

War Song 1451

Chapter 1451

Inside Everspring Palace, the underfloor heating kept the room warm. Carissa had already been sitting for some time after removing her cloak. She had been waiting quietly after arriving, having been informed by the servants that Kylie had gone to change her clothes.

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At that moment, Kylie was in her private chambers, eating royal jelly soup. When Lydia kept insisting that she hurry to see Carissa, the queen looked slightly impatient.

"What harm is there in letting her wait a bit longer?" she quipped.

"Your Majesty, you've always said we should avoid offending her. Now that she's come here, why not explain things clearly? We can resolve the misunderstandings and everything will be fine," Lydia replied. Kylie paused for a moment, her expression hardening.

"I used to think that too. But you heard what His Majesty just said he told me that whether Carissa hits me or scolds me, I'm to bear it. He doesn't treat me like the queen. He only wants the person close to his heart to vent her anger," she said bitterly, pushing her bowl of royal jelly soup aside.

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Has he lost his mind? Or does he truly have feelings for Carissa?"

Lydia gently tried to comfort her, saying, "Your Majesty, the king said that because he knows Lady Carissa wouldn't dare raise a hand to you. He was just frustrated and spoke in anger. Don't take it to heart." "Who isn't frustrated?" Kylie dabbed at her tears with a handkerchief. "Am I not frustrated? What great crime have I committed that warrants being punished time and again? My rights in the harem are gone, and I'm not allowed to care for Connor. And now, I have to endure the anger of a woman like her. What's the point of holding this position if I am to be so humiliated?"

Lydia sighed deeply, her tone urgent as she added, "Your Majesty, you must not act on impulse. If you don't clear the air with Lady Carissa, Lady Grace will take this opportunity to sway her to her side. You don't know what happened earlier. While we were coming here, Prince Caden stopped her, gave her a sugar figurine, and called her a great hero. Lady Carissa was overjoyed.'

"Grace?" Kylie scoffed. "That clown? With her background, what right does she have to compete with me?"

"Lady Grace may not be a threat, but what about Lady Sylvia? Her father is the Minister of Justice; his position in the Supreme Court makes her powerful. If she aligns with Lady Carissa, it could jeopardize Prince Connor's position. You must endure this for now. Later, if you need to vent, you can take it out on

us."

Kylie sighed heavily, wiping away her remaining tears. "I can't bear to take my frustrations out on all of you. You know how soft-hearted I am, yet you all take advantage of that. Fine, let's go. I don't want the royal jelly soup anymore. Let's go and face her. But let me make this clear-if she truly crosses the line, I will not tolerate it."

Lydia patted her back reassuringly. "Endure it for now."

Kylie sighed. "Fine, let's go. Let's see just how impressive this female general is. She dares to come to Everspring Palace and show off her power, after all."

In a room with the smell of scented candles filling the air, Carissa had been waiting for a while.

When Kylie finally emerged, Carissa rose and curtsied respectfully. "Greetings, Your Majesty."

Kylie glanced at her, noting that her demeanor was proper and devoid of any mockery.

She gave a slight nod. "No need for such formality. Please have a seat."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Carissa waited for the queen to sit first before gently lowering herself onto a seat.

Expecting Carissa to speak about the matter from the other day, Kylie was silently calculating her next

move. She wondered how to gracefully resolve the tension. between them without losing her dignity.

However, after a long silence, Carissa didn't say a word. Kylie glanced up to look at her. Carissa's expression was indifferent, looking like she had no intention to speak at all.

Kylie's brows furrowed.

Was Carissa waiting for her to speak first? To offer an apology?

The queen had intended to make peace, but after hearing Salvador's words, resentment had settled in her heart. It made it harder for her to

take the first step. Still, the silence between them was awkward

Kylie subtly gave Lydia a signal.

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Understanding the cue, Lydia stepped forward and knelt before Carissa. "Your Grace, forgive me. That day I spoke out of turn. I misinterpreted Her Majesty's intentions. She never meant to overstep and interfere with the

affairs of the Hell Monarch's

household. It was all a

misunderstanding."

"If it's a misunderstanding, there's no need to bring it up again. Please rise," Carissa responded with a

soft nod.

Chapter 1452

Kylie thought she had given Carissa an opening to vent her feelings, and that would be the end of it. But unexpectedly, Carissa didn't take the bait at all. Instead, she brushed it off as a misunderstanding, leaving Kylie and Lydia somewhat at a loss.

Lydia awkwardly stood up, offering her thanks before stepping to the side. Her eyes flicked quickly to Carissa, silently searching for any sign that she was willing to press the issue further. But there was nothing.

Carissa remained silent, sipping her coffee.

Was that it? Had the matter truly been settled? Was this the resolution they had been hoping for? Both Kylie and Lydia felt the answer was no, but the conversation had already come to an abrupt end. To continue would only make the situation more awkward.

"The coffee's cold," Kylie said, her tone stiff. "Get Her Grace another cup of hot coffee."

Her anger simmered beneath the surface. It was clear to her that Carissa had built an impenetrable wall between them, shutting out all attempts at reconciliation. The queen could do nothing about it. Carissa calmly sipped her coffee, sitting in silence with Kylie. She only answered when spoken to, never starting a conversation herself, but also careful not to offend the queen openly. She wasn't in a hurry to leave either. After all, once she stepped out of Everspring Palace, there would be other invitations from different concubines to contend with.

Rather than navigating more forced conversations, staying here in silence seemed the wiser choice. Inwardly, Carissa reflected on how drastically things had changed this year. Not only was her usual companion absent, but now, she was forced to sit here with the resentful queen, both of them spending the evening together in cold silence.

As for the notion of reconciliation, Carissa saw it as nothing more than a social nicety. It wasn't needed because it wasn't a misunderstanding to begin with.

Was Salvador truly trying to support her? If he wanted them to resolve their differences, he would have suggested they clear up the misunderstanding, not simply tell her to vent her anger as she pleased. Carissa couldn't help but wonder what Salvador had said to Kylie privately. Judging by the way the latter had initially snubbed her and how she now wore such a sour expression, it was clear it hadn't been anything flattering.

Her thoughts kept twisting and turning. At first, she thought it meant one thing, then another. Then, after thinking it over again, she saw yet another meaning.

It was exhausting.

Clearly, Kylie wasn't a person who pondered things so deeply. After a while of sitting in uncomfortable silence, she had also grown weary of the tension. Carissa's demeanor was so different from what she had expected.

As Kylie's anger slowly subsided, calmness returned, and she realized it was time to mend her relationship with Carissa.

Her expression softened considerably as she asked, "Has Ryan not come to the palace with you?" "He's at his uncle's place," Carissa replied.

"Lord Klein certainly dotes on his nephew," Kylie said with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Though, Ryan is a smart and well-behaved boy. Both the queen dowager and the king have praised him countless times."

"Thank you for your kind words, Your Majesty," Carissa responded calmly.

Kylie shifted in her seat and got to the point, adding, "I've heard that after the New Year, Ryan will come to the palace to accompany Connor for his studies. Ryan is a bit older, and feel much more at ease with him looking after Connor."

Carissa nodded. "You're too kind, Your Majesty. Ryan is still just a child and doesn't fully understand things yet. If he makes any mistakes, I hope you won't hold it against him."

Kylie smiled. "It's a matter of fate, really. His Majesty and your second brother were close friends in their youth. Now, Connor and Ryan are to be classmates. I believe they'll continue their fathers' friendship and become friends they can rely on."

Carissa simply nodded in response and didn't speak further, instead just warming her hands with the coffee.

Kylie's intentions were clear to Carissa.

Ryan was the future Duke of

Northwatch, backed by both the Hell

Monarch's household and the Klein

family. Now, he also had the approval of Victoria and Salvador. So, Kylie saw an opportunity to use Ryan as support for Connor

But Carissa felt that pulling Ryan in like this wouldn't be all that useful and wouldn't make a real difference.

In the end, everything depended on whether Connor could prove himself. If he wanted Salvador to firmly decide to make him crown prince within the short time left, he had to earn it himself.

The biggest benefit of Ryan becoming Connor's study companion was that he could help the latter improve. Connections and social ties didn't matter-Ryan was just a child, not a duke yet.

Clearly, Kylie hadn't realized this. She even thought that hard work was useless.

Chapter 1453

The festive atmosphere of the New Year was only truly felt upon returning to Hell Monarch Estate. Everyone there was playing games like ring toss and archery, as well as taking part in a daring contest with Flamepetals, all with prizes and special rewards for the winners.

For the Flamepetal contest, each person had to hold a small pouch of red petals with a short fuse and throw it before it exploded. But it had to go off in the air-if it hit the ground first, they lost. Naturally, it was also acceptable to let it explode in hand. After all, if one's hands were burned, they deserved a prize for their efforts. Otherwise, Travis wouldn't stand for it.

By the time Carissa returned, they had been playing for over an hour. Bits of charred and powdery red petals covered the ground in a thick layer, soft underfoot, leaving a red dusting on her shoes.

She loved this kind of lively atmosphere and quickly joined in. She never let the Flamepetals explode in her hands, always throwing them at just the right moment and sending them bursting with a sharp, satisfying pop in the air.

On the other hand, Travis had reddened hands from too many near-misses, but his grin never faded. His prizes already filled an entire table, piled high.

Jacob played along for a while before sitting to the side, watching Kyle paint. Depicted on the canvas were everyone's youthful, radiant faces, smiling brightly. The red petals scattered across the floor reflected their flushed cheeks as they played, and the festive spirit seemed to spill right out of the painting. Lily had prepared meat pies and honeyed pies, both steaming hot.

The honeyed pies were Violet's favorite. She had once said that eating them for the New Year symbolized reunion, harmony, and completeness. Meanwhile, Carissa said that meat pies were meant to be eaten for wealth, as their shape resembled gold coins, symbolizing prosperity.

Violet insisted Carissa eat the honeyed pies, while Carissa insisted Violet eat the meat pies. They argued, their faces growing red with mock indignation, before both of them broke into hearty laughter.

"You two are like a couple of madwomen," Cynthia remarked.

Travis and Bun, on the other hand, didn't really care for the traditions.

Wasn't it good enough to eat both pies?

"It's a shame Isaac went back to Meadow Ridge," Carissa said with a smile as she leaned against Violet, her face a little flushed. "It would have been even livelier tonight if he were here. He plays every game." Violet didn't reply, simply reaching for a handful of roasted nuts to snack on.

"By the way, why did Isaac go back to Meadow Ridge? Wasn't he supposed to stay here for the New Year with me?" Carissa asked, suddenly remembering that point.

Violet chewed on the roasted nuts, her voice calm as she replied, "He said he's going back to prepare engagement gifts, then go to the Spencer family to propose."

Carissa snatched a few nuts from her and tossed them in her mouth. "Did one of your cousins or aunts catch his eye?"

Violet suddenly sat up straighter, her expression a little strange. "He said he wants to marry me." Everyone turned to look at her with wide eyes.

It was common knowledge that Violet had no intention of marrying anyone she was always the one declaring she would never get married.

Carissa grabbed her friend's ear, tugging on it. "Is that for real?"

Violet didn't resist, her face calm as she continued to eat the roasted nuts. "From the look on his face, he seemed serious."

Cynthia rushed over and knelt in front of Violet. "So, are you going to marry him?"

"It was drunken nonsense," Violet scoffed. "I told him not to go, but he insisted."

"Spill it!" Carissa jumped to her feet. "You two made such a decision under my very nose and I had no idea? How could you do this to me?"

"Spill what?" Violet reached for another handful of roasted nuts, only for Cynthia to grab her hands.

"You have to explain," Cynthia

insisted, her wide eyes narrowing. "What do you mean by drunken nonsense? You two were drinking without us? And he got so drunk he started talking about marrying you? What exactly happened?"

Travis placed his hands on his hips, shaking his head in indignation. "Right? With no news from the Southern Frontier, here you are sneaking around with this little secret, and we had no clue!"

"Violet, we tell you everything we do,

even the silliest stuff," Bun added with mock outrage. "But when it comes to something as big as you and Isaac getting married, you keep it from us? That's disrespectful. We're cutting ties!"

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Violet shot him a sharp look, her eyes glinting "Who wants to know the silly stuff you do? And I'm telling you now Caren't I? I even chose a grand occasion to share this simple little matter with you. Isn't that enough respect?"

Chapter 1454

After much tugging and ear-pulling, Violet finally stood up, raising her voice as she explained, "There's no long story to tell. We were just having a drink at Glimmering Tower. He suddenly said that many people's dream might just be to get married and have children.

"When I agreed with him, he looked at me and asked, 'Why don't we try it?' I said, 'Sure.'"

She sat back down, rubbing her hands over her face. "At the time, I thought he was just joking. But then, before the New Year, he said we should start preparing for our wedding. He's going back to Meadow Ridge to consult with Sage Adrian, then he'll ask Sage Conrad and my family for permission. So... what could I say?"

Carissa crossed her arms. "What do you mean, 'what could you say'? If you don't want to get married, just say no. Clear up the misunderstanding now. If you wait until he's asked for your hand and your dad and mentor agree, but you refuse... Isn't that just asking for trouble?"

Cynthia raised her hand to stop the conversation. "Wait, Vivi. Let me ask you something. Do you want to marry Isaac?"

Violet's eyes clouded with uncertainty. "I don't know."

"Don't know? How can you not know?"

"I really don't know."

Cynthia mimicked Travis' stance, hands on hips, exasperated. "Then, do you even like him? You must have an answer to that."

Violet thought for a moment before replying, "I don't know that either."

The others stared at her in disbelief.

Narrowing her eyes, Cynthia asked the final question, "So, will you marry him?"

Violet shook her head. "I don't know."

Cynthia stared at her, dumbfounded, before muttering, "Your indecisiveness makes me want to hit you." Carissa wasn't about to let anyone hit Violet-if anyone were going to do that, it would be her. Dragging the girl to the study, she questioned her using techniques often employed by the Capital Guard and Supreme Court. By the end of it, Violet was clinging to Carissa, sobbing loudly.

There was more to this than met the eye.

It all started after Nicholas' rebellion. Isaac and Violet had helped clean up the battlefield, which was strewn with not only the bodies of the Mystic Army soldiers, but also the rebels' remains. At the time, the court had ordered that all the rebels' bodies be piled together and burned.

Having been on a battlefield before, Violet had experience with disposing of corpses. The first time they did it had left all of them grieving for a long while.

But Isaac had never been on battlefield. Although he had witnessed the cruelty of the human heart, he had never faced such widespread death. So, he showed great respect for the bodies, whether they were those of the rebels or the Mystic Army soldiers. He made sure to clear them all.

Then, while searching through the rebels' clothes, he found some letters-some from family members, while others were suicide notes they had written themselves. He read them, then showed them to Violet. Afterward, they went together to help with the interrogation of the prisoners. That was when they realized the rebels hadn't risked their lives for a title or to gain power. Most of them had joined not for glory, but for the promise of 50 silver coins.

One man had planned to use the money to buy his sister back, and another to marry his childhood sweetheart. A third wanted to pay for his parents' medical care, and yet one more dreamed of sending his son to school, with hopes he might one day become a scholar and teach others. Of course, some really had hoped to rise in rank, but most had only simple dreams.

Isaac and Violet were filled with pain, which was why they drank together at Glimmering Tower, and why Isaac had asked that question. She had simply answered, agreeing with the heaviness in her heart.

"I honestly forgot about it after that,"

Violet said, her voice soft. "But when he came to me, seriously talking about making preparations, I wanted to refuse. It was right there on my lips, but I couldn't bring myself to say it. I knew he was serious. I couldn't just disregard his feelings because I knew how precious they were."

Carissa wiped away her tears, but her heart ached too, so she cried with her friend.

Though Violet had lived her life freely and recklessly, she also understood the suffering of others. Yet, she always believed there was more beauty in the world than ugliness, more happiness than sorrow.

When she realized the things that came to her so easily were things others couldn't obtain even at the cost of their lives, she became extremely cautious, even fearful. She didn't dare to act brazenly like she once used to.

"If you don't want to marry him, I'll write to Isaac and tell him not to approach the Spencer family," Carissa said, her voice thick with emotion. "Don't torment yourself, Vivi. You haven't done anything wrong. You're not responsible for other people's pain or happiness. The only thing you need to think about now is whether or not you want to marry Isaac."

When Violet finally lifted her confused eyes, Carissa softly added, "It's not about whether you're willing.

It's about whether you truly want to."

Chapter 1455

Violet did not give an immediate answer.

After spending the entire night reflecting, she informed Carissa that if the marriage proposal were indeed made and her family consented, she would be willing to marry Isaac. However, as for whether she truly wanted to, she could not say, for her feelings were uncertain.

What she felt now was different from how she had once felt.

Carissa reassured her, and later that day, she set off for Meadow Ridge with Lulu. Her reasons were threefold. First, she wished to speak directly with Isaac. Second, she had not spent the New Year there for some time, and missed her mentor and other guild members.

Third, Winona had also returned to Meadow Ridge, and Carissa wanted to inquire whether any news from the Southern Frontier had reached her. She feared that Winona might have learned something troubling but didn't dare share it with her. If she asked her directly in person, she would be able to tell if her senior guild member was lying.

Upon Carissa's return to Meadow Ridge, both Adrian and Everett were startled to see Lulu with her. Immediately fearing that something had gone awry, they insisted on speaking with her in private.

The sight of their concerned expressions tugged at Carissa's heart, resulting in her fighting back tears. In the capital, she had to always maintain her composure. But in front of her mentor and the members of the Pathfinders Guild, she would always feel like a child.

Wiping her eyes, she teasingly said, "I just thought it had been too long since I was last here, so I wanted to visit the two of you. I also wanted to catch up with my senior guild members."

Everett sharply retorted, "We've only just returned from the capital and you're talking about catching up? You've come back with Lulu, but why didn't you bring those other troublemakers? What if something had happened on the road? Who would have protected you? Just because you think you're capable now, does that mean you're invincible? You're far from it."

"You're not thinking about how many people you've offended, or whether the remaining rebels have been dealt with. You're not even considering that your husband is at war, and how many people want to use you to threaten him..."

Adrian raised his hand in an attempt to calm him. "Alright, that's enough. Stop with the scolding."

While scolding was necessary, the focus of the topic could still be shifted.

Everett shot back at Adrian, ranting, "You still have the gall to protect her? Isn't this exactly what you always nag about? You've been fretting over her being targeted enemies, getting caught by

this and that. Now that she's dared

Sandorian spies, and worrying el. fet

tédeave the city with just a maid, you're reluctant to let her hear a few harsh words? If you're so capable, stop nagging me about it every day!"

Adrian stood at attention, taking the scolding with his usual patience. He had long grown accustomed to it, but he certainly didn't want Carissa to be scolded into becoming a meek and docile creature. How could she lead the troops if that happened?

Still, watching his foolish apprentice grinning through the tirade amused him.

After enduring her martial uncle's scolding, Carissa released a small breath of relief. Everett had only expressed concern for Rafael being away at war, with no trace of heaviness in his tone. That clearly indicated Winona hadn't shared any bad news with them.

If Winona knew anything about Rafael, she would have definitely told Everett, not daring to hide anything about his apprentice from him.

However, Carissa only felt half relieved. Though there was no bad news, the fact that there was no news at all still caused an uncertainty that weighed heavily on her mind.

Once the scolding was over, she wasted no time in seeking out Winona, who sighed as soon as she saw her. Gently pulling Carissa into the room, she closed the door behind them.

"I thought you might come looking for me. Just two hours ago, I received word from Skywing Spire. The message came directly from one of the scouts, Jordan. I've not yet dared to tell Sage Everett." Carissa's heart sank at Winona's words. She felt a cold shiver run down her spine. "What's happened? Please tell me," she pleaded, her voice trembling with urgency.

Winona placed a steadying hand on her shoulder, her expression serious. "Listen carefully. Jordan said that the Southern Frontier Army pursued

the Sanderian forces to Atamore

Mountain. There, they fell into ambush set by Victor, and the entire force was scattered. Six separate teams were formed, but Jordan's

scouts have confirmed that none of

them include Rafael."

Carissa's breath caught in her chest, her heart pounding. "What do you mean? Is he missing? Or worse..."

"Don't panic," Winona said firmly.

"Jordan says the teams broke apart. Some smaller groups have yet to reassemble. He was able to

only that much before sending

message back. The rest of the scouts are still gathering

no

information, and Jordan himself is on his way to join them."

Chapter 1456

Carissa held back her tears, trying to steady her breath. "So, have they been fighting at Atamore Mountain this whole time? The food supplies must have run out by now. What are they eating?"

"Don't worry about that," Winona replied. "The grassland tribes said they wouldn't offer help, but they sent all their dried meat to them. The army also has the rations and hard biscuits they brought. It should last a while.

"Plus, with the endless mountain range around Atamore Mountain and Ice Lake, they can hunt for food as long as they have weapons. They'll be half-starved, but they'll get by."

She paused for a moment, her expression darkening. "But I doubt it will last much longer."

"Sandoria can't hold out much longer either," Carissa said as she lifted her head, her voice steady despite her rising panic.

The two armies' positions were nearly the same, though the Southern Frontier Army was in slightly better shape. If Victor didn't get reinforcements or rations, he would have to face the Southern Frontier Army head-on.

There had to be a conclusion to the standoff-victory or defeat.

But with the forces scattered, reuniting would be difficult. It would make it nearly impossible to directly engage Sandoria's main forces.

How had they gotten caught in an ambush? Rafael wasn't the kind of person to let his guard down like that.

Suddenly, a thought sparked in Carissa's mind, her eyes lighting up with realization.

She quickly asked, "After the Southern Frontier Army was ambushed, were there many casualties?" Winona shook her head. "Not many. Just that their forces were scattered."

Carissa thought back to the terrain around Atamore Mountain, considering the possible struggles both armies were facing. Sandoria was already stretched thin. After being chased and forced to flee, they were now cornered and had set up an ambush out of desperation.

Could it be that Rafael had intentionally allowed himself to be caught in the ambush? Perhaps he was hoping to trick Sandoria into becoming overconfident and careless, then launch a surprise counterattack. She shared her theory with Winona, who listened carefully.

After a long pause, Winona responded, "It's good to be optimistic, and it's good to have faith in Rafael. But Atamore Mountain's environment is harsh, and people's tempers can change. He may have made a mistake under the pressure of the situation. Even if he intended for the ambush to work to his advantage, the harsh conditions might have clouded his judgment."

Winona had meant to offer comfort by going along with her junior guild member's thoughts, as she would have done in the past. But Carissa had grown, and was now ready to hear other perspectives. Of course, it was also possible that what Carissa said was correct.

Jordan himself had spent a few days gathering intelligence at Atamore Mountain and admitted that the conditions were nearly unbearable, making him anxious and impatient. He said he couldn't imagine being stuck in that place for two months, fighting a guerrilla war, would do to the soldiers' mindset. The psychological toll would be immense.

So, it wouldn't be out of the question for Rafael to have ended up falling for an ambush because he had been too anxious and impatient.

Carissa replied, "You haven't been to a battlefield, so you don't know the kind of losses an ambush like that can cause. And they were part of the main force. Even if they'd been ambushed, they should've been able to fight their way out.

"But the fact that they were so thoroughly scattered... This could very well have been a strategy to take advantage of Marshal Crow's overconfidence. It would make him think victory was within reach, only to lure him into a trap."

Winona considered her words carefully, then smiled. "You make a good point. Let's hope Rafael returns victorious soon."

"He will," Carissa declared with a conviction that surprised even her.

She wasn't entirely sure, but she believed it.

After speaking with Winona, she

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went to find Isaac. The two of them walked through the fields of orchid blooms, the wind biting at their faces. The petals scattered on ground, remnants of blossoms that had once stood proud against the cold winds, now crumbled into the earth, no longer resisting.

"Look at them, how they bloom like this," Carissa said, her gaze lingering on the sight.

There were orchids at Hell Monarch Estate and even in the palace. However, none of them could compare to the wild splendor of

fields stretching endlessly around them.

Isaac smiled, his face as clear and bright as the sky. He might've known what Carissa had come for, but there wasn't a trace of gloom on his face.

"No orchid anywhere compares to the ones at Meadow Ridge," he said.

Carissa turned to him. "So, even after all the women you've been with, you still long for only Vivi?"

Isaac laughed softly. "What women? Where did that come from? If I really had been with so many women, Sage Everett would've had me killed long ago."

"So, all this time, it's always been her?" Carissa asked.

"Yes," Isaac said, reaching out to touch a delicate pink petal. "From the very beginning to the end."
"Why didn't you realize it before?" Carissa asked, genuinely curious.

How had he not noticed?

Isaac thought for a moment, then decided it wouldn't hurt to be honest today.

"Previously, I thought that having feelings for someone was one thing, and getting married was another. They were separate matters," he explained.

Carissa understood that Isaac was also afraid of marriage, but he had taken a step forward before Violet did.

"So, you never intended to let Vivi know your feelings?"

"Yeah."

He nodded, then reached out as if to pick an orchid. In the end, he couldn't bring himself to, so he let his hand fall.

Chapter 1457

Isaac sighed. "The proposal was a bit impulsive. Looking back on it, it may have even been a bit opportunistic. She was in a low mood at the time, so though she agreed, I'm not sure she truly wants to marry me. Sage Everett scolded me when I got back to Meadow Ridge, and I've had time to calm down since then."

Carissa stared at him, surprised. "You've already told Sage Everett?"

"Yes, the very day I got back. I was caught up in the heat of the moment."

"Why did Sage Everett scold you? Was it because he disagreed?" asked Carissa, curious.

Isaac shrugged. "It wasn't even about agreeing or disagreeing yet. He just scolded me first. The usual stuff, really."

"How usual?"

Isaac avoided her gaze. "He called me ugly and told me to take a good look at myself in the mirror." Carissa couldn't help but laugh. "Sage Everett was kind to you, it seems."

She then relayed what Violet had said. Listening intently as the biting wind swirled around him, a smile tugged at Isaac's lips and his eyes gleamed with warmth.

"It's alright. I can wait. I'll wait slowly. A lifetime is a long time, after all," he said softly.

Carissa stared at him for a long moment, truly surprised. The carefree, charismatic Isaac-someone who never let anything tie him down-had fallen so completely for Violet, of all people.

He actually said he would wait a lifetime!

They spent four comfortable days in Meadow Ridge, visiting all the guilds, before Everett began to chase them out. Naturally, Carissa and Lulu weren't allowed to return alone. Everett had Winona send someone from Skywing Spire to quietly escort them. Then, he gave Isaac a long look and chased him out as well. Back in the capital, it was still the holidays, and the social scene was already busy. With people coming and going, paying visits, Carissa found herself more at ease with the social rounds than before.

She didn't inquire about Isaac and Violet's situation. It was clear neither was in a rush to marry, so there was no need for her to interfere. They would figure it out when they were ready.

On the seventh day of the new year, Zoey arrived with Luna. She also brought Courtney back to Hell Monarch Estate, as she would be studying martial arts under Cynthia with Roxana. Zoey had also started planning to do some business. This visit was to personally thank Carissa for introducing her to Janelle at the end of last year.

In truth, the Earl of Southstead's family and the former Earl of Silverstone's family were already familiar with each other, though their interactions had been limited. However, with Carissa's

introduction, Zoey and Janelle hit it off immediately. Smart and capable people always gravitated toward each other.

The former Earl of Silverstone's family had once been involved in business, but Zoey had only managed the accounts, leaving the operations and shops to be run by the family servants. Now, without the noble title to protect or any reputation to maintain, Zoey wasn't afraid to step into the public eye and take matters into her own hands. She was ready to roll up her sleeves and dive in.

When Zoey spoke of the future, her eyes sparkled with excitement. She shared with Carissa that Viola was also able to lend a hand now. Though occasionally still a bit muddled in her thinking, Viola listened when her sister-in-law gave directions.

Zoey sighed. "People can't change overnight. I'm happy with how far she's come. Who hasn't made mistakes? The only issue now is that others still gossip about her past, so I don't let her go out too much to avoid the rumors. It's tough on her, and it could make her lose her clarity again."

Carissa was quiet for a moment before she replied, "A woman's mistakes aren't easily forgiven, unlike a man's. They would simply say he's turned over a new leaf and it's all forgotten. Luckily, though, she has you."

Carissa's thoughts drifted to Heather, who was still imprisoned. She wondered whether Leona still held a grudge against her mother. But even if Leona didn't, Heather still wouldn't be released.

On the eighth day of the new year, work resumed in earnest. Still, no news came from the Southern Frontier. The uncertainty surrounding the war and Salvador's mysterious illness hung over the officials like two massive, crushing weights.

Those of lower rank had already started aligning themselves with the six department heads, particularly Malcolm, the Civil Minister and Patrick, the Minister of Justice.

Naturally, there were also those looking to cultivate connections with the Hell Monarch's household. Some even made their way directly to the Capital Guard headquarters to seek out Carissa. However, she refused to meet with any of them.

On the second morning court session after the new year, Salvador once again coughed up blood, prompting an urgent return to the palace.

The court was thrown into turmoil. Two bouts of coughing up blood-what could the king's illness be?

Chapter 1458

The very next day after Salvador coughed up blood, an urgent dispatch arrived from the Southern Frontier -the Hell Monarch had been ambushed and was missing.

The dispatch was sent urgently by a messenger from the military supply overseer at the Southern Frontier. They had finally received the grain supplies, but sent news that the Southern Frontier Army had been ambushed and the Hell Monarch was missing.

Jeremiah quickly convened a meeting with the six department heads, senior cabinet officials, military leaders, and Carissa to discuss the situation. Once the map was spread out, they saw that

the Southern Frontier Army had been ambushed at Mount Whitemist, a part of the vast Atamore Mountain range. Having scattered after the ambush, the main force had now managed to regroup into six smaller units. However, with morale shattered, they could no longer hope to face Victor's massive army head-on. Despite his frailty, Salvador arrived at the meeting. His face was pale and anxiety was evident in his eyes. His heart felt like it was lodged in his throat as he surveyed the room. He instinctively glanced at Carissa, whose brow furrowed in concern as she studied the map. Though there was clear worry in her expression, she seemed calm and unshaken by the news.

Once the department heads had bowed and exchanged formal pleasantries, Salvador followed Jeremiah's finger to the spot indicated on the map.

The Atamore Mountain range stretched out like a great snake coiled across the land, splitting the terrain into two. The map showed only a thin line marking the mountains, but those lines represented wide, expansive regions.

The ambush took place at Mount Whitemist, which was known for its treacherous terrain. The elevation difference between the low and high points was about 165 meters, with a valley in between. It was indeed an ideal location for an ambush. However, precisely because it was such an easy place to set up an ambush, the Southern Frontier Army shouldn't have fallen for it.

Salvador's gaze shifted back to Carissa, noting that her expression was even more composed than before. It seemed she had already discerned something about the situation.

Salvador had always placed the highest trust in Rafael's military strategy. He now wanted to hear what the civilian and military officials had to say.

In the midst of murmurs and concerns from the other officials, Tyler, Davis, and Thomas were firm in their belief that the terrain was too obvious for the Hell Monarch to have fallen into a trap. Unless Rafael entered it on purpose, pretending to be caught off guard, only to scatter his troops and switch to guerrilla warfare.

"This terrain calls for mountain warfare. The landscape is rugged and dense with forests, making large-scale battles impossible. Too many would die needlessly. The best option is guerrilla tactics—divide the forces, launch surprise attacks, and retreat quickly. That will sap the enemy's morale and make it easier to take Marshal Crow's head," said Thomas, his voice steady.

Tyler nodded in agreement. "General Farrell's words are wise. I also think the same."

Malcolm lifted his gaze, a suspicious frown crossing his face. "If the Hell Monarch was feigning defeat, he wouldn't truly be missing. In that case, the soldiers delivering the grain should know his whereabouts. Why, then, has this urgent report come back with such alarming news?"

His words brought the sense of calm that had been creeping into the room to a halt, reigniting the concern that had been momentarily quelled.

However, Thomas remained

composed and explained, "The grain was sent from Simonton City, and Sandoria has held the Southern Frontier for quite some time. There could be hidden spies or traitors within the ranks. If a strategy was planned, it wouldn't be widely disclosed. They would only share what was necessary with those not involved in the fight."

Thomas had handled intelligence work himself, so his words carried weight. It wasn't far-fetched to suspect the presence of spies, especially given Sandoria's long occupation of the Southern Frontier.

Patrick spoke up, adding, "Even if General Farrett's analysis is correct, it's only theoretical. There's no guarantee it reflects the current situation of the Southern Frontier Army. What if the Hell Monarch is truly missing? What if their forces have been defeated and scattered? This would undoubtedly be a blow to our kingdom. Should we send reinforcements?"

He turned his gaze toward Carissa. "Commander Sinclair, you've fought at the Southern Frontier and faced Marshal Crow yourself. Also, you know Prince Rafael better than anyone. What do you think?"

Patrick was actually doing Carissa a favor. As the Hell Monarch's

princess consort, she had the most reason to worry about the war, especially with Rafael's disappearance. By suggesting reinforcements, no matter what Salvador ultimately decided, Patrick had at least spoken up on her behalf.

The room fell silent as all eyes turned to Carissa.

She looked up from the map and asked, "Did the urgent report mention the casualty numbers after the ambush?"

Davis shook his head. "No, it didn't."

"If the casualties had been severe, they would have reported it," Carissa said, her tone thoughtful. After a moment of quiet contemplation, she looked directly at Salvador. "Your Majesty, I trust General Thomas' analysis. I believe Marshal Sanford has feigned defeat. Even if he truly is missing as Mr. Lloyd mentioned, the army would not be leaderless."

"General Timothy and General Louis are seasoned warriors. They've fought countless battles, and I'm sure they've prepared multiple strategies. Even in adversity, they can still turn the tide in our favor." Carissa's confidence in Thomas' analysis stemmed from her own knowledge of the casualty situation. She believed that the lack of mention in the report meant that the casualties were not substantial. The true concern lay in the Hell Monarch's disappearance.

Chapter 1459

Patrick was taken aback by Carissa's calm response. For a brief moment, he stood there in stunned silence, then couldn't help but admire her. Even with her husband missing on the front lines, she managed to stay composed and offer such a level-headed analysis.

Sending reinforcements now could mean sending Chester's forces, those from Victory Pass, or even the Capital Army under Thomas' command. However, all of these options were too far away to make a difference in time.

The real issue wasn't the battle at the Southern Frontier, but the situation at the Atamore Mountain Range. The reinforcements would only serve to hold the Southern Frontier, not to change the course of the battle already unfolding.

Salvador listened to everyone's opinions, his face unreadable. He didn't make a decision, merely saying that they would have to wait.

It was clear-no reinforcements would be sent.

Later that evening, Thomas and Rosalind paid a visit to Carissa. Thomas could sense that Carissa might still be worried, so he brought Rosalind along to discuss the situation further, hoping to put her mind at

ease.

"This battle is bound to be tough, but our army's aim is to eliminate several enemy leaders and strike a blow to their morale. Marshal Sanford's strategy is likely to draw the enemy into a trap. If they can use the terrain of Mount Whitemist to their advantage, it could be the deciding factor," he said.

"Do you know the Atamore Mountain Range well, General Farrell?" Carissa asked.

"Not in great detail, but we've done reconnaissance in the area before. The terrain is complicated, and the Southern Frontier Army has been stationed there long enough. They've probably already scouted the favorable positions. If they make good use of the mountain range's geography, they'll have a strong chance of success."

Carissa nodded thoughtfully. "I believe in him."

Thomas handed her a map of the terrain, one he had drawn himself. "This map isn't perfect, but it gives a fairly clear idea of where the Southern Frontier Army is positioned."

Carissa unfurled the map, her eyes scanning it before she looked up at Thomas. "So, you want me to send this to Marshal Sanford?"

Thomas shook his head with a knowing look. "Marshal Sanford has probably figured it out himself by now."

Carissa understood immediately. Thomas assumed she wanted to head to the front lines herself, so he had brought her the map to aid her. It seemed the married couple's quiet forays into battle had become somewhat of an open secret.

She smiled and shook her head. "I have faith in him. If he can't win this battle, my being there won't make a difference. It would only hinder him."

Thomas exhaled in relief and smiled in return. "Yes, you're right. It's better this way. It's best if you stay here."

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Rafael stood atop Mount Chimera with 3,000 elite soldiers, watching the cold embrace the land. The days were warm, but the nights were far colder, colder even than Mount Whitemist.

Yet, there was an advantage to this bleak place-Mount Chimera had only one entrance. It was a high, narrow pass surrounded by towering cliffs, with a deep valley beneath it, directly facing Mount Whitemist. It was a perfect stronghold, easy to defend but difficult to attack.

Victor would never manage to scale these heights, but once his forces entered Mount Whitemist, a natural trap would be set.

Rafael was waiting for the right moment, a moment he would create himself.

Louis currently had 30,000 men stationed at Mount Whitemist, with the latest shipment of grain stored there as well. Victor desperately wanted that grain. His soldiers were so hungry they had resorted to slaughtering their own warhorses for meat.

The moment Victor moved to seize Mount Whitemist, the Southern Frontier Army would retreat. Once the latter army was out of the way, boulders would rain down from Mount Chimera, followed by a full-scale assault.

Rafael had initially considered a surprise attack, but that would only wear down both sides. He needed a decisive victory, one that could turn the tide.

So, he took a team of elite soldiers to find a path up Mount Chimera, where he could control the entire situation. The timing was perfect-the grain supplies were delivered just then, which would surely make Victor drool with greed.

For Rafael, it was truly the perfect combination of timing, location, and people. Now, he just had to wait for Victor's greed to take over, and he could spring the trap.

Victor would definitely fall for it. He had no choice left. His men were starving, their hunger so intense that scouts reported they had consumed nearly every bit of tree bark in sight.

Rafael's gaze drifted toward the distant capital, a twinge of longing filling his chest. For soldiers, the hardest struggles were hunger and cold. But for him, the hardest battle was missing his wife. Without him by her side, she was probably also having a difficult time during the New Year celebrations.

Chapter 1460

Mount Chimera had no name before Rafael claimed it. He chose the name because the mountain's shape resembled a chimera's crouching form. Also, once he had taken control, it became a place of no return for any enemy foolish enough to try their luck.

Not only was it hard to approach, even delivering supplies was a nearly impossible task. So, the Southern Frontier Army had to rely on the dried meat they carried with them. And when they were thirsty, they boiled snow to melt it into drinking water.

The advantage of the location was clear: three sides of the mountain were surrounded by sheer cliffs, making it impossible for anyone to scout from above.

Their position had a natural barrier, so even if they lit a fire, it wouldn't be seen. Still, they couldn't take the risk and build large fires to keep warm. So, the hardest part wasn't hunger but the bone-chilling cold at night. Luckily, the sun shone during the day, so they didn't have to endure the cold for a full 24 hours a day.

A deputy general, Willard Carter, walked over to Rafael and said, "Marshal Sanford, it's nightfall. You should drink some water and rest."

Willard had brought over a cup of water. Freshly melted from snow, its warmth was enough to stir the soul.

Rafael leaned back against a large tree, pulling off his gloves. He accepted the cup but didn't drink right away, choosing instead to warm his fingers before taking the first sip.

"There should be enough stones," he muttered, his voice rough from the chill. "But just to be safe, we'll dig and move more tomorrow."

"Yes, sir!" Willard answered promptly.

Rafael sat down, taking slow sips from the cup. His face was covered in dirt, his beard tangled and matted. When he took off his helmet, his hair hung in messy strands. He took a few more sips, then shakily pulled out a piece of dried meat, gnawing on it slowly.

With the rations running low, they could only afford to eat a couple of pieces a day. When hunger struck, they either ate snow or waited until they could boil it down into water for some warmth.

"Marshal Sanford, when do you think Marshal Crow will make his move?" Willard asked.

Rafael swallowed the dried meat with difficulty, feeling some pain in his stomach.

He quickly drank some water to dull the pain before replying, "It'll be within two days. He can't wait much longer."

"Maybe not so quickly," Willard countered. "He'll probably send scouts first. After all, our forces are scattered. Won't he suspect a trap?"

Willard thought their plan wasn't too complicated. If Victor was more cautious, he might not fall for it. Rafael grinned. "Like I said, he can't afford to wait. He has no other choice."

Sure enough, two days later, Victor led his main army toward the foggy mountain pass, launching his attack.

Louis' troops were no match for the advancing Sandorian army. When they charged in, Louis and his troops fled in a hurry, not even attempting to put up a fight.

Although Victor was desperate,

seeing the situation made him think they might be walking into a trap. However he noticed the Southern Frontier Army hadn't taken the grain with them, having left it all in a flat area in the mountain pass. He even checked himself; it was definitely food.

He considered that the Southern Frontier Army had already been ambushed once, and their main force was scattered. So, it made sense that the remaining soldiers would be too fearful to confront them.

On the other hand, the Sandorian

soldiers were ecstatic. The sight of the grain sent them into a frenzy, and they immediately began dancing with joy. Some even

grabbed handfuls of grain and net

shoved it into their mouths, savoring the sweet crunch and the rich, earthy flavor that made it feel like the finest delicacy in the world.

The cheers of the soldiers filled the air as they reveled in their good fortune. The pile of grain, though not plentiful, was enough to feed them once

for a few days. If they ate only!

a day, they could stretch it for nearly a week. By then, they could take advantage of the Southern Frontier Army being stuck there and storm Simonton City.

Their excitement drowned out any sense of looming danger, erasing the cool-headedness that had once been Victor's trademark. As they set up large cooking pots, ready to prepare their meal, the rumble of rolling stones reached their ears.

Many of the soldiers looked up, but the sight that met their eyes was one of smoke and dust as something heavy came crashing down from above.

"Run! It's an ambush!" someone screamed, but the shout was swallowed by the deafening roar of falling rocks.

It was a deadly storm of boulders. Those who failed to flee in time were crushed, their bodies scattered and shattered by the relentless onslaught.

A jolt of panic shot through Victor. He scrambled to mount his horse, drawing his sword with a roar. "Take the grain! Retreat, now!"

The soldiers of Starhaven were so cunning. They had used the grain as bait!

Victor was the first to retreat, but the ground beneath him trembled as the sound of pounding hooves and marching feet grew louder, coming from all directions. His eyes widened and his mind went blank. The

hand holding his sword slowly lowered as a realization hit him.

This black mountain, covered fully in snow, would mark his end.