjorie frowned. "Not being around doesn't undo what's already happened. I don't understand your reasoning."

"If she's not around, people will eventually forget about it," Kylie replied, her tone unwavering.

Marjorie pressed on, saying, "Then,

why did you deliberately try to get

the Hell Monarch to take a

secondary wife? Isn't that just making things worse? People will

only continue to dwell on it and it will lead to even greater trouble

Her temper flaring slightly, Kylie snapped, "How could they be thinking so much into it? This is the palace, Mom. Please mind your manners and don't lecture me here."

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Disheartened, Marjorie fell silent.

People could change, and when blinded by ambition, they often acted foolishly.

When she returned home, Marjorie relayed the situation to Malcolm, who let out a heavy sigh of relief.

"If it's not His Majesty's idea, that's good. I'll speak with Lord Wright immediately."

But after taking a few steps, he stopped and turned back with a puzzled expression on his face, asking, "Why would she do something like this?"

"She said she wanted Lady Carissa

to resign, Marjorie replied, her voice weary. She believes that once Lady Carissa resigns, people will forget about His Majesty's late-night visit to Hell Monarch Estate." Malcolm was taken aback, his face darkening with anger. "That's madness! Commander Sinclair just led the Mystic Army to victory and captured the rebel leader. She's at the height of her popularity. If she resigns now, won't people think His Majesty's late-night visit to Hell Monarch Estate was to pressure her into resigning?"

"Perhaps that's what she wants-to make people believe His Majesty forced Lady Carissa's resignation.

It's better than being misunderstood in another way," Marjorie responded.

Malcolm's expression hardened. "That would demoralize the soldiers."

It might preserve Salvador's personal virtue, but in doing so, he would dishearten the court officials, and the consequences would be far worse.

Chapter 1442

Salvador had no idea that things had escalated to this point.

For the past few days, he had been working with the royal physicians to test a new treatment. The important matters in the court had all been left to Jeremiah.

The treatment, which had been developed over several sleepless nights by the physicians in the Royal Medical Department, focused primarily on heat therapy. There was also needle treatment as a supplementary method, combined with a tonic to nourish and fortify the body.

The results had been positive-at least the headaches had lessened, and he hadn't sweat as much at night.

So, during the court session this morning, Salvador appeared to be in better spirits than he had been in recent days.

Malcolm had sought out Irvin, but the man had his own opinions. Irvin's disappointment with Salvador was profound. To him, Salvador had disregarded his own safety, ignored protocol, and dismissed the state of the war-all for reckless pursuits.

Furthermore, Irvin did not believe Malcolm's claim that the idea to find a secondary wife for the Hell Monarch was Kylie's, and that Salvador had nothing to do with it.

As far as Irvin was concerned, Kylie had been confined to the palace for a long time. Once freed, she hadn't bothered with much else except finding a secondary wife for the Hell Monarch.

No one would believe that Salvador wasn't involved in this decision.

Irvin felt that it was far more plausible that Salvador had given the order. If that were the case, it made sense. As the Oversight Minister, it was his duty to admonish Salvador if necessary.

He stepped forward without fear and said boldly, "Your Majesty, I must offer an Oathbound Plea."

Salvador's sharp eyes turned toward him. "An Oathbound Plea? Speak."

An Oathbound Plea was a formal attempt to offer counsel or make a respectful remonstrance to the king.

It was often critical in nature, aimed at correcting a course of action or preventing potential harm. So obviously, Irvin was directing it at Salvador.

"I've heard that you've kept Commander Sinclair in the royal study several times, Your Majesty. You've dined and conversed for over two hours, during which no servants were allowed to be present," Irvin began.

"When Commander Sinclair was injured, you risked your own safety and visited Hell Monarch Estate late at night. Now, it is said that the queen is to choose a secondary wife for the Hell Monarch. I have no doubt you harbor no ill intentions, Your Majesty, but these repeated actions will only lead to wild speculation among the public. If word reaches the Hell Monarch, it could cause an unnecessary uproar."

He paused, then knelt on one knee.

"Your Majesty, the Hell Monarch cannot afford to lose this battle against Marshal Crow!"

The silence in the hall was deafening. Everyone held their breath, afraid even to swallow, as the tension in the room became palpable.

Salvador's gaunt face turned even more ashen. His breath came in shallow gasps, as though his throat were clogged with a lump of cotton. Each breath he took was a struggle.

He once thought that the thoughts he had would fade away once he had come to terms with them. He had assumed that others would quietly speculate, but it would never come to light.

However, he never expected that at his most unprepared moment, it would be brought up through the direct admonishment of a court official.

In an instant, the carefully hidden feelings he had kept buried for so long were laid bare before all the officials, open for scrutiny and judgment.

The humiliation and shame caused

his face to shift from a grim pale to a deep crimson, and his neck reddened with fury. He had never known such a moment in his life—a level of disgrace so profound, it left him incapable of facing anyone.

The room was unnervingly quiet, but in his mind, a storm of criticism swirled, loud and unrelenting. The

pain was overwhelming his head throbbed as though it would split in two.

A bitter, metallic taste filled his

mouth. Before he could stop it, he

the

around him blurring as if mist clouded his vision. Everything

spat a mouthful of blood, not

seemed to spin in a swirl of dark shadows.

Before he knew it, he fell forward.

Even as he descended into unconsciousness, there was a fleeting awareness of the panic that erupted around him. Screams filled his ears, some high-pitched and desperate, others sharp and frantic. People rushed to him, hands catching, trying to steady him.

He tried to focus, to make sense of the figures around him, but all he could see were indistinct shapes- floating, elusive, and indistinguishable until nausea overtook him.

He vomited, but it was more blood than bile.

The last thing he saw before everything plunged into darkness was the image of someone crashing into a golden-painted column in the hall, the sound of a mournful cry echoing through the air, "I have sinned!" His hand reached out, trying to grasp something, but it slipped into the endless black void.

The court descended into chaos. Shouts erupted, orders to summon the royal physicians rang out, and someone hastily closed the hall's doors to prevent lower-ranking officials from witnessing the turmoil inside.

Salvador lay unconscious for nearly four hours.

When he woke, the world still felt like it was spinning. Soft sobbing filled his ears, but it stopped abruptly the moment his eyes opened.

"Your Majesty? Your Majesty, you're awake? Quickly, summon the royal physicians!"

His blurry gaze focused, and he saw Kylie standing over him, flanked by Desmond and Robert. The dizziness was overwhelming, but he managed to murmur a few words before his eyes shut again.

"Kylie, leave!"

Chapter 1443

Kylie's face was still streaked with tears, her eyes swollen from crying.

When Salvador woke up, his first words were an order for her to leave.

At that moment, everyone present was left stunned.

After a long moment of stunned silence, Kylie choked up and said, "I won't leave. I'll stay here with you, Your Majesty."

"Escort the queen out," Victoria ordered, her voice hoarse but filled with authority.

Kylie had been here as long as Victoria had, waiting for Salvador to wake. She was nearly frantic with worry, but she had to stay composed-there were too many ministers kneeling outside, and she couldn't let them lose their sense of direction.

The officials had initially knelt outside in the bitter cold. Upon her arrival, Victoria had asked them all to wait in the outer hall inside the main palace. However, they had stubbornly refused to rise, insisting on staying in their places.

As long as Salvador remained unconscious, they would kneel.

After the royal physicians finished their examination, Victoria moved closer, silencing them with a gesture before saying softly, "It's all right now."

She squeezed her son's cold hand, her own trembling despite her effort to control it. The chill of his skin ached her heart. Even with all her strength, she couldn't stop the shaking.

Salvador, weak and drained, croaked out a question, "How is Lord Wright?"

"He's fine. When he tried to ram himself into the pillar, Mr. Lloyd rushed in to block the blow. Lord Wright slammed right into Mr. Lloyd's face and knocked two of his teeth out," Victoria replied. She forced a light laugh. "Now Mr. Lloyd can barely speak without air leaking through the gaps."

Salvador didn't believe her. His voice was hoarse, heavy with exhaustion. "I want to see him."

If there were any officials from the Oversight Department making an Oathbound Plea, then he was a blind, foolish king.

Before he lost consciousness, the last thing he saw was a sea of blood. He feared Irvin had already died. Victoria immediately gestured for Davis and Irvin to be brought in.

A moment later, Jeremiah entered with the two of them. They knelt before Salvador, crying for his health. Their voices were hoarse with sorrow, especially Irvin's, who had already fainted once from his grief. Irvin crawled forward, wracked with guilt, tears flowing freely from his eyes. "Your Majesty, it's my fault! I've committed such a grave sin! I deserve to die for it!"

Irvin had only wanted to offer counsel. He was determined to offer advice, thinking that if Salvador got angry, the worst that would happen was that he would lose his own life. The path of an official was one fraught with peril, but he had no fear of death.

But when he saw Salvador cough up blood and collapse from his plea, a shock ran through him, and his mind went blank. The only thought that filled his head was to atone with his life. That was why he had thrown himself against the pillar without hesitation.

Unbeknownst to them all, Davis had been watching carefully. The moment Irvin rose and rushed toward the pillar, Davis stepped forward, positioning himself to block the blow.

When Salvador heard the familiar, grating voice, he felt a weight lift from his chest, and his heart settled back into place. Slowly, he turned his head. He glanced briefly at Irvin, and then at Davis, still kneeling beside him.

Davis' voice trembled with emotion. "Your Majesty, are you feeling better now?"

Salvador managed a faint smile. "So, it really is true that you're leaking air, huh?"

Davis' mouth had been cleaned of the blood, but there was still a faint trace of crimson at the corner of his lips, a stark contrast against his pale face. Salvador was smiling, while Davis had cried like a fool.

Earlier, Jeremiah had summoned the six department heads and Irvin, detailing Salvador's condition in full. They were all deeply troubled, but Irvin was especially shaken.

Jeremiah had told him that, on the night Salvador had gone to Hell Monarch Estate, he had claimed it was to visit Kyle for a painting session. But in reality, he had gone to see Sebastian for a medical consultation. Salvador hadn't summoned Sebastian to the palace out of fear that the news of his condition would spread, causing panic among the court and fueling tensions over the succession.

Salvador hadn't reprimanded Irvin for his actions, but he had heavily rewarded Davis for saving Irvin's life. Irvin slapped himself hard over a dozen times, continuously begging for forgiveness, crying until he almost fainted.

Meanwhile, Victoria had stepped out

to face the court. It had been some time since she had directly addressed the officials. As she took her place at the head of the

the time when Sigmund was seriously ill, and how she had

assembly, it reminded everyone 1. ne

stepped forward to take control of

the situation.

Victoria's face was stern as she chided them, "The royal physicians say His Majesty has been deeply worried about the war and troubled by the rebellion, which caused the heat in his body to build up, leading to his physical condition worsening.

"Recently, His Majesty did leave the

palace late at night to visit Hell

Monarch Estate. However, he didn't go to see Commander Sinclair. He went to visit Mr. Spencer. Mr. Spencer doesn't attend court or visit the palace, so His Majesty personally visited him to seek his advice on the war at Southern

Frontier and Victory Pass, as well as the new policies about to be implemented.

"His Majesty wanted to hear Mr. Spencer's opinions, but his visit unfortunately caused wild rumors to spread. Rather than quelling them you've all indulged in them. It is deeply disappointing that none of you made efforts to clarify the situation or prevent the absurd gossip. Instead, you all took part in

Salvador had coughed up blood, and Victoria's disappointment was palpable.

All the court officials were terrified. They bowed, their heads hanging low, begging for forgiveness with voices full of regret.

Chapter 1444

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Kylie was once again in confinement.

This time, the order came directly from Victoria.

Victoria not only placed Kylie under house arrest but also dismissed more than half of her attendants, leaving only a few trusted aides to serve her. To ensure strict supervision, Victoria handpicked a few reliable individuals to keep watch over Everspring Palace.

It was while Kylie was tending Salvador that she overheard Desmond mention the king's illness-the Black Veil.

At first, Kylie didn't understand what that was. But after being confined, she asked Lydia. When Lydia explained how deadly the lung disease was, Kylie broke down in tears.

She wept for Salvador's illness.

And she wept because, at a time when Salvador should be naming his heir, Victoria had placed her under house arrest.

To make matters worse, Kylie had foolishly offended Carissa.

Because of Nathan, Salvador placed great importance on Ryan. If Kylie hadn't alienated Carissa, she could have convinced Carissa to send Ryan to the palace to accompany Connor. That way, Salvador would have paid Connor more attention.

"Lydia, what can I do? What should I do?" Kylie alternated between crying and wracking her brain, pacing anxiously around the room.

Seeing how distraught she was, Lydia reassured her, "The queen dowager must have known about His Majesty's illness for some time. That's why she took Prince Connor in to personally oversee his education. That means both the queen dowager and His Majesty favor Prince Connor as the Crown Prince. There's nothing you need to do except pray for His Majesty's well-being.

"But even if I pray for His Majesty, they need to know about it! Go make arrangements-make sure word of my prayers reaches the queen dowager!"

Lydia took her hand firmly, her voice leaving no room for argument. "No one needs to know. You are the queen, and His Majesty is your husband. If you pray for him, let only the heavens and the gods bear witness."

But Kylie couldn't calm down. She felt that whatever she did now, Victoria and Salvador had to know about it.

More than that, she feared Salvador might still hold her accountable for trying to arrange a marriage between the Hell Monarch and the young lady of the Earl of Southstead's family.

Before, she had hoped the situation would spiral into a scandal-ideally, that the Earl of Southstead's family would demand an explanation from Carissa.

But now, Kylie prayed fervently that the Earl of Southstead's family would swallow the grievance and not take the matter to the Hell Monarch's household.

She tried to reassure herself that the Earl of Southstead's family wouldn't dare cause a fuss.

How could the Earl of Southstead's family afford to offend the Hell Monarch's household? No one in their family held a court position. And Janelle was already 20 years old, well past the usual marriage age, with a ruined reputation.

Surely, a few whispers wouldn't matter to them.

What happened in court was a truly shocking event, and Carissa learned about it when Kevin came to visit.

Kevin only gave a brief account of the situation before hurrying back to the palace to stand watch. Everyone was stunned. No one had expected such a storm to arise from that night's events.

Kyle said grimly, "Irvin admonished

the king in court and he collapsed, coughing up blood. Now that the six department heads know of the

king's illness, it won't be long before the of the court learns as well.

rest

The matter of naming the crown

prince can't be delayed any longer."

This turn of events had come without warning. If Salvador's illness had remained a secret, no one would

have objected to Connor being named Crown Prince.

But now that word had spread, everything would change.

Jacob's expression was solemn. "By

principle, the eldest son should be

named Crown Prince. But that doesn't mean there won't be complications. This concerns the foundation of the kingdom-our household must stay out of it at all costs."

Carissa didn't know what to say. How had things come to this?

The court would be thrown into chaos, and the harem would too. That much was inevitable.

Carissa was caught in the middle, so she couldn't blame anyone.

The only innocent one was Janelle. She had done nothing, yet disaster had fallen on her head.

Carissa knew of Janelle and even admired her. That woman had single-handedly supported all of the Earl of Southstead's family.

As for her so-called terrible reputation, it was simply unavoidable. In business, if one had only a good

name, one would be trampled and cheated at every turn. For a woman, it was even worse.

"Vivi, are people still talking about Lady Janelle?"

Violet had been silent ever since Kevin left. She had seen life and death more times than she could count. On the battlefield, cutting men down was no different from chopping vegetables. Human life was as insignificant as ants.

But this was the king—the man who held absolute power over life and death. Whoever he wanted dead would die.

And yet, now he was dying.

Which meant there was something above even him—a force that could decide his fate. To that higher power, even a king was nothing more than an ant.

Violet was so lost in thought that she was startled when Carissa's voice pulled her back.

"There are plenty still mocking her," Violet said. "But you, on the other hand, they've started to defend. They say if a man can be jealous, why can't a woman? Some have even begun to rally behind you, insisting that women should be allowed to be jealous too. You're becoming a symbol again."

Chapter 1445

Carissa couldn't allow Janelle to be unjustly slandered, nor did she wish to make an enemy of the Earl of Southstead's family. Since the trouble had begun because of her, it was only right that she provided an explanation.

So, she instructed Luke to send an invitation to Southstead Estate, inviting the entire family to dine at the Glimmering Tower.

At the same time, she deliberately let word of the invitation spread.

As for why she wasn't inviting them to the estate—this was meant to be a public clarification, and holding it within her residence would be inappropriate.

The Glimmering Tower was a place of high prestige, chosen to express respect for both the Earl of Southstead's family and Janelle.

By announcing the invitation in advance, Carissa ensured that wealthy merchants and titled nobility with an appetite for spectacle would take notice. Solving the matter under their watchful eyes was ideal.

In truth, this was also a form of compensation for Janelle. Over the years, she had suffered much in business many had taken advantage of her simply because she was a woman, treating her with disrespect and actively suppressing her ventures.

Worse still, the Earl of Southstead's family had no son capable of shouldering its legacy. Though they were a noble house, their influence had dwindled until they resembled nothing more than an ordinary merchant family.

When Luke arrived with the invitation, Janelle was not at home. The letter was instead delivered to the Earl of Southstead, Hadrian Xavier.

Hadrian was weak-willed and incapable of managing affairs. Ever since inheriting his title, his attitude had been one of resignation-he had simply given up!

Once, both the Earl of Silverstone and the Earl of Southstead's families had been immensely powerful. However, generation after generation had failed to achieve any merit. Over time, their influence had waned, their titles diminishing from duke to marquis, then from marquis to earl.

The Earl of Silverstone's family had Zoey, while the Earl of Southstead's family had Janelle and her merchant-born mother.

Unfortunately, Janelle's mother had passed away years ago. The lady of the household, Katherine, was much like her husband. She had no talent for handling affairs. With no other choice, Janelle had been forced to take charge from a young age.

Upon receiving the invitation from the Hell Monarch's household, Hadrian hesitated and consulted Katherine.

To refuse would be a slight, potentially offending Hell Monarch's household.

But attending was no simple matter either-who could say what Carissa truly intended?

When the rumors had first spread, they had thought Carissa was excessively jealous in nature. In truth, they had even believed that if their daughter could marry into Hell Monarch's household as a secondary wife, it would be a most favorable match.

They had grumbled about it for some time, only to be sharply rebuked by their daughter upon her return. "This has nothing to do with Lady Carissa," Janelle said coldly. "It was the queen who put our family in this predicament, trying to force us into making a scene at Hell Monarch Estate."

Yet whether they went or not, it was a losing battle.

If they went, it would look like they were desperate for the title of secondary wife. It would also seem like they were causing a scene, like an angry woman who couldn't get what she wanted. If they didn't go, they would be called worthless. All sorts of harsh words would be thrown at them.

So for now, they dared not make a decision. They would wait for Janelle to return and let her decide. When Janelle heard of the situation, she sighed quietly. "We'll go."

"Then you can go on your own," Hadrian said. "Your mother and I will stay behind."

Janelle frowned. "The invitation was for our entire family. If the others won't go, at the very least, you and Mother must attend."

"We wouldn't know what to say either," Hadrian muttered. Though he was an earl, he had no desire to socialize with high-ranking nobles. He lacked the confidence for such gatherings, was poor at handling conversations, and feared that a single misstep might offend Carissa.

"I will do the talking. You only need to be present," Janelle said evenly.

There was a quiet authority in her words, leaving Hadrian with no room to argue. He exchanged a glance with Katherine and reluctantly agreed.

The next day at noon, the Earl of Southstead and his wife arrived at the Glimmering Tower with Janelle. By then, the entire establishment was filled with guests.

Word had spread quickly the day before, and many had rushed to reserve tables. Most assumed the meeting would take place in a private room, where they would not be able to hear the conversation.

Even so, they still hoped to witness any signs of tension-if voices were raised, surely some of it would carry.

To their surprise, the gathering had been arranged in the Elegant Courtyard, which was behind the main guest hall on the first floor.

The Elegant Courtyard was a VIP

courtyard. It had over 30 tables, with a covered walkway in the middle connecting to a garden. It was made up of individual pavilions, but they weren't fully enclosed. Instead, there were curtains on all four sides, and there was no soundproofing.

In other words, as long as the conversation was held at a normal volume, anyone in the surrounding rooms would be able to hear every word.

Chapter 1446

Carissa, accompanied by Violet and Cynthia, waited in Willow Pavilion.

A servant led Hadrian, Katherine, Janelle, and their attendants through the garden, stopping just outside the pavilion to announce their arrival.

Supported by Violet and Cynthia, Carissa personally stepped forward to greet them. Hadrian, Katherine, and Janelle quickly offered their greetings.

"There's no need for such formalities," Carissa said with a warm smile. "Please come in and take a seat." As she spoke, she took a subtle glance at the three of them.

Over the years, she had met countless people. With just a look at their expressions, posture, and demeanor, she could usually discern quite a bit about them.

The Earl of Southstead wore a long black cloak over a richly embroidered tunic adorned with golden- threaded patterns of flora and fauna. A thick gold-trimmed front closure fastened the garment, and a heavy string of polished onyx prayer beads rested against his chest.

He looked both noble and devout. Yet as he stood, his body instinctively leaned toward his daughter. The smile on his face carried a hint of deference, revealing that he wasn't particularly skilled in social dealings. On the other hand, Katherine wore a rich crimson surcoat fastened at the front, layered over a white ermine-trimmed mantle. The color brought a healthy glow to her complexion, and her figure was pleasantly full. Were it not for the fine lines at the corners of her brows, one might hardly guess her age. As a couple, they had lived past half their years, yet they still carried an air of inexperience-people who had relied on a father in their youth and a daughter in their later years.

In contrast, Janelle stood with effortless confidence. She wore with a quilted doublet, giving her a crisp, polished appearance.

fitted gown of deep lake blue, layered

Her features leaned toward delicate beauty-gracefully arched brows, gently rounded eyes, a fine, straight nose, and a sharply tapered chin. Such softness might have clashed with her commanding presence, yet on her, it blended seamlessly.

"You've chosen an excellent setting, Lady Carissa." Janelle's voice was bright and cheerful, yet perfectly measured in decorum. "I come here often and have always been especially fond of Willow Pavilion." From the first words she spoke, she made it clear this was a pleasant and amicable meeting. Carissa returned her smile. "I'm glad that all of you like it. I had initially intended to invite you all to Hell Monarch Estate, but our cooks are no match for those at the Glimmering Tower. Besides, the Glimmering Tower is a business run by my mentor, so I thought it might be nice for you to try some of the new dishes they have here."

"In that case, we shall gratefully accept," Janelle said with a gracious nod. "We'll be sure to enjoy the meal."

Laughter rang out from within Willow Pavilion, leaving the eavesdroppers outside disappointed. This... This wasn't tense at all!

According to everyone's expectations, Carissa should have been questioning Janelle's ambitions of marrying into the Hell Monarch's household. Or at the very least, the Earl of Southstead's family should have been demanding justice from Carissa.

Even if the gathering didn't erupt into a full-blown argument, there should have been some form of rivalry or underlying tension. How could things be so harmonious?

Inside Willow Pavilion, two tables had been set, each laden with an array of exquisite dishes.

Hadrian felt uneasy the moment he saw them. This was a genuine invitation-Carissa truly intended to host their family. Yet, only the three of them had come. Would that be seen as disrespectful?

Katherine was even more flustered. Hastily, she stammered an explanation, saying that their estate also happened to be holding a banquet that day, and no one else could spare the time to come.

The moment she spoke, she regretted it. Wasn't that just admitting that their own banquet had been deemed more important than Carissa's invitation?

The couple exchanged a desperate glance before turning to Janelle for help.

But Janelle didn't bother to explain. Instead, she smoothly shifted the topic, praising the Glimmering Tower's renowned cuisine the presentation, the aroma, the flavors, all unparalleled.

After all, they had come to taste new dishes.

As for everything else? It was best left unsaid.

Besides, Carissa had extended the invitation with such grace, and countless eyes outside were watching. Janelle knew she had gained an additional layer of support today.

From now on, who would dare to casually bully her just because she was a woman?

Janelle took a discreet glance at Violet and Cynthia as well. She knew of Violet's status, but Cynthia was unfamiliar to her. When she heard the introduction-that Cynthia was from one of the Meadow Ridge guilds-she immediately offered a polite word of admiration,

Throughout the conversation, Janelle maintained eye contact with Carissa, her gaze soft and respectful. Avoiding eye contact would seem timid, but staring too directly would be impolite. She balanced it just

right.

When Carissa inquired about her

business, Janelle seized the

opportunity, speaking in a lively,

humorous manner about her

experiences. Had she told the same stories with a different tone, they would have been tales of hardship and relentless struggle. But by framing them with wit, she conveyed not only her challenges but also her resilience and unyielding spirit.

Carissa made no lengthy remarks in response, only saying lightly, "If you ever run into trouble, you may come to me."

With just those few words, Janelle suddenly felt as though all the past insults and struggles had been worth it.

For years, she had fought alone-no support, no allies, no safety net, not even an escape route. She had pressed forward with sheer determination, weary in both body and mind.

No one had ever said such words to her to offer her help in her times of need.

The words she had heard most often were, "We all have our own difficulties, Lady Janelle. You'll just have to endure."

For a moment, she felt her eyes sting with unexpected tears.

Chapter 1447

Once the meal had ended, Violet suggested taking Hadrian and Katherine for a walk to explore the grand courtyard of the Glimmering Tower.

Not far from the establishment stood a bustling entertainment district. It was filled with coffeehouses, storytellers, opera performers, street vendors, and all manner of merchants selling trinkets and delicacies. Since arriving in the capital, Violet had been preoccupied with various

matters and had never found the time to wander about. Now, she took the opportunity to send the couple away, giving Carissa and Janelle a chance to speak privately. Meanwhile, she and Cynthia could slip away to enjoy themselves as well. As soon as the others departed, the tone of the conversation inside softened.

They had deliberately avoided that topic earlier, but now, it was time to address it.

Outside, the onlookers-noble guests who had been watching the situation with rapt attention-saw the Earl of Southstead and his wife leave. They immediately assumed that Carissa had dismissed them to reprimand Janelle in private. Eager for scandal, they strained their ears, anticipating a confrontation. But instead of hushed accusations or raised voices, they heard nothing but quiet conversation and the occasional murmur of laughter. If anything, the atmosphere seemed even more harmonious than before. The constant movement of attendants going in and out made it difficult to eavesdrop, so someone simply lifted the curtain, offering a clear view of the scene inside.

Those gathered outside were no fools. They could tell the difference between forced pleasantries and genuine rapport-and from the looks of it, the two women inside were engaged in a sincere and amiable discussion.

What was even more astonishing was Janelle herself.

For years, she had been the subject of scorn, whispered about with a mixture of disdain and ridicule. Yet here she was her words poised, her manner refined. She carried herself not as a merchant scrabbling for status but as a woman of noble birth.

And then, belatedly, people remembered-Janelle was not just a mere merchant. She was the daughter of an earl.

The Earl of Southstead's family might have remained distant from the court, their presence in politics negligible, but their lineage was still intact. And here was proof-even the Hell Monarch's princess consort was affording Janelle due respect.

From time to time, Janelle glanced toward the onlookers outside, but she paid them no mind.

When Carissa finally spoke of the ordeal Janelle had been put through, calling it an undeserved

misfortune, Janelle merely smiled and said lightly, "You jest, Your Grace. How is that a misfortune? It is nothing less than an opportunity bestowed by fate."

Their eyes met, and in that shared moment of understanding, they exchanged a knowing smile.

Following this meeting, the storm of rumors outside quickly died down.

But while the whispers in social circles faded, tension within the court only escalated.

Since coughing up blood, Salvador had neither held court nor handled state affairs in the royal study. Instead, nearly all authority had been entrusted to Jeremiah.

The court officials didn't know what had happened.

Aside from the six department heads and Irvin, no one was privy to Salvador's true condition.

With the court in disarray, the minds of officials were scattered.

That evening, after returning home, Irvin fell into a high fever. Physicians were summoned, but the fever broke only to rise again. In desperation, Meredith sent for Sebastian.

The moment Irvin saw him, tears welled up in his eyes. Without hesitation, he dismissed everyone else from the room, leaving only Sebastian behind.

Sebastian had come to treat him, but upon seeing Irvin's state, he hesitated. Just as he was about to check his vitals, Irvin suddenly grabbed his hands in a desperate grip.

His voice thick with emotion, Irvin choked out, "Mr. Dalton, tell me the truth-is there a way to cure His Majesty's illness?"

Jeremiah had told them that on the night Salvador left the palace, he had secretly gone to see Sebastian. It was the Hell Monarch's household was

that had arranged the physician's visit.

Yet Jeremiah had never mentioned this to Sebastian himself-perhaps because he never expected anyone to ask the physician directly.

So, Sebastian was caught off guard by Irvin's words.

Was the king ill?

Sebastian hadn't the faintest idea

what ailed Salvador. But since it concerned the king, he couldn't simply admit his ignorance. Instead, he said evenly, "Let me check on your condition first."

Irvin obediently fell silent and allowed Sebastian to examine him.

Sebastian took a few minutes to conduct his examination, his expression unreadable. After a long moment, he finally spoke.

"The cold has settled into your lungs, and the fever is burning through your body. You'll have to take some strong medication."

At his words, Irvin seized the sleeve of his robe and said, "Tell me the truth, Mr. Dalton. Is His Majesty's condition truly as dire as the royal physicians' claim?"

Sebastian let out a weary sigh. "Lord Wright, focus on recovering your health. Don't trouble yourself with anything else.

What was Salvador's condition? Why wouldn't Irvin just come right out and say what it was?! Irvin's tears did not stop. His nose was already so blocked he could barely breathe through it.

"How could I not worry? Lung disease is notoriously difficult to cure! The royal physicians have no solutions left. My only hope is that

you, Mr. Dalton, will have a remedy

to spare His Majesty from this fate."

Sebastian's gaze lowered, his heart sinking. Lung disease?

Sebastian's quill glided across the paper as he wrote a prescription, his expression betraying nothing. "Focus on your recovery," he said. "There are others who understand medicine-leave it to them to worry about the rest."

Chapter 1448

That night, before leaving the Arcane Sanctum with Rowan and his medicine chest in tow, Sebastian informed the night physician on duty that he was heading out to treat Carissa's leg injury.

The carriage rolled to a stop outside Hell Monarch Estate. Sebastian stormed inside, his expression thunderous. When the others emerged, he cast a glance at Carissa but held back his anger. Instead, he directed it at Jacob.

"If you're going to use me as a cover, at least have the decency to warn me first," he snapped. "I nearly let something slip in front of Lord Wright."

With Sebastian's temper exploding, the others finally recall what had happened.

Jacob hastily apologized. "Did Lord Wright question you?"

"He's fallen ill, and High Princess Meredith summoned me to treat him. He wept like a child and kept asking if there was a way to cure the king. At first, he didn't even say what the illness was left me grasping in the dark," Sebastian replied curtly.

He let out a sharp huff after he finished speaking.

"You didn't give anything away, did you?" Carissa asked quickly.

Irvin's resolve to make an Oathbound Plea had alarmed them all. He was the kind of person who couldn't tolerate even the slightest flaw. But now, he thought he had misunderstood the king and pushed him to the point of vomiting blood. From here on, he would likely live with endless guilt.

It was a delicate balance. Telling him the truth was out of the question. Yet, leaving him in the dark was just as dangerous.

Sebastian scoffed. "Do you take me for a fool? How could I give anything away? This concerns His Majesty's health-I hardly need to spell it out for him. I told him to stop asking, and that was that." He brushed off his cloak with an air of finality.

"My apologies for putting you in a difficult position," Carissa said.

Sebastian glanced at her. How could he bear to blame her?

After returning from Irvin's residence, Sebastian had taken the time to understand the full scope of the recent events. Only then did he realize how grave the situation had become.

"So it truly is lung disease?" he asked.

"We only have Mr. Walker's word for it," Carissa said, her expression heavy. "The exact details remain unknown."

Sebastian exhaled slowly. "I came tonight to ask-what do you all plan to do next?"

Carissa knew Sebastian was concerned about the Hell Monarch's household getting entangled in the political storm. She said calmly, "Since I'm still recovering, I'll focus on that for now and leave everything else alone."

But that wasn't what Sebastian meant.

He looked at her steadily. "Do you intend to stay uninvolved forever, or just for the time being?"

Carissa considered this. "I'll handle what needs to be handled."

Sebastian nodded, his expression serious.

"Then do your part. Don't make a habit of avoiding things. You're a member of the royal family, and your husband commands the military. The only way to truly stay out of this is to leave the capital. If you have no plans to leave, then instead of waiting to be dragged in, you'd do better to claim your place now. That way, you can see the situation for what it is and act accordingly."

His words were a wake-up call for both Jacob and Carissa.

Sebastian was right. There was no avoiding this trying to stay out of it now would only seem insincere. Salvador was gravely ill. She was the commander of the Mystic Army · while Rafael was the marshal of the Southern Frontier and the Chief Judge. If the court descended into chaos, there was no way they could stand idly by.

Acting detached now really seemed hypocritical.

Sebastian tapped Carissa's foot

lightly with a small hammer. "You're fine. Limp your way back to the Capital Guard headquarters. At the very least, if anything happens at court, you'll hear about it

diately instead of having to

chase down news."

Carissa flinched and pulled her foot back sharply. "That still hurts! Why did you hit so hard?"

Sebastian chuckled. "Did you really think I'd go easy on you? Get back to work. It's just a minor injury, yet you're acting like you have a broken leg."

Carissa could actually walk without much trouble now. The wound still pulled painfully as it scabbed over, but it was nothing she couldn't handle.

"I'll return to duty tomorrow," she said.

On the 25th of December, news arrived from Victory Pass-Leroy had been beheaded, and the Westhaven's forces had retreated.

Upon hearing this, Salvador's health seemed to improve. He issued a royal edict to reward the generals at Victory Pass.

However, there was still no word from the Southern Frontier. No war reports, no updates-nothing. The Hell Monarch and the entire Southern Frontier Army had seemingly vanished.

Even Skywing Spire had been unable to uncover any information.

The last report had been the Hell Monarch's declaration that he would lead his troops in pursuit of the Sandorian army, taking with them every bit of provisions and weaponry they could carry.

That had been over a month ago.

Even if they had yet to secure victory, the Southern Frontier should have at least reported back and requested more supplies. Yet, no such request had reached the court.

Salvador, weakened by illness, grew increasingly suspicious.

Where was the army now?

No one knew, and that was far from normal.

Chapter 1449

Salvador's health had improved slightly, enough for him to turn his attention to the reports on his desk. He trusted Jeremiah, but not entirely.

What Salvador feared most was that the army was neither in the Southern Frontier nor outside Simonton City, chasing the Sandorian forces. Instead, it might be that the Hell Monarch had turned his troops back toward the capital-and that these reports had been suppressed, never reaching him.

Given Rafael's speed, he could have swept through and taken every county along his path within three months.

That was why Salvador needed to review the reports from each district and county.

Carissa had returned to work at the Capital Guard headquarters, and now he summoned her to the royal study. The conversation was naturally no longer casual. He wanted to gauge whether she had any news about Rafael.

Carissa told him the truth, and she was also deeply concerned.

Salvador studied her face, sensing no deceit.

But no matter which scenario they faced, it was grim.

If they were ambushed, it would mean the Southern Frontier Army's crushing defeat, and the region would once again fall into the hands of the Sandorians.

He now began to question Rafael's earlier decision. It had seemed rash to pursue the enemy. Defending the city was the safer course.

Yet, as he considered it, remaining in the Southern Frontier wasn't viable either. The people there revered Rafael. The longer he stayed, the greater the threat he posed to the court.

Carissa had returned to the Capital Guard headquarters, but the waiting was excruciating. Days dragged on like years.

She didn't know what was happening. How could she, with no word coming through?

Winona had sent word, telling her that Skywing Spire initially had someone stationed in the Southern Frontier. However, they hadn't gone with the army, which was why there had been no reports. However, they had now sent someone to investigate and assured her not to worry.

How could Carissa not worry?

Every night, she sat in the study with Jacob and Kyle, studying the map.

Outside Simonton City lay the grassland tribes and the Ice Lake. Beyond the lake was the Atamore

Mountain. Crossing the mountain would bring them to Westara Lake, and just beyond that lay Sandorian territory.

But the map was incomplete-just a rough outline of the terrain, as it didn't belong to the Starhaven domain.

Even with the map, the route was perilous. What of the unknowns?

300,000 soldiers needed vast amounts of supplies every day. If they hadn't encountered dangers along the way, they should have sent word back long ago about their supply needs.

Carissa knew everyone was worried. Every day, she put on a brave face and reassured them, saying that

Rafael was a brilliant strategist and would surely defeat Victor and lead them to victory.

But each night, sleep eluded her. When she did manage to fall asleep, her dreams were plagued by nightmares. In one, Rafael was covered in blood. In another, he came to say his goodbyes.

She would wake, chilled to the bone, her pillow soaked with tears.

The torment dragged on until the New Year. By then, Carissa had lost weight, and her frame had shrunk noticeably.

She kept the situation of the battle from Helen, who remained blissfully unaware as she prepared for the royal banquet, humming with cheer.

Carissa sometimes watched her and felt a pang of envy. Helen didn't hide anything in her heart, didn't keep things her mind, and didn't hold back her words. She just said everything, whether good or bad, simply to feel at ease inside.

When Helen saw Carissa send Ryan off in the Klein family's carriage, she noticed the clothes Carissa was wearing, which looked very familiar.

She asked suspiciously, "If I'm not mistaken, you wore that last year when you went to the palace, didn't you?"

Carissa nodded, "Yes, I didn't make anything new this year."

"Why didn't you? Didn't you have someone take your measurements?"

"I was busy, so I told them to come back later. In the end, I just canceled altogether," Carissa explained, smiling as she gently brushed the peony embroidery on her sleeve "Besides, don't you think this one looks good? You said last year that it suited me."

"Even the best clothes shouldn't be worn over and over again. Life is too short, and there are too many beautiful clothes. This year, I had a few new ones made for Rafael based on last year's measurements. It's a shame he hasn't returned yet. Who knows when he'll come home victorious?"

She sighed, as if the thought of her son had only just occurred to her. "I hear the Southern Frontier is terribly cold. Such a harsh place to endure."

Carissa knew Helen cared deeply for

her son. But her mind, Rafael was an invincible war god-a warrior who never lost a battle. While she felt sorry that the Southern Frontier was so cold and he couldn't return to the capital for the New Year, she wasn't worried about anything else.

She then turned to Carissa and said, "Why do you look so much thinner? Have you been busy lately?" "Yes, very busy. Sometimes I don't even have time to eat," Carissa admitted. She could tell she had lost weight-her dress from last year now hung loose on her.

Fortunately, the cloak she wore covered most of it, though she could still feel her face had thinned. "Even if you're busy, you have to eat. A woman can't afford to be too thin-it makes her look sharp and unkind," Helen said as Carissa helped her into the carriage, still offering some advice.

"I know. Thank you for your concern, Mother," Carissa replied, settling into the carriage. She turned back

to glance at the lamps hanging at the palace gates.

But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't feel the festive joy that hung in the air.

Chapter 1450

This year's New Year's Eve banquet was quieter than usual.

Although Kylie was allowed to be out of confinement for the day, she hardly spoke a word, her face marked by a heavy sense of worry. Even when the princes and princesses came to greet her, she responded only with a faint, distant smile.

Salvador's health wasn't good, and he had to get up early to conduct the New Year rituals at Skyward Sanctum. With all the busy work inside and out, it was exhausting for him.

Having caught a chill, Victoria had left early, with Helen accompanying her as she departed.

As Victoria was leaving, Kylie quickly gave orders. "Take Connor back to Serenity Palace to stay with Mother."

Salvador furrowed his brow. "Why should he go? Mom is ill, and you want him to stay with her?"

With a solemn expression, Kylie replied, "Mother has always treated him with great affection. Now that she is sick, how could he not be by her side to tend to her illness?"

She sighed softly, her tone tinged with melancholy. "It should be me caring for her, but I've failed in that regard. Let him take my place and show his devotion to her."

Salvador cast a cold glance at her, recognizing her maneuver to have her confinement lifted. He decided to go along with it.

"What you say makes sense. Go, take Connor to Serenity Palace. Have him stay by Mom's side day and night until her health is restored."

Kylie stiffened slightly but said nothing. She could only watch as Derek led a reluctant Connor away. She cast a resentful glance at Salvador, tears welling up in her eyes. However, she fought them back with all her might.

Carissa pretended not to see or hear anything, focusing instead on eating her now-cold meal.

Salvador had not taken action against Kylie for what had happened to Janelle. Derek had mentioned that Salvador was furious, but because of his plans to possibly name Connor the Crown Prince, it would have been difficult to punish Kylie at this time. Doing so would only make it harder for Connor to stand on his

own.

Still, the tension between the king and queen was clear for all to see. However, no one dared to openly express their thoughts. Everyone did their best to keep their feelings hidden.

Tonight, the other concubines in the palace were unusually quiet. The atmosphere in the harem was heavy, as if everyone was silently speculating about Salvador's mysterious illness.

Though the hall was full of people, Carissa felt unusually alone without Rafael by her side. This year's celebration seemed oddly empty.

The women all left first. After Kylie and the other concubines had excused themselves, Carissa got up as well. She intended to go to Serenity Palace to keep Victoria company.

But before she could take a step, Lydia approached her with a respectful nod.

"Her Majesty has requested your presence, Your Grace," Lydia said politely.

Carissa instinctively prepared to refuse, but Salvador spoke up before she could. "Since the queen has requested it, you should go, Lady Carissa."

He finished speaking, then called Derek over and gave him a few instructions.

Derek bowed and stepped aside, then approached Carissa and quietly said, "His Majesty said that if something displeases you, speak plainly. There's no need to hold back for anyone's sake. It's the New Year, and your peace of mind is the most important. If you have something to say, say it."

Carissa nodded slightly. "I understand. Thank you, Your Majesty."

When Kylie had just risen to leave, Carissa had noticed Salvador speaking to her. She assumed that he

had asked Kylie to summon her to Everspring Palace to resolve the previous conflict between them.

Now, Salvador specifically having Derek say those words to her, it seemed as though he was offering her his support and giving her a chance to assert herself.

However, Carissa knew it wasn't as simple as that.

The other concubines had been

waiting outside, clearly intending to approach her as well. Salvador had probably noticed this, which was why he had instructed Kylie to

preve

summon Carissa, likely to

her from interacting with the other

concubines.

This signaled that, for now at least, Salvador's intentions were solely focused on establishing Connor as the crown prince. He had no other plans in motion.

Sure enough after Carissa followed

Lydia out, the waiting concubines dispersed in disappointment. As they passed through the arched gate adorned with hanging flowers,

Carissa spotted Caden hiding behind

the corner of the gate.

In his hand was a sugar figurine shaped like a guardian animal, which he had been about to bite into. When he looked up and saw Carissa and Lydia approaching, he instinctively hid the treat behind his back. However, realizing that he had already been caught and there was no use hiding it, Caden stepped forward with a composed air. "Greetings, Aunt Carissa."

Carissa gently tousled his hair, smiling. "What are you doing here alone?"

Caden stuck out his tongue playfully, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Mom won't let me have sweets. She says they'll ruin my teeth."

Carissa chuckled. "So you're hiding here to sneak a treat?"

Caden quickly shook his head, denying the accusation. After a brief moment of hesitation, he held out the sugar figurine to Carissa with an air of generosity and obedience.

"Here. You can have it, Aunt Carissa."

The boy's eyes were bright and clear, and they gleamed with a hint of reluctance despite his outward show of magnanimity.

Carissa felt some of the weight in her chest lift as she smiled. "Well, if I take it, you mustn't regret it later."

"Mom says you're a hero and as strong as any man, Aunt Carissa. I wouldn't mind giving it to you at all," Caden replied.

Carissa's smile faded as her gaze flickered toward the hem of a skirt visible beneath the flowering tree. "I won't take it, but thank you."

She gently brushed her hand against Caden's cheek. "You're a good boy."

Lydia was standing nearby, and she said, "We should go, Your Grace."

