

## War Song 1521

### Chapter 1521

Jeanette didn't notice the subtle smirk tugging at the corner of Calista's lips.

The maid had been by her side since her time as a mid-ranked concubine. Smart and composed, Calista often offered Jeanette advice.

When Kylie had tried to win Jeanette over, Calista had warned that the queen's repeated house arrests were a sign Salvador no longer favored her. She had suggested Jeanette steer clear of Kylie, who held no authority over the harem, and instead align herself with Grace and Sylvia.

Calista had been right. Grace had treated Jeanette well, providing her with everything she needed, making it so no one dared to look down on her anymore.

But things had changed.

Grace, once a true ally, was now using Jeanette's pregnancy to get closer to Salvador. Jeanette couldn't help but feel uncomfortable about it.

"Do you not like Lady Grace's visits?" Calista asked as she adjusted the pillows to lift Jeanette's head and back.

Long days in bed had begun to wear on her; her back ached from lying down too much.

Trusting Calista as she did, Jeanette didn't hesitate to speak her mind, explaining, "When my pregnancy was more stable, Lady Grace didn't visit so frequently. Now, it's clear she's not coming to see me out of genuine concern. It's all because the king is here. He visits because he cares for me, but Lady Grace and Prince Caden keep interrupting us, so we hardly have a chance to talk."

Calista offered a comforting smile. "You don't need to worry about such things. Just focus on taking care of yourself."

Jeanette sighed deeply. "I lie in bed all day and night, and can only sit up when His Majesty comes. This child is certainly causing me some discomfort. I hope it's a prince—then at least all this suffering will be worth it."

Calista chuckled lightly. "Your wish will surely come true, Your Grace."

Jeanette turned her head to look at her. "What do you think is wrong with His Majesty? I hear Healer Dalton has been living in the palace and taking care of him day and night. Meanwhile, the royal physicians only visit to check on him and leave."

Calista thought for a moment before replying, "I'm not sure, Your Grace. However, His Majesty seems to be in good spirits. It's likely that Healer Dalton was brought in to help with his recovery. Since the royal physicians only need to check on him, it doesn't seem serious."

Jeanette placed a hand over her stomach, a glimmer of ambition in her eyes. "If I give birth to a prince, surely I'll be promoted to a higher rank. With the king's favor, I might even stand a chance to compete for more."

Calista raised an eyebrow. "Yes, Your Grace. So, it's even more important that you take good care of yourself."

Jeanette closed her eyes, pressing her hand more firmly against her belly. She was determined to protect this child—no matter what. With this child, her future in the palace would be much more secure.

Getting promoted to a higher rank was something Jeanette had never dared to dream of when she first entered the palace. It was only thanks to her mother's gift of good looks that she had won Salvador's favor.

She knew that within the harem, everything was uncertain. Nothing held more weight than the king's favor and the promise of offspring. Those were the only things that truly mattered.

"If I were to become a high-ranking concubine, I won't have to keep flattering others. I won't need to constantly please Lady Grace," said Jeanette. Her tone was soft, tinged with a hint of sadness, yet there was also some arrogance in it.

Calista didn't reply. She only helped Jeanette settle into bed before quietly leaving the room.

From that day on, Grace stopped visiting with Caden.

At first, Jeanette felt a bit uneasy. She thought the words she said to Salvador had reached Grace's ears and made her angry. But the next day, Grace still sent royal jelly soup for her. A royal physician examined it and reported there was nothing wrong with it, so Jeanette felt slightly relieved.

However, she couldn't be completely at ease. So, she had Calista inquire about Caden. It turned out that the prince was sick, so much so that he didn't even go to the study for lessons or participate in archery practice.

Grace had been attending to him every day, which was why she hadn't been able to visit Jeanette.

This news allowed Jeanette to

finally relax. When Salvador came to visit, she made sure to seize every opportunity to attract his attention knowing well that men tended to be drawn to women who appeared delicate and in need of protection. So, she would often feign weariness, making herself appear fragile and vulnerable.

"Foolish girl!" Grace muttered lazily as she reclined in her chaise lounge, a golden armor clasp brushing lightly against her satin gown as she listened to the person speaking to

her. I she's so ungrateful, let her be. If

Some people just aren't meant for

good fortune."

Calista, who shouldn't have been there, smiled slightly as she said, "She doesn't

know how much you've done for her, Your Grace."

Grace chuckled. "I'm not doing all this for her, but it does benefit her in the end.

She's a disobedient wretch who doesn't know her place. There's no use keeping

her around. Since she's useless, it's best to discard her."

"Understood, Your Grace. I'll turn a blind eye. Is Prince Caden in serious condition?" Calista asked.

"It's nothing. He's just caught a chill," Grace replied.

Given Caden's esteemed position, it was hard to believe he could fall ill so easily

-unless Grace had allowed it.

Chapter 1522

In Tranquil Palace, Cecil sat still in a chair while Phoebe carefully dried his damp hair.

"You just washed your hair the other day, and now your hair and face are covered in fur after you went out to play with that little raccoon. If this happens again, I'll smack you on the backside," she said with an air of annoyance.

The child, with delicate features and bright eyes, leaned into his sister's embrace. He smiled widely and said, "But the little raccoon is so fun and cute! It walks all over me with its little feet, and it's so cozy when I hold it."

Phoebe sighed. "Mom said that Dad doesn't like raccoons. You keep telling him about it. No wonder he's been avoiding you lately."

Cecil remained perfectly still, letting his sister continue to comb his hair.

But he wasn't one to back down, so he said, "Dad and I are two different people. We each have our own likes and dislikes. Just because Dad doesn't like

something doesn't mean I can't like it. I really like the raccoon. I love it. No matter how much Dad dislikes it, I won't give it up."

Phoebe tapped his nose. "Sharp-tongued."

Cecil grinned. "You can't win against me because you don't have any good arguments. Uncle Rafael always says that if you're reasonable, no one can talk over you."

"Then, why haven't you gone to practice martial arts with Uncle Rafael lately?" Phoebe asked, raising an eyebrow.

Cecil tilted his head. "He's only teaching the basics, which I can practice here. I've already learned it all. As for horseback riding... I can't get on a horse yet. I'll wait until I'm older and my legs are longer to practice."

"You've already learned it all? I don't believe you."

"I really have." Cecil nodded vigorously. "Uncle Rafael teaches the same things every day. Connor still has to learn them, but I only needed one lesson to get it."

"You're just bragging," Phoebe teased, poking his nose affectionately. "Well, never mind. You're still young. You can wait until you're older to learn properly."

"It's just the basics. It's not like I need to brag about it. It's nothing that impressive," Cecil mumbled.

A curtain gently fell, obscuring Sylvia's bright, beautiful face. She held the little raccoon in her arms as she walked out, her expression thoughtful and weighed down.

The attendant following her softly said, "Prince Cecil isn't affected, Your Grace. Don't worry."

"He's still young. He doesn't understand what His Majesty's favor really means," Sylvia replied, sighing softly.

It was as if a heavy, unspoken burden pressed against her chest, and she couldn't find a way to release it.

Previously, Sylvia had never given much thought to such matters. But once ambition took root, it grew like a stubborn weed. It was impossible to suppress, and it spread

uncontrollably. Now 1.61

Jeanette's pregnancy, Sylvia felt the need to set fire to the thriving growth inside her, unwilling to let it go.

"My lady, it's said that Lady Jeanette has been complaining to His Majesty about how Lady Grace and Prince Caden have been disturbing her. Lady Grace hasn't gone to visit her over the past few days," the attendant whispered quietly.

Sylvia sat down, absently stroking the little raccoon in her arms. It was hard to tell what she was thinking.

After a long pause, she finally looked up and asked, "Lady Jeanette's pregnancy was going well. How could it suddenly go wrong?"

"They say His Majesty has been taking medicine, which is affecting the pregnancy," the attendant replied.

"Probably just bad luck," Sylvia remarked calmly, a flash of coldness crossing her gaze.

On the night of the 18th, Jeanette suddenly experienced unbearable abdominal pain.

By the time Dorian arrived, she was already bleeding. After administering needle treatment and giving her two doses of medicine, they still couldn't save the baby.

Throughout the ordeal, Salvador

stayed close by. His expression was

unreadable as he listened to

Dorian's report, delivered in a

trembling voice. The disent

Salvador felt remained hidden behind his composed demeanor. Instead, he reassured Jeanette, telling her to rest and take care of herself.

Jeanette wept, nearly collapsing from the weight of her sorrow.

Her pale face was damp with sweat, and through her pained sobs, she cried, "Someone must have harmed my child. Your Majesty, please investigate!"

Victoria came personally to offer her condolences.

An investigation would be carried out, of course, but the royal physicians had already warned that Salvador's constant use of medicine, especially during the time Jeanette conceived, had made the child more

vulnerable than usual. Given that, it

was already a miracle the pregnancy had lasted this long.

After a thorough investigation, no signs of foul play were found. In the end, the

matter was considered closed.

## Chapter 1523

When Salvador returned to his palace, his mask of composure finally slipped and disappointment etched itself across his face.

The lack of evidence didn't mean there was no problem. In the harem, the methods used were often subtle, invisible even.

Sebastian had warned him that Jeanette might not be able to carry to term. Even if it did, the child could be born with deficiencies, or worse, could be a fool.

Salvador had once considered giving Jeanette a dose of medicine to terminate the pregnancy. But deep down, he hesitated as this might be his last child. He wasn't ready to give up hope just yet and had been willing to take a risk.

This time, he was certain that someone had interfered. Recently, he had been frequenting Jeanette's palace more often, and there were those in the harem who resented that.

Grace, for all her attention to Jeanette, had been met with ingratitude. Jeanette had become arrogant in her favor, even harboring resentment toward Grace. Salvador had hinted at it to her that day, but unfortunately, she hadn't picked up on it.

Grace had control over the harem, and many of the concubines had been placed there by her and Sylvia. If Grace wanted to harm Jeanette's child, it would have been easy.

However, Grace wouldn't have been the one to take action. If she had intended to harm Jeanette, she wouldn't have protected her so fiercely previously. In recent days, when Grace brought Caden to visit, it was as much to scheme for Caden's sake as to protect Jeanette's pregnancy.

Jeanette's words would have reached Grace's ears, and so she had stopped visiting her. With Grace openly distancing herself from Jeanette, it would have been much easier for someone with ill intentions to make a move.

Salvador's disappointment wasn't because Jeanette had lost the baby. It was the inevitable power struggle for the throne that had, in the end, come to pass, just as he had feared.

He could almost guess who was behind it either Kylie or Sylvia, though he suspected there was a higher possibility of the latter being the culprit.

He was now faced with two options: either conduct a thorough investigation and punish the culprit severely, or cover everything up and hide the fact that the fight for the throne had already begun.

However, if he chose to investigate, it would inevitably drag their families— Malcolm's or even Patrick's—into the scandal. They were men the king had carefully chosen and relied upon.

Thus, Salvador had no choice but to lean toward covering things up.

It was cruel and cold to confront one's own heart, but the person who acted had done what Salvador had long hesitated to do. Whenever he had free time, he would go and spend time with Jeanette, subconsciously making his choice. He was trying to ease his guilt by doing this.



When he learned that the child was lost, an emptiness had consumed him. Now, as he reflected on the situation, his heart was full of conflicting emotions, anger being one of them.

Watching him with concern, Derek said, "Your Majesty, please be at peace. Your health is of utmost importance."

"Do you think Sylvia did this?" Salvador asked, his eyes as cold as ice.

Derek quickly knelt. "Your Majesty, I don't know. I wouldn't dare to speak rashly."

Salvador's eyes remained dark and unyielding. "Rise. We both know the truth, but don't have much time left. There are certain people who cannot be toughed. A single move could shake everything to its core.

Derek understood everything clearly in his mind. He also knew why Salvador didn't want to make a big fuss about it. There were the reasons the king gave, and other reasons too.

Perhaps it wasn't worth creating a storm for the sake of the child. Perhaps it was simply a matter of fate.

After all, Salvador had asked Sebastian several times how likely it was that the child would be born a fool.

As such a large incident had happened in the palace, news of it quickly reached everyone.

Soon, everyone came to visit

Jeanette, including Kylie, who had

not concerned herself with the

matter until now. Of course, Sylvia was also among the visitors. All of them displayed their sympathy, offering kind words of comfort, assuring Jeanette that she was still young and would have children in the future.

Grace arrived fashionably late, bringing a number of supplements with her. She sat by Jeanette's bed, gently wiping away her tears and urging her to take care of her health.

Surrounded by all the visitors, Jeanette felt both fearful and cold at the same time.

She knew, deep down, that one of

them was responsible for her loss. She just didn't know who it was. However the only one she had truly wronged was Grace. The complaints she had voiced to Salvador that day had likely reached Derek's ears and been passed on to Grace.

Jeanette knew too well the darkness in the hearts of these chamberlains. When

there was gain to be had, they swarmed like flies to rot, capable of the most despicable deeds.

Chapter 1524

Carissa learned about Jeanette's miscarriage from Rafael.

When Adelaide came by to invite her to visit the palace, she agreed. At first, the two women had little to do with each other. But ever since Kendrick and Carissa went to Orivenia together, Adelaide had become quite friendly, saying that sisters-in-law should spend more time together.

As Kylie's cousin, Adelaide was a member of the Quinton family. She hadn't visited the queen since she was placed under house arrest, which made Carissa wonder if Adelaide's idea of "spending time together" meant the opposite-stay close if there were no troubles, but avoid each other if there was any.

It was much like when Salvador had once been wary of the Hell Monarch's household. Adelaide had kept her distance from Carissa then, fearing any trouble they faced might befall her too.

In truth, Kendrick hadn't done much of note. He had only received brief praise from Salvador. But even that one compliment was enough to make Kendrick proud for two years.

As they entered the palace together, Adelaide didn't say much, just a few casual remarks. Carissa thought her sister-in-law was actually a clever woman who sometimes played the fool, always seeking peace and safety. In such moments, she wouldn't speak much, doing her best not to give anyone anything to use against her.

Upon meeting Jeanette, Adelaide offered words of comfort, telling her that she and the child had a deep connection. After all, it was this child that had helped her rise in rank. Since their paths had crossed, it was only a matter of time before she would bear another child and continue their bond.

"You must take good care of yourself now," Adelaide said firmly. "Don't let yourself fall into despair. His Majesty is busy with state affairs, and if you keep crying all the time, it will only trouble him. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

Her words left little room for Carissa to interject.

Of course, Adelaide also made sure to add, "Lady Carissa, don't you agree?"

At moments like these, Carissa could only nod in agreement.

After Adelaide's comforting speech, Jeanette seemed much calmer and grew closer to her. However, Jeanette's attitude toward Carissa turned colder. Aware of the strange period Salvador had gone through, she couldn't help but feel uneasy in Carissa's presence.

Moreover, the king had a cold and distant attitude. If Carissa hadn't acted in a way that led him to misunderstand her, he would never have done something like that. Ultimately, it was this remarried woman's own fault for being restless in her own marriage.

Young, reckless, and unable to hide her intentions, Jeanette cast a sharp glance at Carissa and said, "Lady Adelaide is right. His Majesty cares for me, so it's only

a matter of time before I bear a child again."

Carissa, somewhat slow to pick up on things, assumed Jeanette was simply comforting herself.

She nodded in agreement. "Right."

Jeanette eyed her again, realizing that Carissa hadn't caught the real meaning of her words. It irritated her, but she didn't want to pursue it further. Though she disliked her, she had once

considered using her as an ally. She knew well enough that Carissa was someone she couldn't afford to offend. It was best to stop there.

After comforting Jeanette, Carissa and Adelaide went to visit Victoria.

The queen dowager didn't seem overly upset, simply saying, "If it was meant to

be, it would have been. There's no use forcing fate."

She then told Adelaide to visit Kylie, asking Carissa to stay to speak with her

alone. Adelaide, ever perceptive, immediately excused herself.

Victoria turned her gaze to Carissa and bluntly said, "Jeanette's miscarriage was Sylvia's doing."

"Lady Sylvia?" Carissa repeated, stunned.

The queen dowager laughed coldly.

Live

"At first, it was Kylie's idea. She wanted the king to neglect Sylvia and Cecil, forcing her to take action. Once Sylvia took the bait, the king would surely turn against her. The king hasn't investigated, but know everyone in the palace like the back of my hand. I know who is loyal to whom. A thorough investigation would expose everything."

Carissa frowned. "Does His Majesty know?"

Victoria sighed. "If he wanted to investigate, he would have a harder time than I would. Even so, he's in a difficult position. Patrick is an advisor he chose personally. were to be found guilty of

endangering a royal heir,

overne

Would be guilty of failing tick

educate

his daughter.

"The king probably has an idea of what happened, but he doesn't want to and can't afford to investigate. In the end, the situation will play out as Kylie wanted. He'll certainly neglect Sylvia and Cecil."

Chapter 1525

Carissa thought being a king must be incredibly frustrating. The balancing and scheming involved made it feel like nothing was truly in Salvador's control.

Right now, Salvador probably wanted to make Connor the crown prince, so Kylie couldn't be involved in this mess. Connor was already a bit mediocre, and if the queen was found guilty of plotting against a royal heir and causing trouble in the harem, his chances of securing the crown prince position would become even more precarious.

As for Sylvia, who was directly involved, Salvador couldn't pursue the matter too much out of respect for her father.

All in all, this entire affair could never be brought into the open.

"None of them are easy to deal with." Victoria sighed. "But in the face of absolute power, who wouldn't want to fight for it?"

Carissa was about to ask why Victoria was telling her all this, but before she could, the queen dowager said, "You need to be aware of what's happening in the palace. People's hearts are the hardest thing to control. The king once feared the Hell Monarch and his people, but now he trusts all of you.

"Those who want to take the throne will come for you first. The intrigues in the harem are far more complicated than they seem on the surface. When faced with a situation, you need to think two steps ahead and dig deeper."

Carissa nodded. "Understood."

After a pause, she asked, "So, Mother, is that it? Will this matter just be covered up?"

Victoria shook her head. "People don't just get away with the things they've done. Even if it's not dealt with now, it'll catch up to them sooner or later. Everyone faces the consequences of their own actions."

Carissa hesitated, then asked, "It seems the harem will never be at peace. Since you know everyone's intentions now, can you stop it?"

Victoria let out a long sigh. "Like I said, people's hearts are the hardest thing to control. One thought can lead to ruin, another to salvation. It all depends on what they choose. You can try to guard against trouble every day, but you can't stop it completely."

Carissa had to agree. No one could truly control everything-not even Salvador, who already had enough to handle with the court, the harem, and his own health.

In the end, the fight for the throne would come down to the three princes. Other than tightening security, there wasn't much else that could be done. It wasn't like they could send the princes away or get rid of the entire harem.

What happened with Jeanette was just the beginning. There would be plenty more schemes to come.

Carissa wondered why Salvador didn't just name the crown prince already. He clearly favored Connor, so making it official now would save everyone the trouble of endless power struggles.

But that wasn't something she could ask Victoria, nor was it her place to bring it up. Even though she was commander of the Mystic Army, matters of succession were beyond her authority.

Since she couldn't ask Victoria, she returned home and asked Rafael instead.

"Whether or not the crown prince is named doesn't change much. If it comes to that point, the only difference will be whether they kill a prince or the crown prince," he answered grimly.

Carissa felt a chill run down her spine. Someone had already taken the first step; there was no turning back now.

The throne had a pull like no other. Once someone set their sights on it, they would stop at nothing to claim it.

"In every era, the fight for the throne only starts after the princes come of age and are given their own titles and territories. Why has it already begun when they're still so young?" she murmured.

"Because His Majesty's illness can no longer be hidden. Even if they don't know the full extent of his condition, seeing Sebastian residing in the palace is enough of a hint. If they don't act now, when will they?" Rafael replied.

He sighed and continued, "If the princes were grown, they'd have their own supporters at court. The power struggle would be more balanced and could drag on for years. But right now, while they're still young, it all comes down to the schemes of their mothers."

While the queen had been without real power for a long time, Grace and Sylvia had been in control of the harem. They had placed their own and even

people in various palaces, Victoria only knew part of it. Since that was the case, rooting them all out would be impossible.

Rafael had another concern-if the crown prince were officially chosen now, it might force the concubines to act sooner. As long as the decision wasn't made public, they could still hold on to a sliver of hope and hesitate to make a move.

Salvador thought the same. That was why he planned to write an edict naming his heir and keep it sealed away, only to be revealed on his deathbed. He wanted to protect his chosen successor for as long as possible.

And after what happened to Jeanette's child, Salvador was even more certain that was the right choice.

Chapter 1526

A few days later, the lifeless form of a palace maid was carried out of Victoria's palace.

That same day, Salvador issued an edict, commanding Sylvia to move out of Tranquil Palace. She was to take Phoebe and Cecil with her and settle in Laurel Palace.

Located in the northwest corner of the palace, Laurel Palace was near the Cold Palace. Almost no one went there on normal days.

When the edict was delivered, Sylvia was struck dumb. She stood frozen, unable to comprehend for a long time. It was some time before she managed to regain control of herself, though her face was still deathly pale.

"Pack up," she finally instructed her attendants in a hollow voice.

This was it—she and Cecil were completely out of the succession race.

Truth be told, she had expected this outcome ever since she learned of Jeanette's miscarriage. She had known this day would come. The dosage she had given Jeanette was small, barely enough to show any immediate effects. She had anticipated that it would take at least half a month for anything to happen.

But when the miscarriage occurred the very next day, it confirmed one fact—one

of her spies in Jeanette's circle had sided with either Kylie or Grace.

It no longer mattered who it was. Salvador had clearly learned of Sylvia's involvement in the miscarriage. The fact that he had ordered her relocation to another palace meant he knew she was behind it.

If she tried to resist or stir up more trouble, it would no longer be a simple relocation but banishment to the Cold Palace.

This was the best outcome Sylvia could hope for. If she was lucky, there might be no further retribution.



Soon, the news of Sylvia's transfer spread throughout the harem. Everyone still remembered her grand entrance into Tranquil Palace. Now, seeing her relegated to a palace near the Cold Palace, the gossip began. Many speculated that the move was tied to Jeanette's miscarriage.

However, Salvador's edict stated that the relocation was due to Cecil's health. Though the young prince was recovering, he still needed peace and quiet to regain his strength. So, Sylvia and the children would move to Laurel Palace to avoid disturbances.

Additionally, Sylvia was to care for Cecil. As a result, her authority to manage the harem would be temporarily relinquished. Salvador instructed that a suitable person be selected to work with Grace in managing affairs.

While the official reasoning seemed clear, who could truly know the truth?

Perhaps the one most delighted by this turn of events was Kylie. At last, the thorn in her side had been removed.

"Has everything been handled?" Kylie asked, a trace of satisfaction in her voice.

Lydia nodded. "You need not worry, Your Majesty. The palace maid was taken by the queen dowager. She was tortured, and confessed about Lady Sylvia before being put to death. I don't expect this matter to be tied to you, Your Majesty."

Kylie felt a stir of unease upon hearing that Victoria had conducted the interrogation. But after a moment, she reminded herself that there was no need to

worry too much. Since the palace maid had already confessed Sylvia's involvement, Victoria would have no reason to probe further.

Still, the queen found her joy somewhat dampened. After all, Sylvia was only being moved to another palace, and had been demoted rather than imprisoned. Even more irksome was the fact that Salvador and Victoria had gone so far as to make excuses, claiming the relocation was necessary for Cecil's recuperation.

"His Majesty will never let Lady Grace wield all the power. Do you think I have a chance of regaining control of the harem?" Kylie asked, her voice steady but sharp.

She had hoped this move would

serve two purposes. Not only would it pull Sylvia from power, it might also allow Kylie to reclaim her

authority of the harem. If she could take charge again, even if Grace

remained in charge of certain

matters, at least Kylie would retain ultimate say over the harem.

Lydia hesitated, unwilling to give false hope.

Finally, she simply said, "Your Majesty, we can only abide by His Majesty's decisions."

However, what came as a surprise to many was that Grace's authority was also rescinded. The control of the harem was temporarily handed to Victoria.

Others were perplexed by this shift, but Carissa understood. With the power in the queen dowager's hands, any plot against the crown prince would be far more difficult to execute. Everyone would have to lie low and wait-no one would dare make any bold moves in the short term.

On the third day after Sylvia's relocation, she made her way to Serenity Palace to seek an audience with Victoria.

Sylvia had come to terms with her downfall. When one chose a path, one had to be prepared for the consequences. Yet, this time, she knew that someone else had meddled behind the scenes. For that reason, she requested to see the queen dowager and spoke her suspicions aloud.

Victoria listened quietly as Sylvia confessed to having given Jeanette the miscarriage-inducing drug.

"If the medicine was to remain undetected, the dosage couldn't be too large. Otherwise, the royal physicians would surely notice.

"So, I instructed the palace maid to administer it slowly over the course of half a month. But Lady Jeanette's miscarriage occurred the very next day. I believe someone interfered behind the scenes. I am guilty, but the one who acted in the shadows is equally to blame," Sylvia explained.

Victoria looked at her with tired, swollen eyes.

Instead of responding to the accusation, she said, "You should focus on caring for Cecil in Laurel

Palace. The child is innocent, and the

king will not take his wrath out on him. In time, Cecil will have better days. But mark my words do not stir up any more trouble. That is my final counsel to you."

Chapter 1527

Sylvia's lips parted in shock. Her mind was in turmoil.

Based on Victoria's words, it was clear that they knew the truth, yet had no intention of investigating further.

But did Sylvia truly wish for them to pursue the matter?

If they did, she would be the first to bear the consequences. Regret settled over her like a heavy cloak. Coming to confess had only cemented her guilt. Lowering herself to the floor, she bowed deeply before stumbling out on unsteady feet.

Watching her retreating figure, Victoria thought back to when Sylvia first entered the palace. Back then, she had been strikingly beautiful, with a proud and aloof temperament. After securing Salvador's favor, she had become arrogant, even domineering.

Over the past two years, she had learned to restrain herself, but the pride in her bones had never truly faded. And now, just the glimmer of ambition had driven her to this.

Power could really drive people to madness.

To prevent further complications, Victoria issued an order: Kylie and Grace were to copy religious texts, a task that would last until New Year's Eve. Only then would they be permitted to leave their quarters.

As for Connor and Caden, they were to spend their days studying and their evenings training in martial arts under Rafael's guidance. Also, they would reside in Serenity Palace, with Kylie and Grace barred from seeing them.

Because Serenity Palace was an impenetrable stronghold, there was little risk of the princes' food or drink being tampered with. However, they were most vulnerable when traveling to and from their lessons, so Rafael arranged for soldiers from the Mystic Army to escort them, ensuring their safety.

Days passed, and before long, a rumor spread through the palace. It was said that Sylvia's demotion had been due to her involvement in Jeanette miscarriage.

But within a few days, another rumor arose, claiming that Sylvia had been innocent all along. The true culprit was Kylie, and Sylvia had merely taken the fall for her.

The rumor spread like wildfire, sweeping through the palace corridors until it reached the queen's ears.

Kylie was certain Sylvia had started the rumors. Now was the time for the queen to restore her reputation. Even if she had played a role in Jeanette's miscarriage, she couldn't allow the blame to fall upon her. Besides, she was confident there was no evidence against her. If there was, Salvador's wrath would have already descended upon Everspring Palace.

More importantly, Kylie knew precisely whom she could not afford to offend, and who might be worth stepping on, if only to test where Salvador's favor truly lay.

With that in mind, the queen led her attendants straight to Laurel Palace. The moment she laid eyes on Sylvia, she unleashed a torrent of scathing accusations. She claimed Sylvia had slandered her, spreading falsehoods and committing the grave offense of insubordination.

On those two charges, Kylie ordered her attendants to slap Sylvia as punishment.

Everyone in the palace knew that Sylvia had long since fallen from favor. With that in mind, how could the few attendants remaining in Laurel Palace protect her?

Right before Cecil and Phoebe's eyes, Sylvia was seized by the shoulders and struck across the face a dozen times. They slapped her until blood spilled from her lips and the world spun around her.

Phoebe fell to her knees and cried, "Mother, please spare her! Mom never said such things!"

But Cecil resorted to far more direct methods. He lunged at Kylie and sank his teeth into her arm, biting down with all his strength. Despite her striking him across the face, sending him tumbling to the ground, he scrambled up and bit her again.

The palace attendants hurried to stop him, but it took a lot of effort to control the child.

Pain flared in Kylie's arm, but she made no move to retaliate further. Instead, she cast Sylvia a cold, disdainful look.

"Look at the son you've raised. How dare he attack me! Such reckless defiance! If he behaves this way now, what chaos will he bring upon the kingdom in the future?"

Sylvia could hardly stand, swaying as her attendants held her up. Her

hair had come undone and her accessories were scattered on the ground. Yet, even in such a wretched state, she still shielded her children behind her. Her glare was fierce as she fixed it upon Kylie.

In a hoarse voice, she said, "Are you truly so blameless, Your Majesty? Do you dare swear to the heavens that you had no hand in the loss of Lady Jeanette's child?"

Obviously, Kylie had no intention of swearing such an oath.

Instead, she straightened up and declared with righteous indignation, "Only the guilty resort to deceitful words and show no remorse or

shame. You even incited palace net

servants to spread vile rumors and conspired to lay blame upon me. But the heavens see all, Lady Sylvia. Your retribution has come."

"Yes, everyone will get their retribution." Sylvia trembled with fury as she glared at

the shameless queen before her. "Wait and see."

"At this point, you're still unrepentant. You're truly beyond redemption," said Kylie, then turned and left without another word.

Naturally, word of the incident soon reached Victoria. She sighed and shook her head.

"What a fool. She's clever enough to attempt clearing her name and testing the king's response, yet blind to the fact that someone is deliberately stirring up conflict between them, waiting to reap the benefits of their strife."

#### Chapter 1528

Soon, Victoria issued an edict, stating that Sylvia had been relocated to Laurel Palace so Cecil could recover in peace. Under no circumstances was she to be neglected.

With the queen dowager watching over them, the Royal Management Department didn't dare slack in their duties. Sylvia still received food, clothing, and provisions befitting her rank. However, when her family sought an audience with her, they were turned away under the pretense that Cecil's recovery required absolute quiet.

Gladys had no choice but to seek out Carissa, hoping she could deliver some money on their behalf. If Sylvia could smooth things over with the right people, perhaps she and the children wouldn't suffer as much.

Gladys didn't know whether her daughter had truly been involved in Jeanette's miscarriage, but she did know how difficult life could be for a concubine who had fallen out of favor. The palace was full of people who flattered those in favor and trampled those who had lost power.

Even when Carissa assured her that Victoria had already given orders to protect Phoebe and Cecil, Gladys still wept.

"How could I not worry?" the older woman said, tears streaming down her face. "She's my daughter. She was in my womb for nine long months, and I gave birth to her after much difficulty.

"She was cherished like a precious treasure in our household, and I raised her personally. I cannot bear the thought of her suffering even the slightest hardship. As her parents, we've done all we can for her. From now on, she must walk her own path."

She choked back her sobs and added, "Please, Your Grace, pass on a message to her for me. Tell her that her body and health are gifts from her parents. She must take the utmost care of herself."

Carissa froze. A sharp pang twisted in her chest.

She had heard nearly the same words before.

Years ago, when Melanie had arranged her daughter's marriage to Barrett, she had spoken with the same sorrow and love.

"I was no longer young when I carried Cari. Those nine months nearly cost me my life. She was raised with the love of her parents and brothers, and I cannot bear the thought of her enduring any hardship. She is a wise and well-mannered girl. If you cherish her, she will return those feelings a thousandfold. So, I ask of you, treat her well."

A parent's love for their child was ultimately always the same.

Carissa lowered her gaze, her eyes faintly reddened. She softly said, "Very well. I will make sure Lady Sylvia receives your words."

Gladys bowed deeply, tears falling as she murmured, "Your Grace, I will never forget this kindness."

"There is no need for such formality," Carissa said, helping her up. "It is a small favor."

Aside from the money, Gladys also sent a box of almond cake-Sylvia's favorite.

"She's loved this since she was a child. Even after she entered the palace, she'd mention how much she missed the almond cake I made. She said the palace cooks could make anything, of course, but no matter how skilled they were, their version always tasted a little different."

She paused to wipe her tears, then

added, "Back then, she was only

being sweet, coaxing me like she always did. After all, the palace lacks for nothing. But now... perhaps without the luxuries she once had,

even the taste of something familiar

feels out of reach."

Carissa offered a few words of comfort before setting off toward the palace, carrying both the money and the almond cake.

Sylvia never expected a visitor at a time like this, least of all Carissa. She sat in her chair, her posture still carrying the grace of a former noble concubine. But with her face swollen and bruised, all the dignity in the world couldn't mask her humiliation.

"Well, well, who do we have here? A rare guest. Have you come to enjoy the sight of my downfall?" Sylvia said coldly.

Carissa was taken aback the moment she saw Sylvia's face. She had heard rumors that Kylie had gone to Laurel Palace to make trouble, but hadn't known it had gone as far as a beating.

"Mrs. Lloyd cannot enter the palace, so she asked me to bring something to you, Your Grace." Carissa held out a lacquered food box. "She said this is your favorite -almond cake."

The money was hidden inside, sealed within the box. Carissa acted as though she was unaware of its presence, sparing Sylvia any embarrassment.



At the mention of her mother, Sylvia immediately gestured for a servant to take the box. The moment the lid was lifted she turned away, pressing a hand to her eyes as a quiet sob escaped her lips. Carissa wisely said nothing, giving her a moment to regain her composure.

Sylvia picked up a piece of almond cake, taking slow, delicate bites as if savoring

the rarest delicacy in the world. When she finished, her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, but she let out a satisfied sigh.

"At last... I've been craving this for so long. I asked Mom for it several times, but she never sent any to me."

Carissa finally spoke, saying, "Mrs. Lloyd asked me to deliver a message. She begs you to take care of yourself, Your Grace."

Sylvia lowered her gaze, masking the emotion in her eyes. "Please tell my mom that I am well. Everything is fine. She and my dad mustn't worry or dwell on things they cannot change."

"I will deliver your words exactly as you said them," Carissa promised.

Sylvia's voice softened as she replied, "Thank you."

Carissa offered a respectful nod before taking her leave. She had only just stepped over the threshold when Sylvia's voice drifted after her.

"It was my own foolishness... One moment of greed, one wrong thought, and I reached for something I never should have. And now, my children suffer for my mistakes. Regret comes too late. The world truly does repay what it is owed."

Carissa hesitated for just a second, then continued on her way without a word.

Chapter 1529

There seemed to be no end to the debate over appointing a crown prince. Nearly every morning court session saw officials raising the matter.

Finally, on the 18th of December, Salvador made an announcement-he had already chosen a crown prince. However, as the prince was still young, the decision would not be made public just yet. Instead, he had written an edict and secured it high upon a beam in the royal chapel.

During a court session, he declared that he alone knew who the crown prince was. According to him, he had not disclosed the decision to anyone, not even to Jeremiah or Rafael. With that, Salvador spared them from further scrutiny.

However, it was no great mystery.

Connor had long since abandoned his former laziness and arrogance, becoming diligent and eager to learn. His temperament had also grown more refined. Furthermore, Ryan, the future Duke of Northwatch, was his study partner. With all those facts, many believed it was all but certain that Connor was the chosen crown prince.

The reasoning was sound.

Not only was Connor Salvador's firstborn son with the queen, he had also shed his past shortcomings and was being personally guided by Victoria. Though Caden also enjoyed the queen dowager's protection, his circumstances were different. Connor no longer returned to Everspring Palace, while Caden was now permitted to return to his mother's residence.

Among the court officials, many suspected that Malcolm must know the truth. As a result, his household quickly became overwhelmed by visitors, with streams of guests arriving to pay their respects and offer their congratulations. Lavish gifts poured in, including rare treasures from all corners of the empire.

Yet, Malcolm felt no joy, only deep unease. After all, the more prominent one was, the more likely they were to attract trouble and criticism.

If Connor had truly been named crown prince, then Salvador's next step would undoubtedly be to weaken the influence of the royal in-laws. These eager visitors weren't simply offering gifts, they were presenting him with a double-edged sword.

However, to refuse them all outright was impossible. To do so would be to offend every one of them beyond measure. Should Salvador ever turn against the Quinton family, they would be left without a single ally to call upon.

With no better option, Malcolm feigned illness and submitted a request for leave. That way, he could justifiably turn away guests while also making his stance clear to Salvador.

His request was swiftly approved. Salvador instructed him to focus on his recovery, and to delegate his ministerial duties in the meantime. Besides, with the new year approaching, court sessions would soon be suspended for the holiday.

At last, Malcolm breathed a sigh of relief. With his leave secured, he embraced a life of leisure at home, shutting himself away from the affairs of the outside world. Yet, Kylie was far from pleased.

She was certain that Connor was the crown prince. Now was the time to make it known, to allow the court officials to show their support and demonstrate that this decision was what everyone wanted.

But Malcolm had shut his doors under the guise of illness, making it clear he had no intention of building alliances for Connor. It wasn't the first time the queen had been disappointed by her family's lack of support, but this time, she found it truly unbearable.

Fuming, she vented, "I could never count on them, and I still can't count on them now! Do they not wish for my son and me to prosper? Will they only be satisfied if we suffer? If this is what it means to have a family, I'd rather not have one at all!"

Lydia tried to reason with her, explaining, "Your Majesty, Lord Quinton's actions do have merit. With the crown prince now decided, Lord Quinton's residence has become a place of great interest.

"Prince Connor may be the eldest

prince, but he's still young and has yet to fully mature. His Majesty has always been wary of his in-laws' influence, and will make a move against them should they make themselves too visible. Even if it were not His Majesty's desire, he would still act if Lord Quinton's household continues to rise in such a high-profile manner."

Kylie's expression darkened. "They fear this, then fear that what good does fear do? If half the court were under our influence, would His Majesty dare act against us so easily? It's precisely because our power isn't secure yet that we should be seizing every opportunity to strengthen it."

She cast an irritated glance at the ever-cautious Lydia and snapped, "Instead of worrying about the Quinton family, you should be

thinking about how to bring Connor back to Everspring Palace. What kind of mother is kept away from her

own son? Letting him stay in Serenity Palace day and night-what nonsense is that?"

Lydia's face tensed with unease. "Your Majesty, it is difficult enough just to see him, let alone bring him back. The queen dowager has stationed her own people to watch over him. Whenever he goes to his studies or training, guards escort him. All of them are skilled fighters. Also, they are unwavering in their duty and immune to bribes."

Kylie clenched her fists, her irritation boiling over. "What kind of queen dowager meddles in the affairs of the harem, even taking it upon herself to raise a royal prince? Does she want him to think of her as his true mother and cast me aside? That old woman is far too calculating."

Lydia gasped in alarm. "Your Majesty, please be careful with your words!"

"What is there to fear?" Kylie scoffed. "The crown prince has already been chosen. Find a way. If nothing else, bring Connor back for just one visit."

Chapter 1530

Lydia had no choice but to try and meet with Connor.

However, the study hall was strictly off-limits to unauthorized personnel. If she wanted to see him, she had to wait for the brief moments when he left-either on his way back to Serenity Palace or while heading to the training grounds.

Even then, she could only watch from a distance. A swarm of attendants and guards surrounded him at all times, making it nearly impossible to catch more than a fleeting glimpse.

On some days, she couldn't see him at all. The royal guards, towering and broad-shouldered, flanked him in two rows. They shielded him so thoroughly that even the tip of his head was obscured.

She attempted to bribe them, offering money in exchange for a mere hour of Connor's time. But these men were guards whom Victoria had personally chosen. They were unyielding and incorruptible. Forget silver coins, even gold coins wouldn't tempt them.

Victoria had chosen the simplest, most crude method of protection. Even Salvador himself required an escort to visit the boy.

By contrast, Caden enjoyed a degree of freedom. As Grace had held authority over the harem for a while, she had her own network of people stationed throughout the palace and could protect her son.

Still, Victoria had placed watchers of her own. Not to guard against danger, but against ambition.

Both Kylie and Grace were uneasy, their hearts restless.

For a time, the queen had been pleased, but doubt soon crept in. Without an official announcement of who had been chosen as crown prince, Caden still had a chance-however slim-to contend for the position. As long as the edict remained sealed, Grace would hold on to hope.

In Kylie's mind, it was better if everyone else abandoned their ambitions. Then, no danger would remain.

In fact, Grace had little to no hope or expectations. She was well aware that the royal edict would most likely contain Connor's name. However, the delay in announcing the decision left room for her to continue striving for her son's chance.

No one could rise to power simply by waiting for the heavens' favor.

Power was seized, not gifted.

Once, Grace had believed that Salvador might overlook Connor. With his arrogance and reckless temper, the eldest prince had seemed an unlikely choice. But now, things were different.

Now, the only way her son could have a future was if Connor didn't. If the eldest prince were dead, Caden would have a great chance of becoming crown prince.

Cecil was beyond hope, as Sylvia still carried the heavy stain of the crime of plotting against a royal heir. Though she had not been punished, Salvador would no longer glance in their direction.

Thus, Connor had to die.

But with Victoria guarding him so fiercely, how could Grace strike?

Grace quickly noticed that Lydia frequently sought out the eldest prince. She also learned that Kylie was trying to have him return to Everspring Palace. So, she waited, as the only chance to act would be when Connor left Victoria's watchful eye.

But Kylie was utterly useless. Not only had she failed to bring the boy back to her palace, but she couldn't even manage to see him in person.

Still, Victoria's wariness only confirmed what Grace already suspected the name written in the sealed edict could only be Connor's.

While Grace gathered information about Salvador's health, she also searched for an opportunity to strike. The act itself would be difficult, but what was even harder was ensuring that no suspicion fell on her.

Fortunately, she had planned ahead. She had already spread rumors throughout the palace, making it well known that Kylie and Sylvia had a falling out. However, tying the assassination to Sylvia would take more work.

Seeing that her mistress was deep in thought, Lyra, Grace's trusted maid, stepped forward and said, "Your Grace, Lady Carissa recently visited Lady Sylvia. If this matter sparks another dispute between Queen Kylie and Lady Sylvia, it could cause a great stir, especially if Lady Carissa is involved as well."

it

Grace waved her hand dismissively. "No. Lady Carissa must not be dragged into

this. That would be like lifting a stone only to drop it on our own feet."

After a pause, she added, "There is no need to fan the flames any further. The grudge between them is already known. If we escalate matters now, the queen dowager and the king may step in to resolve the conflict, and all our groundwork will be wasted."

Lyra nodded in agreement. "You're thoughtful as always, Your Grace."

"But thoughtfulness alone is useless without an opportunity," Grace murmured. "We cannot rush this. If we are patient, the right moment will come."

She knew well that success required patience. One had to wait for the perfect time to strike and deliver a fatal blow. If she acted too soon and things went wrong, all her plans would be exposed.

Soon enough, the opportune moment arrived.

Salvador had been taking a new medicine for some time now, and after a period of adjustment, his health had greatly improved. His

birthday had gone uncelebrated not

earlier that year due to his illness. However, he now intended to present Connor before the entire court and make a public showing of him.

As such, it was arranged that the celebration would take place on the 26th of December, with the additional feature of an equestrian competition.

The three princes were expected to participate, each having selected a young colt to train for the occasion. For the past several weeks, Rafael had been instructing them in horsemanship, and the princes had been diligently practicing with their steeds.