

War Song 1461

Chapter 1461

The battle raged on with a ferocity that turned the sky to dusk and the earth to mud. Blood, corpses, severed limbs, and agonized cries filled the air, suffocating Mount Whitemist in their wake.

Death came with the daylight, and the mountain was bathed in a thin, warm golden hue.

Rafael rode in, shouting for them to surrender and hand over Victor.

Victor shouted equally loudly, retorting that the people of Starhaven were treacherous. Once they laid down their weapons, only death awaited them. But if they fought on, there was still a slim chance of survival.

Yet, how could they hope to fight? The Starhaven forces were armed to the teeth, with six-barreled matchlocks capable of picking them off from afar.

It was a battle they could never win.

One by one, Victor's men fell, lifeless in the blood-soaked earth.

Victor raised his sword, his eyes filled with a mix of emotions: failure, death, despair.

Once, he had stood tall on the Southern Frontier-a hero among his people, his family's name soaring to new heights thanks to his victories. He was the pride of Sandoria, cherished and celebrated.

Now, everything he had gained from that land was slipping away, lost to the very land he had conquered.

He looked at Rafael, but the hand holding his blade had no strength left. Trembling, he could only point it weakly at his old enemy-there was too much unwillingness to accept reality in his heart.

In the end, Victor turned the blade on himself. Even with swords from all sides pressed against his neck, his blade reached his chin, cutting a thin line of blood.

Victor raised his head, locking eyes with Rafael, a cold fire burning in his gaze. "You cannot kill me. I will die by my own hand."

With those final words, he tilted his head back, the blade cutting deep into his throat. Blood poured out in a torrent.

Louis was the first to withdraw his blade. "You may choose to die by your own hand. It matters not to us. We only seek your head."

Above them, black crows and eagles circled, their wings blotting out the sky. Their cries were a funeral bell, foretelling the end.

As Victor's life slipped away, the last thing he saw was the darkness before him, filled with the sound of death.

Victor's head was severed with a brutal swiftness. The flow of blood had slowed, and the vast gaping hole in his neck no longer caused anger among the Sandoria soldiers. Instead, it was fear that gripped them. With no leader, struggling any further meant death-perhaps an even worse one.

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They could barely fight anymore. They were too hungry and exhausted, and even breathing was difficult. Slowly, they began to drop their weapons, one after another. Surrender was their only option now. Perhaps as prisoners, they could gain a sliver of mercy.

An urgent dispatch was sent to the Starhaven capital, bearing word of their victory.

Before this, there had been no other report except for the previous urgent dispatch. No news had come to confirm whether the Hell Monarch had been found.

Many had already braced themselves for the inevitable defeat.

But then, a messenger rode in from the outskirts, bearing the report of victory. His shout of "A great victory for the Southern Frontier!" echoed through the gates, and the streets erupted in joy.

People followed the messenger as they called out, their cheers carrying all the way to Royal Street. The dispatch was swiftly delivered into Jeremiah's hands, who wasted no time in presenting it before Salvador.

Salvador's hands trembled as he

tore open the long report, which recounted every detail of the battle. He devoured it eagerly, almost greedily. When he finished, his heart burned with pride, a fiery heat spreading through his chest. He could not calm himself.

This victory had been hard-won, but they had done it.

He had done it.

Jeremiah also read the report, and with each line, his smile grew wider. He couldn't hide his delight.

"The Southern Frontier Army is invincible and unstoppable," he remarked.

His words were aimed at the Southern Frontier Army, not the Hell Monarch.

During the battle, Salvador had placed his faith in Rafael's success. But once the battle was won, his thoughts would shift elsewhere. Much military merit on a

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person was best left unspoken—it wasn't something to bring up too often in Salvador's presence.

Salvador, feeling the weight on his shoulders lift, let out a long breath.

"Rafael says we've captured over a hundred of Sandoria's generals, and thousands of soldiers. The

Sandoria king has now sent envoys to negotiate, hoping we'll release the prisoners."

Jeremiah nodded. "Would you like the Hell Monarch to continue the negotiations, or should other emissaries be sent?"

A rare smile crossed Salvador's pale face, though it was tinged with ambiguity.

"Draft the edict-Generals Timothy and Louis will serve as envoys for the peace negotiations. The Hell Monarch shall return at once to receive his rewards. As for the Southern Frontier generals and soldiers, they will be rewarded according to their merits

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Jeremiah's words lingered on his lips, but in the end, he held them back. However, that brief moment of hesitation didn't escape Salvador's notice.

Salvador smiled and said, "The Hell Monarch has already accomplished the great feat of reclaiming the Southern Frontier and driving the Sandorian forces out of Starhaven. It's time for those beneath him to rise as well. I believe Rafael would be willing to give them that opportunity. As a leader, one must know how to recognize and use talent."

"Your words are wise, Your Majesty," Jeremiah responded.

After considering it carefully, Jeremiah knew the Hell Monarch's return to the capital would be for the best. While he could secure more benefits and reparations from Sandoria through negotiations, Salvador's health was always in question.

The capital needed the Hell Monarch to maintain order and stability.

Once Jeremiah had left, Salvador fell into silence for a long moment before turning to Derek. "I also wish for their reunion soon. It's been far too long since they've been apart."

Derek lowered his eyes. "You're compassionate, Your Majesty."

Salvador's silence continued, the joy of victory slowly fading as unease settled within him. He knew he always had to say things he didn't mean and do things that went against his heart, but he had no choice.

At Hell Monarch Estate, Travis had always regretted not setting off a long string of Flamepetals during the New Year.

But now, there was no need for regret. Jacob had gone out and bought a whole pile, telling him he could set them off however and wherever he liked-front door, side door, back door, or even in his room if he wished.

Jacob had only one condition-whenever they were set off, he had to hear the cracking sounds.

Carissa had called for the seamstress to come to her, requesting several new outfits in the latest styles. After a long, harsh winter, her skin had become much drier. She went to the city with Violet and Cynthia to visit the perfumer's shops, buying rose-scented creams to nourish her skin. Her hair also needed proper care, and jasmine oil was a must.

Violet helped her pick out lip balms, rouge, and eyebrow pencils. In a teasing tone, she said, "Even though you're naturally beautiful, beauty doesn't last long without the riches to maintain it."

Carissa took everything Violet recommended, then made sure to buy the same items for Violet and Cynthia as well.

Violet looked at the gift with some surprise. "I used to be the one giving, but now someone is giving to me -it feels like the world has turned upside down."

Carissa laughed softly. "You should learn to accept it. I am wealthy too."

Violet shrugged. "I'll accept it. You can keep giving, then."

Cynthia was absolutely thrilled. As soon as they got home, she went wild with the powders and paints,

turning her face into something resembling an artist's palette. In Bun's eyes, however, she was always the most beautiful.

Carissa also selected a gift and had it sent to Victory Pass for Dominic's birthday.

On the eighth of February, Rafael returned to the capital.

When he left, it was in secrecy. When he returned, it was with great fanfare.

Alongside him were Louis and some of the military officers from the former Sinclair Army.

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As they entered the city, the streets were lined with citizens cheering their arrival, many officials standing in formation to greet them. Rafael searched the crowd, hoping a glimpse of his wife's face. However, there were so many people, and the cheers were deafening.

He couldn't find her.

However, he did spot the tall figures of Bun and Travis-they had to jump to be seen.

Rafael and his party rode straight to the palace. There, he still had to offer his apologies.

Surrounded by officials, they entered the palace. After greeting Salvador, the sound of celebration and praise washed over them like a tidal wave.

Salvador looked at Rafael, his

younger brother, thin and weathered

from the journey. However, the festive atmosphere made all other thoughts fade away. There was only joy and a deep sense of concern for his brother.

He issued an edict announcing a celebration feast for the following evening, to which all officials of the third rank and above, as well as the wives of the court officials, were invited.

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After dismissing all the court officials, he stayed behind in the royal study with just his brother.

Rafael had already noticed how much thinner and more exhausted Salvador looked. As he knelt to offer

his apology, he couldn't help but ask, "Are you well, Your Majesty?"

For some reason, Salvador felt a sudden heat rise behind his eyes.

Of all people, this man was the one he should guard against the most. And yet, time and again, he found himself revealing emotions he kept buried from everyone else.

Perhaps this was the bond of blood between brothers.

"Get up," Salvador sighed softly. "Sit down. This battle was hard fought. You've worked so hard."

He didn't answer the question about his health-it was impossible to hide, anyway.

"Worrying for the ruler is the duty of the subject. The hardship was well worth it," Rafael replied.

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Salvador raised his eyes to look at Rafael. The handsome young man before him now seemed weathered by the harsh winds of the Southern Frontier.

A weight pressed against Salvador's chest; a tight, uncomfortable feeling.

He knew how difficult the battle had been-cold, hunger, and the emotional toll that wore down even the strongest spirit. Yet, they had endured and fought with great valor.

But all the while, as they fought bravely at the front lines, Salvador's thoughts had wandered elsewhere- toward Carissa.

Guilt surged in his heart, but with it came something else, something darker. It was something he couldn't suppress, no matter how hard he tried. It left him feeling uneasy, caught in a constant tug-of-war within himself, never quite able to make peace with his own contradictions.

Salvador was clearly concerned for Rafael, yet the words that came out carried a hint of bitterness. "After this battle, I fear all the officials and generals in court will bow to you. The people are with you, and their hopes rest in you. Your risky venture onto the battlefield-going in alone, fighting fiercely-it worked." Then, he added with a smile, "Of course, I am proud of you too."

At this, Rafael's eyes dimmed, the spark in them fading as if something had frozen inside him.

"Tell me more about the battle," Salvador said, sighing softly. He knew he had messed up again, so he changed the topic.

Rafael recounted the battle quickly, his earlier excitement gone. He finished speaking in a matter of moments, his thoughts elsewhere. "I miss my wife. I wish to return home soon."

Salvador studied him, letting out a small sigh. "When I said I was proud of you, I meant it, from the heart."

"I know," Rafael replied. His voice was steady, but there was something sharp in it—a mixture of gratitude, resentment, and unspoken emotions.

Some things had been bottled up inside for too long. Rafael wanted to speak his mind, but as he lifted his gaze, he saw Salvador's face had taken on a sickly yellow hue, paler than before. A suspicion stirred in him. He had asked earlier, but Salvador hadn't answered.

Now, it was too late to ask again.

As Rafael left the royal study, his steps quickened, the heavy emotions of the previous moments forgotten in an instant. Excitement surged within him once more.

He was almost certain that Carissa would be waiting for him at the palace gates.

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Sure enough, as he hurried out, he spotted a familiar figure standing just beyond the gates, craning here neck in search of him. When her eyes met his, her gaze instantly softened, and her eyes welled with tears. ,

A warmth spread through Rafael's chest, his own throat tightening with emotion. He moved swiftly toward her, ignoring the guards at the gates, and pulled her into his arms with all the strength he had.

Carissa wasn't one to cry easily, but she had already shed her tears earlier.

As Rafael and his men entered the city, she had been lost in the crowd, unable to reach him. But she had seen him, thin and weathered, his lips cracked and bleeding.

Now holding her, she felt his waist had become slimmer, a sign of hunger. The thought of it brought tears

to his eyes, and soon, the sobs began to escape her.

She sobbed softly, her body shaking against him. Rafael held her tighter, as if trying to pull her inside him, to keep her close and never letting go.

"I'm fine. I'm safe now." His voice was hoarse.

He had been hurt at Atamore Mountain and had caught a cold that lingered for days. Though he had recovered, his voice would never be the same.

"Home," Carissa whispered, her arms loosening from around him, her breath still unsteady.

"Everyone's waiting for you."

They gazed at each other for a moment, drinking in the sight of each other as though they could never look enough.

Her eyes spoke of longing, of pain, and the unshed tears lingered just beneath the surface, as if they could fall at any moment. Rafael's heart clenched, his throat tight with emotion.

The true danger of the battle had never been the Sandoria forces-it was the harsh, unforgiving environment that had tested his body and spirit.

After he was injured and then fell ill,

the army physician feared it might be typhoid fever. The others whispered in private that he might not survive, but he couldn't allow himself to think that way-not for a second.

He couldn't bear to think of how devastated Carissa would be if he didn't make it back. Fortunately, he made it through. He was home.

Safe, at last.

Chapter 1464

As they arrived at the gates of Hell Monarch Estate, the crack of Flamepetals filled the air, and the household rushed out to greet Rafael. Everyone surrounded him in a joyous embrace as he made his way inside.

Even Frederick and Holly from Northwatch Estate had come, and Ryan had been brought out from the palace to join the celebration.

Rafael hoisted Ryan up into his arms and lifted him onto his shoulders, then strode into the main hall with a commanding presence. Ryan was absolutely delighted, his hands resting on Rafael's forehead as his smile stretched all the way to his ears. His eyes sparkled with admiration for his uncle.

Once they reached the main hall, Rafael gently set Ryan down, asking about his studies. He learned that Ryan had been serving as Connor's study partner in the palace, earning praise from both Victoria and Trevor. Rafael gave an approving nod, lifting his thumb in praise of the boy's diligence.

Ryan glanced shyly at Carissa, though his joy was plain in the sparkle of his eyes.

Carissa's face lit up with a smile, but the tears that lingered at the edges of her eyes betrayed the emotion she was holding back.

Helen had been waiting for her son to come and offer his greetings, but she could not wait any longer. She hurried out to meet him, and when she saw how much weight he had lost, her heart clenched in

sorrow.

The table was laid with an abundance of food, but Helen did not sit with them. She insisted that they enjoy their meal, allowing them to talk freely and enjoy themselves.

Though famished, Rafael ate sparingly. He chose only light fares that were placed further from him. He tried a few morsels from the meat dishes Carissa had arranged for him, but he only nibbled a small amount before pushing the plate aside. Several times, he clutched at his stomach, as though in discomfort.

Carissa noticed at once. Her eyes welled with tears, and she swiftly turned to send someone to fetch Sebastian.

The others had caught on as well, their concern evident in their expressions.

Rafael set his cutlery down, then took Carissa's hand in his with a smile.

"It's nothing serious," he reassured her, his voice soft. "There's no need to trouble Sebastian. It's just my stomach. I'll recover with time."

"Let him check your condition," Jacob suggested. "It'll put everyone's mind at ease."

Violet raised an eyebrow. "Did you ruin your stomach in Atamore Mountain? With nothing to eat or drink, did you end up gnawing on tree bark or snow?"

Rafael gave a lighthearted shrug. "There was food, though it was scarce. But there was always some dried meat from the grasslands tribes. Every meal, I had a few pieces to fill my belly. And I could always make a fire for water, so we never had to eat snow."

His words were not entirely untrue, though they omitted the worst of it.

How could there be enough dried meat for several pieces in one meal? Sometimes, they would only get a small piece for the whole day, tearing off tiny bits to make it last.

Before reaching Mount Chimera,

there had been times they had resorted to eating snow. The thick fog of Mount Whitemist made it difficult to light a fire without revealing their position. It wasn't until they reached the peak of Mount Chimera that they could make a fire for water. Even then, it was in short supply.

Carissa knew the reality was far worse than Rafael let on. He was only masking the true hardships. Her grip on his hand tightened, her heart sinking with sorrow.

Sebastian and Rowan arrived together. Rowan's medicine chest was so large it bent his back with its weight.

Rafael rose to greet them, but when Sebastian looked at him and saw the gauntness of his face, he sighed deeply. "It's just good that you've returned safely. Sit down, I'll check on you."

"It's nothing serious," Rafael reassured him.

"Let me see your hand," Sebastian replied, his voice firm.

Rowan quickly unstrapped his medicine chest and took out a mat, and Rafael reluctantly placed his hand upon it. As Sebastian checked his vital signs, he asked about his condition.

Rafael kept it brief, mentioning only a slight discomfort in his stomach and no other symptoms.

Sebastian didn't challenge him. After

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his examination, he wrote out three prescriptions, handing them to Rowan without explaining their purpose. "One dose of medicine with each meal, morning, noon, and night. Do not skip."

Seeing this, Carissa was uneasy and asked, "Is it serious?"

Sebastian gave Rafael a quick glance before answering. "It's nothing to worry about. He just needs some rest and good care. He's had a few injuries, and with poor nutrition over time, it's left him with some lasting effects."

Rafael had been holding his breath, but at those words, he let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Carissa wasn't convinced but didn't press further. Instead, she asked, "How long will he need to take this medicine?"

Sebastian's response was calm. "Let's see how he fares after six months."

As he spoke, he continued to pull out medicine bottles from his chest, laying them carefully on the table. "Three doses a day, with each meal."

Carissa picked up one of the bottles. Though she didn't understand much, she could tell there were also remedies for external injuries among them. It was clear now that Rafael hadn't been just suffering from illness.

Sebastian gave a final word of advice. "There's one more thing I need to tell you. You two come with me into the inner chamber."

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Once inside the inner chamber, the curtain fell, and Sebastian immediately grew more serious. "No intimacy," he said firmly. "No indulgence. Do you understand?"

Rafael's ears turned a deep red. "It's... not that serious."

Sebastian's expression remained stern, his tone unwavering. "It is necessary."

Carissa's heart sank as she realized the situation might be even more dire than she had suspected. Sebastian continued, "There are many people outside, and not all can be trusted. That's why I didn't

say much earlier. Your wounds haven't healed yet, and it seems you've been through an illness as well. The cold has seeped into your body, deeply damaging your internal organs. If not for your inner force, you might not have survived that fever.

"However, using that inner force to push through has cost you dearly. You're severely weakened now, and your energy is nearly depleted. If you don't take proper care, you might lose your abilities altogether, and your life expectancy will be shortened. I'm speaking gently, but it's worse than I've said." Carissa's eyes filled with tears as she looked at Sebastian. "Is it that bad? Will rest really help him?" "Only time and rest," Sebastian replied. "I'll come to check on him every few days. And don't let too many people know about this. Right now, he can't really tap into his inner force, and there are those who might take advantage of this weakness."

Rafael was already aware of his condition, and he had hoped to hide it. Now that Sebastian had laid everything out, there was no point in pretending.

He tried to reassure Carissa, "It's nothing. I'll listen to Sebastian. I'll be fine soon."

Carissa, unable to hold back her sorrow, struggled to find words. After a long silence, she finally managed to ask, "Where is he injured?"

"In the lower abdomen, near his core," Sebastian answered. "A blow to the core means he couldn't use

his inner force. However, he had no choice in that situation. He had to push through."

He sighed.

"At that time, the medicine was scarce, wasn't it?"

Rafael took Carissa's hand in his and replied, "When we were on Mount Whitemist, many fell ill. After several battles, there were even more injuries. Medicine was in short supply, so when I was hurt, we could only scrounge up a couple of doses."

Carissa's mind began to fill with images of the suffering Rafael had endured.

She insisted on having Sebastian examine the injury, her hands trembling as she began to unfasten Rafael's clothes. There, just below his abdomen, was a wound.

It wasn't large, but it was deep, right in a critical area, and the surrounding tissue had been affected. The wound had scabbed over, but the skin around it was red and swollen, with a ring of yellow pus forming around it.

Sebastian had anticipated that the wound hadn't healed yet, but seeing the redness, and pus surrounding it, he furrowed his brow. "This needs to be drained, or the infection will spread. I'll have to make an incision to let the blood and pus out"

Wanting to put Carissa at ease, Rafael agreed to whatever Sebastian suggested. "Please, do what you must, Sebastian."

Not wanting Carissa to witness the procedure, Rafael subtly signaled to Sebastian.

Understanding the unspoken request, Sebastian turned to Carissa. "Why don't you go prepare the medicine? We wouldn't want anyone to mix up the prescriptions. You'd be best at it. Start with the one for his external injuries first."

Carissa replied, "I'll get someone to handle it. I'll stay..."

Sebastian cut her off. "Are you not

going to listen to me? If you're not going to listen, then I won't treat him. I'll need to drain the infection, and it will hurt. With you here, he'll be too sensitive about it. How am I supposed to work like that?

She looked at Rafael, worry in her eyes, and her steps faltered.

Sebastian's voice sharpened. "Go, now. Have Rowan bring the medicine. He's holding the medicine chest."

With a reluctant nod, Carissa turned. "Fine, I'll prepare the medicine."

Before leaving, she ignored Sebastian's presence and crossed the room to embrace Rafael. "Endure it, I'll be back quickly."

Rafael gently brushed a strand of hair from her face, his voice soft. "It's alright. Go on. I'll be fine."

She stepped outside to call for Rowan, who had just gathered all the herbs. The medicine chest on his back was large and packed with a variety of ingredients, so there was no need to make another trip to Arcane Sanctum.

When Violet heard Carissa planned to prepare the medicine herself, she decided to accompany her. Lulu and the others followed as well-there was no way they would let Carissa do it herself.

While Violet and the others helped brew the medicine, they gently pulled Carissa aside to ask about Rafael's condition. When Carissa mentioned the possibility of him losing his martial abilities, Violet gasped.

"It's that serious? If a martial artist loses their skills, how are they supposed to live?"

How many early mornings and late nights of hard training had it taken Rafael to reach this level of skill? If he lost it all, not only would it be

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unbearable for him, but the fear that Sandoria's people had for him would

diminish considerably.

"I just hope all their sacrifices were worth it, and that it will bring us a century of peace," Carissa said

quietly.

Chapter 1466

Once Rafael's injury had been tended to, Carissa personally saw Sebastian and Rowan out.

In a low voice, Sebastian instructed, "Remember, he must not use his inner force for now, not even in a fight. The injury is to his core, and he used his inner force when he shouldn't have. He also rushed back here before the wound had fully healed. When I examined him, he was still trying to sustain his energy. That's a deadly mistake. Right now, his body is as fragile as an egg. If anyone wanted to kill him now, it would be far too easy. So, be vigilant, Carissa. This is a critical time, understand?"

He paused before adding, "The fewer people who know about his condition, the better. The situation is already precarious. People can't always be trusted, especially in times like these.

Carissa knew Sebastian was thoughtful and always had their best interests at heart. His advice was meant to help them, so there was no reason not to appreciate it. She immediately agreed and promised to follow through.

Inside the estate, Jacob had dismissed the others, insisting that Rafael needed rest. The journey had taken its toll, and after enduring the bitter cold and constant battles, along with the strain of surviving on snowmelt, his stomach had suffered. He needed time to recover.

Jacob also knew when to step back. Tonight was a time for the couple to be alone.

Carissa accompanied Rafael to Helen's quarters, where they formally greeted her.

Having heard of Sebastian's visit, Helen had sent Gillian to inquire and had learned that Rafael was suffering from a stomach illness. Beyond that, she knew nothing.

Seeing her son so gaunt and weak, tears welled up in her eyes.

"My dear boy," she said, her voice heavy with sorrow. "No more of this. Let others go to the Southern Frontier and fight if they want to. You stay here. Settle down. Have children, perhaps. That way, there's something to hold you here, and you won't be off fighting all the time."

Helen knew he was loyal to the kingdom, that it wasn't really about fighting for the sake of it. But she also realized she didn't share the same sense of duty or awareness that he did. In her view, if he didn't go to war, others would. The kingdom wouldn't fall apart just because he wasn't there.

Rafael smiled gently, trying to reassure her. "Don't worry, Mom. This battle, though hard-fought, has secured peace. From now on, I'll stay in the capital. I won't go anywhere."

Helen didn't believe there was such a thing as true peace. A prosperous nation was nothing more than a fat piece of meat-sooner or later, someone would want a bite.

She looked at Carissa, initially thinking of asking her to speak with him, but then remembered that Carissa was also a person of action-a woman of strength in her own right. It seemed the two of them shared the same spirit, after all.

"Never mind," Helen said with a sigh. "You should head back and rest. You two have been apart for so long, so there must be much for you two to talk about."

She paused, then added pointedly, "Carissa, don't hide things from him. You should tell him about the queen trying to arrange a secondary wife for him."

Rafael's brow furrowed deeply. "Is this true?"

Helen's voice was cold. "She says it's

for the good of the family, to ensure the royal line continues. It's laughable, really. If she's so concerned about heirs, she should worry about the king's first. Since when is it her place to meddle in this household?"

Rafael's eyes burned with anger. He had tolerated many things, but this wouldn't be one of them. He had never wavered in his commitment to Carissa, and when he married Ker, he had told Salvador that he would never take a concubine.

Wasn't this an affront to their marriage?

"We'll discuss this when we're alone," Carissa said softly, her hand gently resting on his back. "It's not the time for anger."

Rafael took her hand and led her out. His expression was calm, but the storm in his chest was far from settled. Now wasn't the time to lose his temper-but that didn't mean he wouldn't. How dare Kylie meddle in his life like this?

The thought sent a chill down his

spine. He had been out there, risking his life to defend the kingdom, while trouble brewed in his own home. If a secondary wife was actually forced upon him, he had no doubt what would've awaited him upon his return-Carissa's letter of divorce.

He had seen it happen before, so how could he not be afraid of it happening to him?

Back in their room, Carissa recounted everything that had happened after Rafael left for the Southern Frontier-every little detail she could remember, large and small. To Rafael, there were two important matters.

The first was Salvador's worsening lung condition.

The second was the strange visit from Salvador late one night, coupled with Kylie's attempt to introduce a secondary wife into Rafael's life. Anyone with a clear head would likely understand the motive behind both of these events.

Carissa carefully wiped his body with warm water, as per Sebastian's advice to avoid bathing.

"His Majesty's late-night visit and the queen's arranging for a secondary wife are not the same thing. His Majesty does not know about the queen's actions."

Rafael's face darkened. His lean features became even sharper in his displeasure. "But they've both overstepped their bounds."

Chapter 1467

Rafael took Carissa's hand in his, his expression serious.

"I never wanted a secondary wife or concubine. I have no intentions toward anyone but you. You must always trust me."

Carissa gazed up at him, her eyes soft and trusting. "Of course I believe you. Otherwise, why would I have rejected it so firmly?"

He pulled her gently into his embrace, both finding comfort in the trust they shared. It was their anchor, and in that moment, they were certain their bond would weather any storm.

"Has Sebastian examined His Majesty?" Rafael asked.

Carissa shook her head softly in his arms. "No. His Majesty hasn't mentioned it, and no one has dared to suggest it. Even the queen dowager hasn't brought it up.'

Rafael sighed lightly. "He looks like he's aged ten years in the span of a few months. When I first saw him, I was truly startled.

Carissa, who occasionally saw Salvador, didn't think he appeared a decade older at once. However, she did notice his significant weariness and his eyes were clouded and dull.

"The department heads and Lord Wright didn't recommend Sebastian, because when His Majesty left the palace and came to the estate, he claimed it was a private visit for a diagnosis," she said. "So naturally, the department heads wouldn't bring him up again. But I do find it strange that Mr. Murray didn't recommend him either."

Jeremiah was well aware of the entire situation.

Rafael's brow furrowed as something came to mind.

"When my dad, the previous king, was gravely ill, Mr. Murray recommended a well-known physician from the common folk to treat him. But after his condition worsened, he grew enraged and had the physician executed. I suppose that's why Mr. Murray doesn't dare recommend Sebastian now."

Carissa's eyes widened in shock. "That really happened?"

"Yes," Rafael replied, his tone somber. "I heard that the physician was actually a friend of Sebastian's." He paused, his thoughts weighing heavily on him.

"Mother likely knows of their connection, which is why she hasn't ordered Sebastian to treat His Majesty. She's concerned about past grievances and whether Sebastian would truly be impartial in his care. Carissa nodded, understanding. She knew Sebastian's nature well. If he wanted to save

someone, whether they were a commoner or a noble, he would do everything in his power to help them. But if he didn't wish to, no title or status could sway him-he would refuse them without hesitation.

But over the years, he had rarely turned anyone away. When he did, it was usually for those whose moral character was in question.

"The royal physicians originally said His Majesty had only a year to live. Yet, three or four months have passed, and the crown prince's position remains undecided," Carissa remarked, a touch of concern in her voice.

She believed the delay in establishing the crown prince was a sign of Connor's failure to meet Salvador's expectations. Given how urgent the situation was, if Salvador had any real confidence in him, the decision would have already been made.

"Have you heard anything from Ryan about Prince Connor's situation?" Rafael asked.

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"When I brought him back a few days ago, I asked. Ryan said that Prince Connor used to be more diligent, but now he finds the political strategies Mr. Young teaches boring and tiresome. He's been nodding off in class, and Mr. Young has had to punish him several times. Even the assignments Mr. Young gives him, he has Ryan do for him."

Rafael frowned deeply. "Such laziness... How could he possibly be fit for the throne?"

"By the way," Carissa continued, "Prince Caden also went to the study room a few days ago, but he and Prince Connor had different hours for lessons. Ryan mentioned that Prince Caden is diligent, respectful, and polite. Every day, he brings snacks and coffee for Mr. Young."

Rafael fell silent for a long while, a look of concern settling on his face. Carissa lifted her gaze to him. "Do you think there's a problem?"

Rafael said slowly, "You can't really say His Majesty is wrong in handling things this way. He has to choose the right person in a short amount of time-this is the only way. But with his eldest son still in the picture, elevating the second prince is already a rejection of the first. Naturally, that means more people will start rallying behind Prince Caden."

He cleared his throat, still hoarse from his illness.

"In any era, there are often factions in opposition. Despite her high position, Queen Kylie has been confined to her quarters time and again. The management of the harem has fallen into the hands of Lady Grace and Lady Sylvia, and the Quinton family has been suppressed.

"If His Majesty elevates Prince

Caden, Queen Kylie and Prince Connor will be weakened. The only thing keeping the old ministers loyal to them is their status as royalty but that alone isn't enough to create a real balance of power. In the end, if those ministers continue to resist, Prince Connor may very well become a target for assassination."

Carissa followed his reasoning. "But there's a premise to what you're saying-if Lady Grace and Lady Sylvia know about His Majesty's condition. Though... I suppose it won't be easy to keep it hidden much longer."

Chapter 1468

The celebration feast scheduled for the following day was canceled. A messenger from the palace arrived, saying Salvador had caught a chill and was suffering from a severe cough.

Though the feast was called off, the royal edict to reward the soldiers was quickly issued.

Timothy was appointed commander of the Southern Frontier Army and promoted to the rank of second-rank general. Louis and other officers were elevated to third-rank and deputy third-rank military positions, remaining stationed at the Southern Frontier. Funds were allocated to establish residences in the region, allowing them to bring their families along.

The families of fallen soldiers were to receive compensation, while the wounded would each be given ten silver coins.

Everyone's contributions were clearly outlined, but Rafael's reward had not yet been finalized. For the time being, he was granted 1,000 gold coins, 50 rolls of silk and fine cloth, and his position as Chief Judge remained unchanged.

The reward edict praised Rafael, the Hell Monarch, for his tireless efforts and the great achievements he had made for Starhaven. The words were grand and flowery, but ultimately empty. In the end, 1,000 gold coins felt far more practical.

Rafael did not seek praise, however. He was a prince, raised on the support of the court and the people, and he saw it as his duty to serve.

Salvador's "chill" kept him absent from court for two consecutive mornings. Even when Rafael went to the palace to request an audience, he was not summoned.

The entire court was buzzing with rumors. No one knew exactly what ailed Salvador, but they were all nearly certain it was a serious illness. Since Salvador had fallen ill, the Royal Medical Department's physicians had moved into the palace and couldn't even return home.

On the thirteenth of March, when Rowan came to check on Rafael's recovery, he passed along Sebastian's message. "Sage Dalton said that if His Majesty requests his presence, you should simply agree."

Rafael's wounds had completely healed, so there was no need for Sebastian himself to come. That was why Rowan had been the one to visit these past two times.

When Carissa heard Rowan's message, she turned to him in surprise. "Has His Majesty sent for Sebastian?"

"Not formally, just a private request. Sage Dalton had foreseen this and had already left the city. His Majesty must know it was an excuse."

Carissa's thoughts drifted to the famous physician who had treated Sigmund, and a complex feeling stirred within her. "Does Sebastian want to treat His Majesty?"

"No, he doesn't want to," Rowan replied bluntly, "But he says that if His Majesty passes, it will not be good for Starhaven or the Hell Monarch's household. If His Majesty is ruthless enough, he might even clear away the obstacles for the

crown prince before his death."

The so-called obstacles referred to the Hell Monarch.

Rowan paused for a moment before continuing, "Sage Dalton also said that while His Majesty may not be a wise ruler, the war has ended, and the Southern Frontier is in desperate need of rebuilding. Our trade abroad is also beginning to grow. If the kingdom falls into chaos now, it will be the common people who suffer the most. So, as long as things can be delayed, they should be."

Carissa nodded silently. With the future of the kingdom still uncertain, no one knew how disastrous things could become if Salvador were to die.

Rafael understood Sebastian's meaning as well. If he were to enter the palace and treat Salvador now, he would feel as though he were betraying an old friend.

If a younger person whom Sebastian cared about came to him for help, he might consider doing them this favor. He needed to convince himself. Sometimes, the only way to resolve an inner conflict was to find a way to make peace with it.

Rowan wrote out a new prescription, one to nourish the stomach and strengthen the constitution. It would take at least half a year of treatment before Rafael could stop taking the medicine.

After seeing Rowan out, Rafael and Carissa exchanged a look. Salvador's sending for Sebastian was a clear sign that his condition had worsened considerably.

It would be a lie to say Rafael was not troubled.

Even though Salvador had always been suspicious of him, the truth remained—they were brothers, connected by blood.

Rafael figured Salvador probably felt

the same way-torn between

conflicting thoughts. That was why the latter's attitude was so unpredictable, shifting from good to bad. Sometimes, when Salvador looked at him, it didn't seem like he was faking it—there was still a sense of brotherhood there.

Before ascending to the throne, Salvador had been a good older brother. It was a shame the throne had such a dazzling pull, one that blinded the eyes and clouded the mind, making everything else difficult to see clearly.

Two days later, Derek came in person to summon Rafael and Carissa to the palace to see Salvador.

Chapter 1469

Five days ago, Salvador had sent Derek to Arcane Sanctum to find Sebastian. When Derek arrived, he was told that Sebastian had already left the city, with no clear return date.

When Derek reported back, Salvador understood immediately-it was because of the incident with their late father, who had executed a famous physician years ago. Sebastian had no desire to return to the palace and treat Salvador.

Salvador had considered sending someone to retrieve Sebastian, reasoning that no place in the world was beyond the reach of the crown. Surely, he could find him. But he knew that if Sebastian didn't want to come, no amount of pressure would compel him to help. Even if he were brought back, it would be of little use.

Naturally, Salvador knew there was one person who might persuade Sebastian-Carissa.

But his illness had been kept secret for a reason he didn't want the entire court to know just yet, especially not Rafael.

Rafael had just returned with great military achievements and a rising public reputation. If he learned of Salvador's condition now, it wouldn't be hard for him to start planning and preparing for what came next. But in the end, Salvador was just a man-a frail, suffering man. The pain had worn him down, and his earlier rationality was slipping away. All he wanted now was to find relief.

Sebastian was his only hope.

Rafael and Carissa entered the palace together, and both were taken aback when they saw Salvador after such a long time.

He had lost so much weight that his cheeks were sunken, his complexion pale and sickly. Despite the chilly March weather, his forehead was drenched in sweat, and the clothes next to him, recently changed, were soaked through.

Surrounding him were the royal physicians, their faces equally drawn and weary, likely from days of constant vigil at Salvador's side.

Salvador sat propped up on the bed, a soft cushion pressed against his back. His neck seemed unable to support his head, which wobbled slightly, giving him a dazed look.

When he saw Rafael and Carissa enter, his nose inexplicably tingled, and his eyes reddened.

"Your Majesty," Rafael said, his heart aching at the sight. "Are you feeling any better?"

Salvador dismissed everyone but Desmond and Derek, signaling for the others to leave.

"Sit," Salvador said, his brows furrowing as though he were suppressing pain.

Rafael and Carissa took seats at the bedside, sitting upright and still, the sharp scent of medicine hanging heavily in the air.

"I need you to do something for me," Salvador's voice was weak, his head tilting back to rest. "Please... Go to Sebastian and bring him here to examine me."

Rafael nodded. "I will go to him as soon as I leave the palace."

Salvador watched him intently. "Do you think you can bring him back?"

"I will do my best," Rafael replied.

Salvador let out a soft sigh. "Tell him... I will not take my anger out on the royal physicians or anyone else."

He closed his eyes, pressing a hand to his chest, enduring the pain as even his breath became shallow.

"Mr. Desmond, how is the king?" Rafael asked, turning to Desmond who stood nearby.

Desmond had already been instructed by Salvador to speak plainly if the Hell Monarch ever inquired.

"Your Highness," Desmond began, his voice thick, with emotion, "His Majesty's illness has progressed to the lungs, a condition of internal lung congestion. The pain is

sweating profusely, and theel

excruciating. He is feverish,

remedies the royal physicians have tried have shown little effect, even failing to ease the pain."

Desmond's voice caught. "His Majesty has not slept for several nights-his pain is so severe that he cannot rest."

Rafael immediately rose. "I will go to Sebastian at once."

Salvador's brow loosened slightly, and there was a faint glimmer in his dull eyes.

Rafael turned to Carissa. "Go ahead to Serenity Palace. There's no need for you to accompany me while I seek Sebastian."

Carissa nodded. "Alright. Be quick, please."

Once Rafael had gone, Carissa prepared to leave as well. However, Salvador's voice stopped her.

"Commander Sinclair, I have something I must ask of you," he said, his gaze intense. "Please, sit. Desmond, you may leave us."

Desmond bowed and exited, leaving Derek to stand silently at the side.

Perhaps due to the intensity of the pain, Salvador didn't mince words. He looked directly at Carissa. "The royal physicians have said that I may not survive more than three O months."

Carissa's heart jolted. Three months? Hadn't they said a year before? So little time had passed since then!

Seeing the shock on her face, Salvador managed a weak smile.

"I know you share the same loyalty to the kingdom as your dad," he said quietly. "I hope you'll follow your conscience and answer truthfully to what I'm about to ask."

Chapter 1470

Carissa disliked the idea of involving her dad, especially since whatever Salvador had to say had nothing to do with him.

It seemed unnecessary to invoke Hector's loyalty to the kingdom, as if to pressure her into answering the coming question. But, of course, whether she liked it or not, her feelings were irrelevant in Salvador's

eyes.

Her expression remained composed as she said softly, "You may ask what you wish, Your Majesty. I will listen."

The sharp, biting pain that seemed to pierce his very bones caused Salvador to bypass the usual probing and go straight to the heart of the matter.

"You are the one who knows Rafael best. Do you think that if I die, he should become Regent-would he kill the future young king and take the throne for himself?"

Carissa's heart sank, the fury rising in her chest like a firestorm. Rafael had survived the brutal battles of the Southern Frontier; he should not be subjected to such flagrant suspicion. Her protective instincts flared, and her tone became icy, her words rapid.

"Your Majesty, I've been married to Rafael for only three years. I hardly claim to know him better than anyone else. Surely, the person who knows him best is you-his elder brother. Do you believe he would do such a thing?"

Salvador's gaze tightened with worry. "You need not be upset. My concern is for the future of Starhaven. As a court official, your duty should align with your dad's loyalty..."

"Your Majesty!" Carissa interrupted him, not caring about the formality or the consequences. "This has nothing to do with my dad. Whatever I say, whatever I do, represents only myself. My dad died on the battlefield in the Southern Frontier, and his legacy will be judged by future generations."

Salvador's brow furrowed in frustration. "Do you even know what you're saying? Are you implying that what you're doing goes against your dad's actions?"

Derek was alarmed and quickly stepped forward. "Your Majesty, please, do not let your anger take hold." Carissa stood and said, "Do you even know what you're saying, Your Majesty? You're not asking me a question you're already passing judgment. You could ask me, or Mr. Murray, or the six department heads. Words have power, Your Majesty, and with a single sentence, you can condemn someone. If you want him dead, it can be as simple as that. There's no need to place a false charge on him."

"How dare you?!" Salvador's fury erupted, his voice thick with anger. "Do you think I need to place a false charge on him? Just for daring to enter the Southern Frontier without permission, I could have him executed!"

"Then do it."

Carissa wiped away her tears, her voice trembling despite her efforts to remain composed. She wasn't the type to cry easily, but she couldn't help it now.

"Pretend he didn't come back from

the Southern Frontier. What was the point? The Southern Frontier was in chaos. He knew full well there would be no glory and that he might lose his head for doing so. But he went anyway, and came back sick. Now, he has to take medicine and remedies daily, and his treatment has no end in sight.

"When he learned of your illness and how you missed court sessions for days, he didn't sleep well for days because he didn't know how you were faring. In his heart, you're not just the king-you're his elder brother. He respects you, loves you, and whenever there's great danger, he's the first to step up.

"And now, you ask me if he would kill the future young king and take the throne after you're gone? If you

can ask that, then in your heart, you've already decided he deserves to die. Fine then! Do it. Kill him, and I'll die with him. Then you'll have no more worries."

Derek hurriedly said, "Your Grace, don't say that! Quickly, beg for His Majesty's forgiveness!"

Carissa ignored him and knelt, her face set with a finality that chilled the room. "I ask you, Your Majesty, to grant death to both of us."

Salvador's eyes locked onto her, his chest rising and falling with labored breaths, each one more desperate than the last. His fury shook his voice. "Are you forcing me to do this?"

Carissa's eyes were filled with

sorrow. "He has earned great military accomplishments and possesses the ability to stabilize and protect the kingdom, but he has no ambition for the throne. Despite his talents, he was always destined for a tragic end. If you sentence him to death, I won't blame you, Your Majesty.

"The fault lies with him, for he could not hide his loyalty and devotion, and instead wore his heart on his sleeve, offering it to you as a brother. His death will not be in vain. As his wife, I will share his fate, whether in life or death."

Salvador was struck silent, and he didn't say anything for a long time.

His dull eyes slowly clouded over, and his red-rimmed eyes filled with tears.

Derek trembled all over, his heart racing and unable to calm down.