

War Song 1491

Chapter 1491

The queen waited anxiously for two days, but nothing happened.

Lydia secretly went to the Royal Medical Department to see Dorian, but he was on leave due to family matters, so she couldn't find out if he had said anything to Salvador.

However, with no order for house arrest issued, Kylie's concerns were eased considerably.

As days passed without any further developments, she relaxed entirely, convinced that Dorian had said nothing to the king. It seemed unlikely that the royal physician would ever speak up. After all, he had been paid handsomely.

Yet, over time, something began to feel off.

Every day, Kylie had Lydia deliver food to Connor, but he wouldn't touch it. At first, he claimed Victoria had advised him to stick to bland meals because his stomach was still bothering him. Though Kylie found that reasonable, it had been many days since the incident, and there was no sign that the young prince was in poor health.

So, why was he still refusing to eat?

With a sense of unease slowly creeping over the queen, she decided to visit Victoria later that evening. At the same time, she would bring some food for her son herself, hoping to have a word with him.

By the end of the evening, she arrived at Serenity Palace. She knew that at this hour, Connor should have finished his dinner and been preparing to study. Upon arriving at the gates, she encountered Keith, who informed her that the prince had gone to the riding grounds to practice horseback riding.

"His Highness now spends time at the riding grounds every day after lessons. He practices riding before returning for his meals," Keith explained.

"He waits until after practice to eat? Won't that starve him?" asked Kylie, taken aback.

"Do not worry, Your Majesty. The queen dowager sent me to bring His Highness refreshments during the late afternoon, so he won't go hungry," Keith reassured her.

The queen furrowed her brow. She had also sent Connor snacks at that hour but he had refused them, claiming stomach discomfort as an excuse.

"Well then, I'll go to the riding grounds to see him."

"Your Majesty, the queen dowager has ordered that His Highness be undisturbed while in the study or at the riding grounds, including by you," said Keith, calmly stopping her.

"Why?" Kylie's brow furrowed further, her tone suddenly sharp.

"This is the order of Her Majesty, the queen dowager," Keith replied, unruffled. "If you wish to know more, you may ask Her Majesty directly."

Since she was already here, it was only natural for Kylie to offer her greetings to Victoria. Yet, the thought of questioning the queen dowager made her uneasy.

Upon entering the hall, she found Victoria holding a scroll of

parchment, her attention absorbed in reading. The dim, yellow light cast an almost haunting glow on the strands of silver in the queen dowager's hair, making her appear much older than Kylie remembered.

She curtsied respectfully, but Victoria made no move to

acknowledge her, acting as if she wasn't aware of the former's presence. The queen dowager wasn't typically a harsh

ovel

mother-in-law who enjoyed tormenting her daughter-in-law, so this attitude made Kylie extremely anxious.

Unable to remain calm and wait for Victoria to acknowledge her, Kylie straightened up slightly and asked, "Mother, I heard from Mr. Finley that from now on, no one is allowed to visit Connor during his studies and training, not even me. Is that truly your wish?"

Victoria's gaze shifted from the parchment in her hands, and a coldness settled on her face as she replied, "Yes, it is my wish."

Hearing that the queen dowager was at least willing to respond, Kylie quickly said, "But when he returns from training, he'll be busy eating and washing up. If I come to talk to him, wouldn't that..."

Before she could finish, Victoria interrupted, "Then, don't come."

Those icy words felt like a bucket of cold water poured over the queen's head.

She blinked rapidly, her eyes welling with tears.

Her voice quivered as she said, "Mother, do you mean to sever my bond with him? You're also a mother. How could you bear to do this?"

Victoria set the scroll aside, her weary gaze settling on her daughter-in-law. "Kylie, have you ever truly listened to a single word I've said to you?"

Tears filled the queen's eyes, and her lips quivered as she struggled to hide her grievance. "I don't know where I've gone wrong. Please, Mother, enlighten me."

"The king will speak to you about your mistakes," Victoria replied.

Unwilling to say more, she waved her hand and dismissed Kylie.

Chapter 1492

Kylie returned to Everspring Palace, but her unease did not last long.

Soon, Salvador arrived. Accompanied by the Nightsteel Guard, he sealed off the entire Everspring Palace, allowing only Lydia to remain within the halls.

Derek entered, carrying two items.

One of them was the poison powder Kylie had given to Connor days before. When it was placed on the table for her to inspect, she stood frozen in place. A cold, piercing chill spread through her, making her body tremble uncontrollably.

Witnessing this, Lydia immediately stumbled and dropped to her knees, her voice thick with fear as she cried out, "Your Majesty, please forgive me! It was all my doing! Her Majesty had no part in this!"

Salvador paid no attention to her desperate pleas.

Sitting down, he turned to Derek. "You may show Kylie the edict. There is no need for formalities."

Derek nodded and unfurled the second item—a royal edict.

The moment it was placed before the queen, her eyes caught the first few lines, and it was as though she had seen a ghost.

"No!" she screamed, collapsing to the ground.

Tears flooded from her eyes as she frantically cried, "No! No..."

Lydia was unable to read the contents of the edict, and she dared not look. She kept her head bowed, her forehead bleeding slightly from the stumble she took to kneel previously.

Salvador's gaze grew colder, sharper. "You were willing to poison him to preserve his reputation. Wasn't it because you wanted to make him the crown prince? Since you were willing to use his life to stake the claim, then I will grant your wish. I declare him the crown prince. In exchange, you will forfeit your life. Fair enough?"

"No! He is your eldest son! He should be the crown prince! Your Majesty, I may have made mistakes, but I don't deserve to die for them!" Kylie protested, throwing herself at the king's feet.

Tears streamed down her face as she clung desperately to his legs. Her voice trembling with helpless despair, she entreated, "Your Majesty, he is my son. I never meant to harm him! I only wanted what was best for him!"

"What's best for him? You got what you wanted—he's the crown prince now, isn't he? That was your goal all along!" Salvador's voice rose, his anger unmistakable. "If you were willing to risk his life to protect his reputation, why not simply offer your own life to secure his place as crown prince? That would have saved you from having to do all that scheming and plotting."

Kylie trembled uncontrollably, her mind struggling to grasp his words.

Had she truly gotten what she wanted?

Kylie's voice broke, dry and hoarse as she pleaded, "No... it's not like that... Your Majesty, even if I've made mistakes, it doesn't mean I deserve to die for them!"

"The queen used her life to secure the nation's future. There's no crime here, only merit," Salvador said coldly.

Fear crept across Kylie's face, her strength slowly draining away. She lifted her head with great difficulty, her eyes clouded by tears. She could no longer make out Salvador's expression, only feeling the suffocating pressure around her, tightening her chest until she could hardly breathe.

Lydia lifted her bloodstained face, her voice breaking as she cried out, "Your Majesty, there must be another choice for Her Majesty, right? You and the queen are husband and wife; you've been

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together all these years!"

"As long as you live, I will not depose you. So, you must choose your life or the position of crown prince," Salvador declared, his voice cold and unyielding.

With that, the king turned and left. Derek followed behind him, leaving Everspring Palace cloaked in an unbearable chill.

Her limbs frozen in place and her body unable to move, Kylie was helped to a chair.

Time passed.

Finally, she buried her face in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably, her voice barely a whisper through the tears.

"He's so cruel... so cruel..."

She had no choice.

She truly had no choice.

The next day, Derek arrived, asking if the queen wished to announce last night's edict or pretend nothing had happened.

Kylie was already prepared for the day. She had covered the puffiness under her eyes with makeup, and she wore a gentle, composed smile.

"Mr. Walker, you've worked hard in His Majesty's service. Please come in and have some coffee. Enjoy some snacks with me."

Derek understood immediately, giving a slight nod as he followed her into the palace to partake in the refreshments she had prepared.

Later, he returned to Salvador and reported back. Hearing the news the king wasn't surprised. After reading through some reports, Salvador paused for a moment, a flicker of thought crossing his face.

"I thought she might be willing to give up her life for her son, especially after pampering him so much. Yet, it

seems it was all to consolidate her own position," he said.

Chapter 1493

Nowadays, Salvador would discuss matters concerning his sons with Rafael,

especially since he often taught them in the evenings. After finishing his lessons, he would come over to accompany Salvador during his needle treatment

sessions.

As the brothers talked more, the barriers between them lessened, as did the suspicion.

Of course, this varied from person to person. Rafael spoke sincerely and rarely held back, as long as the topic didn't involve Carissa.

Up close, Salvador could always see things clearly. Any issues between them were now discussed openly, unlike before when they relied solely on assumptions.

Salvador credited this change to Carissa's sharp words. It was as if she had shaken him awake, making him see things differently. Now, he could see Rafael as a brother, not just as a subject under his rule.

After Sebastian finished his needle treatment, he excused himself to rest. Rafael helped Salvador up and walked with him, with Derek trailing behind at a distance. The royal garden at night was softly lit by elaborately crafted lamps, their gentle, ethereal light casting a delicate glow that softened the features of those who passed beneath them.

Rafael listened to Salvador speak, but made no immediate comment. He knew that the king had his own plan and understanding of the situation, so he refrained from offering further advice.

As Salvador finished speaking, a wry smile crossed his face. "She's not foolish. After all, he is my eldest son, borne by the queen of the kingdom. There's always hope for him."

Rafael gave a quiet hum in response, supporting his brother as they walked slowly together.

"How has his attitude been these past few days?" Salvador asked, as he did every day.

"It's not a complete transformation, but he's certainly working harder than before," Rafael replied.

This was no exaggeration. Since the Verdant Hunt, Connor had changed as if he had suddenly gained insight. He realized his natural talents were lacking and began to put in real effort.

Moreover, he worked harder each day, truly taking Carissa's words to heart and striving to improve himself every single day.

Salvador was pleased with that answer. Although he received the same response daily, it was exactly what he wanted to hear.

"And how is he getting along with Ryan?" Salvador asked further.

"Quite well. They're helping each other."

The king's gaze grew distant, as he silently wished that his son's generation might

be able to renew the friendship he once had with Nathan.

"And with his younger brothers?" Salvador queried.

Rafael's lips curled into a subtle smile. "He's learning to care for his younger brothers now. Today, Prince Cecil fell from his horse and Prince Connor rushed over to catch him."

Salvador exhaled softly, a small

relief in his chest. "As brothers from the royal family, they must support and care for each other, at least in their younger years. If they don't, the bond will fade as they grow older, and there will be little left to hold onto."

The king had also learned a thing or two about that, especially after Sebastian entered the palace. Constantly being treated as a patient, Salvador's heart softened. Sometimes, when he thought about the past, he even found his own actions absurd.

How could he have ever thought that way? This younger brother of his had always been his shadow since childhood.

"I remember you used to love honeyed cake when you were little. Every time brought it to you, you'd be so happy that you'd smile for

hours, Salvador mused, remin

like an elderly patient, recalling random fragments of the past as they came to mind.

Rafael chuckled softly. "In truth, I didn't actually like honeyed cake that much back then. I found the scent too strong. I only started to enjoy it after eating it a few times."

Salvador raised an eyebrow in surprise. "You didn't like it? But when you ate it, your cheeks puffed up and you chewed it so eagerly. How could it not be delicious?"

"That's because it was from you, Your Majesty," Rafael replied steadily. "I thought, if it's something you enjoy, then it must be good. So, I slowly learned to like it— and eventually, I did."

Salvador let out a quiet, amused

like

laugh. "So, that's how it was. But I'll tell you a secret. I actually didn't like it either, which was why I always gave it to you. But when I saw how much you enjoyed it, I started to try it myself, and in the end, I grew to like it too."

Salvador sighed, reflecting on how an unremarkable beginning had eventually

turned into something beautiful.

Chapter 1494

At Hell Monarch Estate, Carissa and Cynthia were busy teaching Roxana and Courtney martial arts. Mostly, it was Cynthia who took charge of Roxana's lessons, while Carissa kept company with Courtney, observing but not actively participating.

Work at the Capital Guard headquarters was actually quite busy, but time seemed to slow down, bringing a sense of calm to everyone's hearts. No matter how long this period without suspicion would last, they decided to cherish each day as it came.

But there was one thing that weighed heavily on Carissa's mind-Rafael's health.

Although he was gradually recovering, his vitality had been severely damaged. Working tirelessly every day, leaving early and returning late, with irregular meals and inconsistent medication, he wasn't able to rest properly, which was always a worry.

Bun came down the corridor and approached Carissa, saying, "Vivi says she won't be home tonight."

Carissa nodded, her expression unchanged. She didn't need to ask. She knew exactly what Violet was doing-returning to her old ways.

This matter was not something they would discuss in private. However, they had once said that since their hands were already stained with blood, they might as well let the blood of the wicked nourish their souls to an even deeper crimson.

So, whether Violet was helping the authorities find evidence or directly taking down evildoers who couldn't be convicted due to insufficient proof, Carissa didn't interfere.

They no longer talked about upholding justice as openly as they did in their childhood, even though it had always been their ideal. Now, as they grew older, Carissa no longer defined her actions in terms of righteousness.

The world was not as simple as black and white; it was full of gray. But the end result remained the same-seeing the guilty get their just punishment was all that mattered.

Bun sat beside her, watching Cynthia teach Roxana.

"Roxana is really something. Strong and full of energy, just like Cynthia was at her age. But honestly, Roxana has even more talent. She might just turn out to be the second you," he said.

Carissa looked over and saw Roxana moving with incredible speed. Her fists were a blur, yet each strike carried a palpable weight. Bun had given her the nickname Powerful Cyclone for her fierce strength.

Carissa smiled faintly, imagining Roxana's future. Would she become a female general, or a wandering hero, fighting for justice?

It was at that moment that Rafael returned. He sat down next to his wife and immediately pulled her into his arms.

Seeing the two of them, Bun stood up with a playful scolding look. "Only a day apart and you're acting like you've been apart for three years. It's enough to make my eyes sting."

Carissa rested her head on Rafael's shoulder, a smile blooming on her face. "Then, hurry up and go."

"Fine, I'm going. I won't disturb you," Bun replied, already heading over to join the girls for their practice.

Let the two of them enjoy their little moment together, while he kept the others busy.

"It's time for your medicine," Carissa murmured, shifting slightly to nestle closer, inhaling the cold, piney scent of his skin.

"I've already taken it. Sebastian had the apothecary prepare a dose for me at the palace," Rafael replied, his voice low.

Carissa lifted her head, suddenly cautious. "Then, His Majesty will know about your condition."

"He only knows that I... can't perform," Rafael said gloomily.

Carissa burst out laughing. "You told him that?"

"It was Sebastian who said it," Rafael replied, even more sullen. "When he brought His Majesty's medicine yesterday, he brought mine along too. His Majesty asked about it and Sebastian told him it was to help me regain my strength. Said a man has to maintain his vigor."

In truth, Rafael felt he could perform in bed without an issue. However, until the day Carissa and Sebastian approved, he wouldn't be able to do anything.

Carissa smirked, shaking her head. "How tragic. Does His Majesty think you're pitiable, or is he pleased with the outcome?"

After all, Salvador had once said he didn't want them to have children. Wasn't this exactly what he had wanted?

Rafael ran his hand gently through

her hair. His Majesty didn't say

much, just looked at me with a mixed expression. Half sympathy,

half something else. He stared at

me for quite a while."

Carissa reached into her sleeve and pulled out a candy, slipping it into his mouth.

"Take it slow, you'll get better."

Ever since her husband had

practically become a walking

medicine cabinet, she had kept little

candies and dried fruits with her,

always ready to offer him something

sweet to mask the bitter aftertaste of the medicine he had to endure.

Rafael had eaten so many sweets lately that his teeth ached, but it was still better than the constant bitter taste lingering in his mouth.

The lamps flickered gently, casting a soft glow over the young girl diligently practicing martial arts, as well as the radiant woman leaning against her husband.

Chapter 1495

In the blazing heat of July, a letter from Westhaven arrived.

Westhaven's king, Edmund, had abdicated. Grand Princess Lisandra was now queen. She had taken the throne and assumed control of the kingdom, and its name was officially changed from Westhaven to Orivenia.

The new queen invited Starhaven to send an envoy delegation to attend her coronation and to discuss the long-standing border disputes. Lisandra had already ascended the throne, so attending the coronation was merely a formality. The true purpose of the visit was to negotiate the border issue.

When the Westhaven envoy delegation previously came to Starhaven, their primary goal was the border—an issue that had been put on hold due to internal unrest. It was also the matter that had weighed most heavily on Lisandra's mind. So, with her coronation behind her now, she wasted no time in reopening the talks.

At the morning court session in Starhaven, there was unanimous agreement that old grudges were behind them. Both kingdoms were now on equal footing, and it was time to stand firm where needed. The border issue might not be resolved quickly, but as long as war was avoided, it was a step in the right direction.

Salvador selected Kendrick for the diplomatic mission. Though he had no experience in court matters, his status as a prince made him a symbol of respect. He was to accompany the envoy delegation, which included the Defense Minister and the head of the Diplomatic Affairs Department, to Orivenia.

Carissa was also part of the group, serving in her official capacity as the commander of the Mystic Army, tasked with overseeing security along the journey. Rafael had recommended her for the role, as the delegation would pass through Victory Pass.

They would stop there briefly to gather information about the state of affairs between the two kingdoms and Orivenia's current situation. It would also be a chance for Carissa to reunite with her grandfather and his family for a few days.

When the official order from Salvador arrived, Carissa was thrilled. She immediately gathered Violet, Cynthia, and the others to go on a shopping spree. While she regularly sent gifts to Victory Pass each year, there was nothing like personally delivering them.

As for the choice of guards, she left that to Michael and Max. This time, her focus was on combining business with pleasure, as well as taking the opportunity to show her gratitude to her husband for securing this important assignment for her.

In truth, even if Rafael hadn't recommended Carissa, Salvador had already intended to send her. After all, a queen had ascended the throne of Orivenia. It would be a fine gesture for Starhaven to send a female official to congratulate her.

Salvador had even privately joked with Rafael, saying, "Since you need to rest, it's not such a bad thing if your wife is away for a few months. That way, you won't be so distracted and can focus on your health."

Rafael also jokingly replied, "True, I must take care of myself. Otherwise, how else will I ensure the continuation of the royal family?"

Salvador rolled his eyes at him with a smile. They could speak about such matters now without any bitterness between them.

Sebastian had once shared a thought with Salvador that he found quite wise. The older man had said that those who overthink often didn't live long.

Why did so few kings live to old age throughout history? Ruling a nation required constant vigilance and tireless effort, far more than the average person. The relentless stress took a heavy toll on both mind and body, weakening the immune system and making them vulnerable to illness.

If, even while receiving treatment, a king remained consumed by worries-fretting over state affairs, seething with anger over one

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different from pushing themselves step by step toward an early grave.

It was better to simply stop worrying about everything. Focus on what needed attention and trust the court officials to handle the rest. After all, wasn't that what they were paid for?

With that clarity, Salvador found that he had become much more at ease.

His main concern was the crown prince position. Connor had made significant progress, and the king was thankful to see the boy improving. It was good that Salvador could watch over his son just a little longer.

With that, what more could he wish for?

Being able to think this clearly was the result of many conversations with Sebastian. Though Salvador had always known these truths, hearing them from someone with authority felt different.

His life was in Sebastian's hands, so the physician's medicines were gospel, and his words, law.

The day before the envoy delegation departed, Salvador summoned Carissa to the palace, where he had Rafael and Sebastian by his side.

"I have a message for you to deliver to Grand General Sullivan. I am grateful for the sacrifices he and his family have made for Starhaven. I will never forget the Sullivan family, and I am certain the people of this kingdom will also hold them in their hearts. In the future, history will record Grand General Sullivan as

one of Starhaven's greatest heroes," Salvador said.

In other words, the earlier demotion and dismissal were only temporary. Dominic's

accomplishments would undoubtedly be recorded in history.

Carissa knew her grandfather didn't care about such things—his actions and

legacy would be judged by the people and future generations. But she was certain Salvador's words would bring him joy.

Chapter 1496

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The evening before the trip, Carissa, accompanied by Rafael, made her way to bid farewell to Helen. Since she was leaving early in the morning, before her mother-in-law would be awake, Carissa chose to say her goodbyes the night before.

Helen had known about the trip to Orivenia for some time. At first, she hadn't fully understood the situation and felt Salvador's order was a bit much. Why did it have to be Carissa, of all people, who had to undertake such a long and tiring journey?

But after hearing from Violet that the real purpose of the journey was for Carissa to visit her maternal family, Helen only sighed quietly.

"The greatest pain in life is the separation from loved ones, whether by life or death. And the greatest joy is the reunion with loved ones after a long time apart."

Of course, those words were spoken to Violet, and would never be said in front of Carissa. To say them to her would be like rubbing salt in an open wound. After all, Helen had come to love and cherish her daughter-in-law, and didn't want to make her feel any more sorrow.

Now, as she watched Carissa prepare to leave, Helen couldn't help but feel a touch of emotion. She had once fiercely opposed this marriage, having disliked Carissa simply because it would be her second marriage, which meant she wasn't worthy of Helen's noble and majestic son.

But in time, Helen grew to fear and respect Carissa. Formidable as she was, Carissa had proven to be fiercely protective, and in the end, Helen's heart softened.

The relationship had evolved, and now, all that remained was the desire to cherish her.

"I've prepared some gifts for Grand General Sullivan and his family. They've already been loaded onto the carriage. Be sure to give them my regards, and wish them good health and happiness," Helen said.

Carissa nodded. "Thank you, Mother. I also wish you good health."

Helen glanced at her, thinking how her daughter-in-law was far less charming than Violet, who always spoke so sweetly. It was good enough that Carissa wished for her health, but why not say a little more? Others would have showered her with all sorts of pleasantries.

Her eyes then fell on her son, standing like an immovable mountain next to his wife. At that moment, Helen realized there was no point in complaining. He was even more reserved than Carissa.

When he came to pay his respects, all he said was, "Greetings, Mom."

No more, no less.

Helen gave Carissa a few more reminders for the journey and urged them to rest early so she wouldn't be delayed in the morning. The couple took their leave and returned to Orchid Hall.

Lulu had finished packing everything. She, along with Violet and Cynthia, would be accompanying Carissa on this journey.

Lulu was filled with excitement. She knew how long Carissa had yearned to visit Victory Pass, but various obstacles had kept her from going. Now, at last, the wish would be fulfilled.

Once her things were packed onto the carriage, she turned to see Rafael and Carissa returning. A bright smile spread across her face as she hurried to greet them.

"Lulu, why aren't you off to rest yet?" Carissa teased, reaching up to lightly tap her cheek. "If you're not up in the morning, I won't wait for you."

"I'll go right away. I promise, I won't make you wait in the morning," Lulu replied hastily.

She couldn't bear to be separated from her mistress for long, but there was still some work to do. Lily and Joy were preparing snacks for the journey, meant for Carissa to eat on the road, and Lulu couldn't resist offering a hand. She waved

cheerfully and hurried off, her steps light with excitement.

Even Rafael noticed and remarked, "It's been a long time since I've seen Lulu so lively and happy."

Carissa's smile faded slightly as she replied, "She sees my family as her own."

Rafael nodded thoughtfully. "And I see you treat her as a sister. No wonder she doesn't want to marry."

Carissa sat down and began untangling her hair. "Even if she does marry, it will be to someone in the capital. I couldn't bear to send her too far away."

Rafael moved behind her and gently wrapped his arms around her neck, his face brushing against hers.

His voice was filled with longing as

he said, "You be gone for at least three months. I can't bear to be

apart from you. I wish I could go et

with you, but with all my duties. I wonder if your grandfather and his family will be disappointed that I'm not coming along."

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Carissa leaned into him a little more. "I wish you could come too, but you're needed here. You have the princes to teach, and His Majesty can't be without you. Grandpa and everyone else will understand."

Rafael sighed, his handsome face tinged with regret. "Just remember to write to me often."

Chapter 1497

On the twelfth day of July, the Starhaven envoy delegation departed the capital in a grand procession, heading toward Orivenia.

Rafael rode alongside the group for five miles, only reining in his horse reluctantly when Dylan and Jacob both insisted it was time to stop. Carissa turned back to wave at him, her smile as bright as ever. There wasn't a hint of sadness on her face.

Rafael gazed after her, his eyes filled with longing.

But under his breath, he muttered, "She's heartless, truly heartless."

The sun had risen high, and the road was still and stifling with the lack of wind. Still, Rafael waited until the last of the procession had disappeared from view before reluctantly turning his horse around and heading back.

This journey to Orivenia was a significant one. Carissa had brought along three hundred men from the Mystic Army, as well as Travis, Violet, and the others.

Though the two kingdoms enjoyed a temporary peace after the last conflict, Leroy had made public what happened with their late crown prince. The news stirred much animosity toward Starhaven among Orivenia's people, which meant that a larger entourage was necessary for the safety of Kendrick and the rest of the envoys.

Carissa had little direct interaction with Kendrick. In fact, her dealings with him and his wife had been few and far between.

His princess consort, Adelaide, was Kylie's cousin. At a previous banquet, Adelaide had publicly insulted Carissa, claiming the painting she had presented as a gift was a forgery. Since then, their

relationship had been strained. In recent years, Adelaide had become remarkably reclusive. She avoided most social gatherings, attending only the mandatory affairs.

The two women, as sisters-in-law, maintained a distant and cordial relationship- nothing more.

For his part, Kendrick seldom visited Hell Monarch Estate. It was this quiet lifestyle that had allowed him and his family to remain in the capital, never moving to their fief. Salvador had never once considered him a threat, not in the slightest.

Rumors often labeled Kendrick as mediocre, though Carissa hadn't bothered to verify whether there was any truth to them. But two days into the journey, Violet remarked that he seemed to have been dropped on his head as a child, which explained why he rarely made public appearances.

Carissa couldn't help but laugh at her friend's sharp words. "That's a bit harsh. He's just inexperienced, nothing more."

Violet couldn't help herself and was as sharp as ever, adding, "If he were only three years old, you could say he was inexperienced. But at nearly thirty, it's nothing short of foolishness."

The incident that had set Violet off occurred during a night when they stopped at a relay station. Kendrick had claimed there were not enough rooms available, suggesting they all go to the nearest town and stay at an inn instead.

Michael had explained that the relay station could easily accommodate the number of adults in their party, and everyone had tents with them for camping if needed.

However, Kendrick insisted. He

argued that being able to travel was a rare occurrence, so he didn't want to be so miserly. He offered to pay for the inn himself, and even proposed treating everyone to a lavish meal. After all, they were on the road, and such comforts were needed to wash away the fatigue of the journey.

The rest of the group hadn't really considered his suggestion, but Kendrick was persistent. He insisted on bringing his retinue to the inn and even instructed the relay station staff to distribute the pre-arranged food to nearby villagers, rather than let it go to waste.

Reluctantly, the group followed him to a nearby town, Longvale. It was a small town, with only three inns that were all fully booked. Not a single room was available.

With no place to stay, the idea of a lavish meal became even more impossible. The town hadn't prepared for such a large group of visitors, and food couldn't just appear out of thin air to serve dozens of tables.

The envoy delegation couldn't be split up and left to fend for themselves either. If anything went wrong, the consequences would be unthinkable. In the end, they had no choice but to buy some dry rations and travel back to the relay station overnight, leaving everyone utterly exhausted and starving.

Violet considered herself someone who could endure hardship, but she had no patience for unnecessary suffering caused by sheer stupidity. That was why she said Kendrick must have been dropped on his head as a child.

The others were equally frustrated, secretly comparing him to Rafael and wondering how two royal princes could be so different.

Carissa could have stopped Kendrick's foolish decision, but she noticed that he had been trying to assert his authority over the past two days. Instead of interfering, she decided it was better to let him learn the consequences of his actions. By nipping his ambitions in the bud, life would be easier for everyone in the days to come.

Chapter 1498

After nearly twenty days of grueling travel, they finally arrived at Victory Pass on the third of August.

The heat had been unbearable along the way, causing many in the party to fall ill. Fortunately, Carissa had come well-prepared with plenty of medicine. They had also brought along a royal physician, Dorian, who was able to manage the illnesses without any major issues.

But Kendrick, having never endured such hardship, was exhausted beyond measure. By the tenth day of their journey, he could barely speak. His face and lips were pale, and the exhaustion was evident in every line of his features.

When they finally reached the outskirts of Victory Pass and saw the Sullivan family and the troops come out to greet them, Kendrick collapsed. The sight of him fainting right there gave everyone a fright, and they quickly rushed to carry him back.

However, Carissa barely noticed Kendrick's condition. As soon as she saw her family, she ran straight into her grandfather's arms, tears streaming down her face without stopping.

Dominic looked at her with affectionate eyes, gently patting her head as he, too, fought to hold back his emotions. He had thought their farewell in the capital might be their last, never expecting they'd have the chance to see each other again.

After a moment, he softly said, "Enough now, don't make a scene. Wipe your tears and go greet your uncles."

Carissa lifted her head and hastily wiped her tears, only to stop when she saw the weathered, aged face of her third uncle and the empty sleeve of his tunic. As her heart broke all over again, she turned away, tears flooding down her cheeks once

more.

She had known for some time that Wyatt had lost his arm, but seeing it firsthand was another kind of pain altogether.

When the Sullivan family's second son, Wilson Sullivan, saw Carissa, he couldn't help but think of her mother, his own sister. His eyes reddened at the thought.

Wyatt knew his niece was crying because of him. Swallowing the emotions welling up inside, he forced a smile and flicked his sleeve.

"Want to test out your uncle's sleeve technique?" he quipped.

Before she could react, he infused his strike with inner force and sent a gust of force her way. Caught off guard, Carissa nearly lost her footing, stumbling back two steps before steadying herself.

"Wyatt, stop teasing Carissa," Wallace said with a laugh, stepping forward to steady her with a hand on her shoulder.

His tan skin, much like his brothers, only seemed to accentuate the bright gleam in his eyes.

"Let me take a good look at our Starhaven female general. Truly, we are all so proud of you. Well done! Well done indeed!"

Carissa wiped her tears with a laugh, her sunburned cheeks turning even redder. "Uncle Wallace, you're making fun of me. How could I possibly compare to you?"

Since there were still other officials present, the family's excitement at being reunited was momentarily restrained.

Davis noticed they were looking their way and immediately led his group forward to greet them. No matter how high-ranking the officials

present were, they all had to bow

and greet Dominic, who held no official title but was still regarded with deep respect. Dominic humbly waved them off, though he accepted their gestures with the dignity of an elder.

After exchanging pleasantries, the group headed to the marshal's residence, Stormwatch Keep.

The cooks had already prepared a feast to welcome them, but Carissa first went to visit her aunt. Violet and the others, understanding the family's need for a private moment, did not want to intrude, so they went to have their own meal. They weren't concerned about Carissa, who would certainly be well taken care of.

When Cindy saw Carissa, she immediately embraced her and cried, overcome with emotion. Her other aunts were similarly teary-eyed, unable to take their eyes off their beloved niece.

Word of the troubles back in the capital had reached them, including Harvey's involvement in the rebellion and Heather's subsequent imprisonment. Naturally, Carissa's aunts asked about Leona.

Carissa reassured them that Leona

was doing well and living a good life.

As for Heather, while they all said

she deserved her fate, deep down they were still somewhat worried Carissa explained that

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arrangements had been made in prison. Heather would endure some hardship, but it wouldn't be unbearable.

"She deserves it!" Cindy fumed.

She recalled how Dominic had been confined to Sullivan Estate previously, and how Heather never once visited. The bitterness in her heart still ran deep.

Carissa didn't dwell on it, excusing herself to visit the memorial plaque of her grandmother, Edith Evans.

Though she had fallen ill and passed away after the series of misfortunes struck the Sinclair family, no official mourning period was declared upon her death.

The court was aware of her passing, but chose not to publicize it. If they had, all the Sullivan family's sons would have had to observe a period of mourning. Even

if they were recalled to duty under special circumstances, it would still have involved a lot of complications and unnecessary delays.

With the war intensifying, many decisions had been made out of necessity, leaving little room for alternatives. Though there was no formal mourning period, all the proper rites had been observed without a single day missed.

Carissa still remembered her grandmother clearly-Edith had always been a kind, gentle woman. She never called her granddaughter by name, but instead always referred to her by her nickname, Little Gem. It signified how she, as the only girl among her six older brothers, was as precious as a gem.

Now, kneeling before Edith's memorial plaque, Carissa couldn't help but shed more tears.

Her voice caught as she whispered, "Grandma, your little gem is here to see you."

Chapter 1499

After lighting a candle for Edith, everyone returned to the backyard. They wiped away their tears, set aside their grief, and gathered around Carissa to ask about her married life. The most frequent question was about how well Rafael treated her.

That was how families were. They knew she was capable, yet they couldn't help but yearn for her spouse to treat her with genuine love and care.

Carissa had many cousins, all daughters of her uncles, but most had only met her a handful of times. Still, when they saw her, they were all overjoyed.

Her cousins were all married, and many had returned to Victory Pass with their husbands and children. Having heard so much about Carissa, they couldn't help but feel a mix of admiration and sympathy.

Among them was Shayla Sullivan, the eldest daughter of Carissa's second aunt. She had married Chase Hudson, one of Dominic's subordinates. But within a year of marriage, Chase died in battle before their child had even been born.

Now, the child was 12 years old.

Shayla had opened an orphanage in Victory Pass, taking in abandoned babies. There were now over 30 children under her care, but life was incredibly difficult. Her resources were stretched thin, and some days, she wasn't sure how much longer she could continue.

Upon hearing that Carissa had opened a workshop in the capital, she sought her out for advice on how to manage it successfully.

"I rely entirely on our family's support now. Otherwise, the children wouldn't even have enough to eat," Shayla admitted in a humble tone, her voice thick with shame.

Carissa noticed her cousin's coarse clothing, patched in several places. Even her shoes were worn through and patched. It was clear that times were hard.

"Shayla, running a workshop is different from running an orphanage," Carissa began. "In the workshop, everyone is capable of supporting themselves. I only provide them with a place to stay and a community of people whose circumstances are similar to theirs, so they can support each other. But your orphanage is filled with infants who can't fend for themselves. They depend on you entirely."

"You're right. They can't care for themselves." Shayla sighed, her face drawn with worry. "I'm not capable of much, but I can't bear to turn them away."

Her voice gentle but firm, Carissa offered some advice, saying, "Adopting infants is a noble cause, but you must act within your means. When it exceeds your capabilities, it becomes a burden. Not just on you, but on your family as well."

"You can't send them away, of course, but you need to find a way to sustain them. I suggest you don't take in any more children for now. And perhaps, since Victory Pass is temporarily exempt from paying taxes, you could petition the local government to establish the orphanage as an official institution. They may allocate funds to you, and it wouldn't require approval from court, so it shouldn't take long."

The room fell silent as her words sank in.

Carissa observed their expressions

and guessed that they had likely considered it. However, the separation of military and

government affairs meant that if the Sullivan family pressured the local authorities, it could easily lead to

criticism, especially since the

orphanage was now under the management of one of their own.

On the surface, it might seem like a noble cause to help abandoned infants. But if someone wanted to stir up trouble, they could spin it in many ways. For instance, they might accuse the Sullivan family of using the orphanage to siphon tax money from the local treasury, or claim it was a front for personal gain.

What was once a noble cause could easily become a scandal and a serious crime.

Also, Magnus Smith, who worked in the local government, had been sent by Salvador. He was specifically there to oversee the Sullivan family.

How could those in high positions ever fully trust a family that held military power?

Carissa chuckled. "Actually, there's no need for you to get involved. There's someone else who is perfect for this task."

Everyone looked at her, curiosity written on their faces, waiting for her to reveal who she meant.

Carissa only grinned and replied, "Don't worry, I'll speak to him first."

Victory Pass was far from Salvador's reach, and the military and local government were technically separate. However, in a region frequently plagued by war, the military naturally held a higher status. Yet, the balance between the two had been remarkably maintained.

The Sullivan family didn't compete for status because their goals lay elsewhere.

But to others, this made them seem easy to manipulate.

Now, it wasn't like Carissa wanted to fight for status on their behalf either. Orphanages existed in many parts of Starhaven, funded by the court and managed by local government offices.

If other states could have them, why not Victory Pass? The reason was simple: it wasn't considered a political achievement and would require significant funds. Yet, this seemingly insignificant achievement was exactly what Kendrick needed.

He knew he had to remain low-key and unremarkable, but he also couldn't bear to be seen as a useless prince. If he could earn a good reputation, it might elevate his standing when he returned to the capital.

Most importantly, the entire endeavor would bring him benefits without any drawbacks. From his behavior at the relay station, it was clear that he occasionally liked to make a splash, even if just a little.

So, let him have this.

Chapter 1500

Kendrick didn't wake until well into the afternoon the following day, his body heavy with exhaustion and hunger. When his eyes finally fluttered open, he felt as if his entire body had been shattered. Every muscle ached, and lifting even his arm seemed like a Herculean task.

The weariness sank deep into his bones, and he had no energy to move. His attendant, a trusted servant by the name of Avery, stood at his bedside, awaiting his attention.

He said quietly, "Your Highness, Lady Carissa has been waiting for you for half the day. She wishes to speak with you."

Kendrick had initially planned to stay in bed, have all his meals brought to him, and then drift back to sleep. He was simply too tired to move.

But when he heard that Carissa had waited so long, he immediately threw the covers off and commanded, "Prepare me, quickly."

Over the course of the journey, Kendrick had come to understand just how formidable Carissa was. As a woman, she had never once complained about exhaustion and led the entire group safely through several dangerous situations. Even as many others fell ill along the way, she remained strong.

He knew better than to take someone like her lightly—such people rarely wasted time with idle conversation, and when they spoke, it was for a reason.

Despite his hunger gnawing at him, Kendrick hurriedly washed up, drank a quick bowl of porridge, and then went to see Carissa.

"What is it you wish to discuss, Lady Carissa?"

Carissa wasted no time explaining the matter of the orphanage. Kendrick listened carefully, his expression thoughtful. After a moment, he nodded, as if understanding everything at once.

"I see. Though I arrived yesterday and collapsed from exhaustion, I couldn't help but notice the simple furnishings here at Stormwatch Keep. Everything appears so humble and frugal. The grand general's family has served the kingdom loyally and should not be treated so poorly."

Carissa's lips twitched slightly. "Your Highness, you misunderstand. This isn't what I meant. The Sullivan family will not take a single coin for themselves from this. What we're doing is for the children—and for your reputation. These children will remember your kindness, even from far away in the capital, and everyone in the court will praise your good deeds."

She quickly added, "Of course, the Sullivan family will benefit from this too."

Kendrick's eyes widened slightly as he processed her words.

So, that was the plan. He could see the logic behind it. The Sullivan family might struggle, but they were not without support from the Duke of Northwatch's family and the Hell Monarch's wealth.

But Dominic had previously fallen out of favor due to the incident involving Aurora, and to some extent, it had damaged his standing with the people. This was a way to repair that—to win back their trust and goodwill.

Without hesitation, Kendrick nodded firmly. "Consider it done. I'll handle it."

He had a tendency to overthink things, and now his mind was racing with possibilities.

If this arrangement benefited everyone, then they were all in the same boat, weren't they? That thought made him feel like he and the Sullivan family were practically old friends already. Besides, Carissa was his sister-in-law-technically family, right?

Unaware of his thoughts, Carissa instructed Travis to accompany Kendrick to the local government's office.

Travis was no longer the naive country boy who had first entered Rafael's service, and he had learned much during his time alongside Jacob. He had become sharp and capable, now seasoned in the ways of diplomacy.

During their quick trip to the local government's office, Travis advised Kendrick to adopt the princely manner and keep silent. It would be fine to let Travis handle the talking.

"The truly authoritative don't speak much," Travis said, his tone calm but firm.

Kendrick found the advice reasonable. He had always feared his older brother Salvador, who, with just a glance, could impose an almost suffocating pressure on anyone in his line of sight.

In truth, Travis was worried Kendrick

would say too much and make

things worse. After spending time with the prince on this journey, he had come to understand the man's nature all too well. Kendrick didn't think before he spoke-promises rotted off his tongue as easily as breathing. If he liked someone, he would swear he would give them mountains of gold and silver without a second thought.

But if Kendrick went to Magnus and started making those same grand, careless promises, it could spell trouble. After all, Magnus didn't know Kendrick like Travis did.

As it turned out, things went surprisingly smoothly. Magnus was more than willing

to do Kendrick this favor-he was eager to curry favor with Kendrick, hoping to use the prince's influence to secure a transfer back to the capital.

Having previously served in the capital, Magnus knew of Kendrick's marriage to the Quinton family's daughter, And though Kendrick was

only a prince without true authors

the Quinton family held significant power. After all, Malcolm was in charge of the Civil Department. A simple word from him could send Magnus back to the capital.

Magnus acted swiftly. By the next day, a location for the orphanage had been secured—an old,

abandoned temple on the western

side of the city. Repairs began

almost immediately, and belie

any

work had even started, officials had already hung the official plaque for the orphanage.

Carissa and Travis, along with Violet, visited the site. While the building was indeed aged, it had potential. The property included front and back courtyards, with the rear garden large enough to grow vegetables and fruits.

As they were leaving the soon-to-be orphanage, Carissa and Travis noticed a man and a woman standing by the door, peering inside.

The pair looked out of place, their clothes worn and dusty. The man's shoes were so torn that one of his toes was exposed. At first, they seemed like mere curious onlookers, a couple of ordinary townsfolk drawn in by the commotion.

But as Carissa lifted her gaze to their faces, she froze, taken aback.

The man had a refined, commanding presence. Yet, his worn and tattered clothes didn't seem out of place on him—it was as if he was born to wear them. Beside him, the woman had striking features. Her bone structure was exquisite, though her eyebrows were thicker than most women's, not the delicate, arched kind they often painted. Instead, they gave her a bold, almost heroic look.