

## War Song 1051

### Chapter 1051

Camila settled into the third room of the Peace Wing, marking the arrival of Skye Embroidery's first true resident.

When Violet saw Camila sitting at the embroidery frame, delicately stitching a flower, she couldn't help but smile with quiet satisfaction.

It had been an arduous start, but it was a start nonetheless. Violet clung to the hope that, in their darkest moments, women with nowhere else to turn might think of Skye Embroidery before considering death.

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Elsewhere, Serena had been sent back to her family after her divorce.

Viola was thoroughly displeased, refusing to let Serena set foot in their home again. However, Barrett had insisted on bringing her back to Valor Estate. Furious, Viola stormed off to her own family's home.

In her mom's sitting room, Viola wept bitterly, lamenting Barrett's state. "He's lost his position, he neglects his duties, and he's nothing but a useless wreck of a man! I can't live like this anymore!" Evelyn, weary of the many similar complaints, barely reacted. Instead, she stared blankly ahead and let Viola cry herself hoarse.

"If you can't live like this, then divorce him," she snapped. "But don't think for a second you can come crawling back here afterward! Maybe try your luck at Skye Embroidery-but don't count on them taking you in. After all, you had more than a hand in pushing Amelia to her death."

However, Zoey had no such patience.

Viola paled at the mention of Amelia's name, her sobs abruptly silenced. She had no courage to face her elder sister-in-law's accusations. After sulking for two days at Silverstone Estate, she returned to Valor Estate in shame.

Meanwhile, Zoey made her way to Skye Embroidery and met Camila in person. She had heard whispers of Camila's plight and decided to inquire directly with Violet.

"Is there any way you can help her find justice?" Zoey asked privately.

Violet's answer was practical, if disheartening. "I've already sent Claire to investigate her claims. But even if we can clear her name, the dye shop she lost... I doubt it can be returned to her."

Zoey stayed silent. She knew Violet was right. The dye shop had been Camila and her husband's shared venture, but it was legally in her husband's name. Women, aside from their dowries, were not allowed private property.

After leaving the workshop, Zoey reflected on her situation. She might appear to live a charmed life, but she knew better than anyone the fragile threads holding it all together. The grand estate she managed was riddled with problems beneath the surface, like fine silk infested with lice. She couldn't afford to wait idly for disaster to strike.

Her children might still be too young for marriage, but it was high time she began laying the groundwork. Dowries and engagement gifts needed to be prepared well in advance. In families of their status, such matters weren't left to the last minute. Suitable items had to be carefully acquired and stored away for the right time.

Zoey resolved to prepare. Her instincts told her she had little time to spare.

Whether it was the engagement gifts or dowries, Zoey knew it all had to be meticulously recorded and approved by the authorities. In the past, she had thought she had plenty of time to prepare. Now, however, urgency pressed on her.

She carefully reorganized her dowry,

making sure it was securely stored. Then, she purchased several shops to add to her daughter's future inheritance. Her mother-in-law, practical woman with a deep affection for her grandchildren, would not object. Rather, Zoey expected Evelyn to praise her for her foresight and prudence.

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Though her daughter wasn't yet old enough for marriage, Zoey began thinking about arranging a match early. The future was too unpredictable, especially given her husband Oliver's increasingly uncertain prospects. She had known him long enough to recognize that his career would likely never regain its former momentum.

That same evening, chaos erupted at a tavern, Drunken Blossom.

The second

son of the Earl of Delmarsh caused an uproar when he attempted to set the building on fire

over a dispute involvin

Thanks to the swift actions of bystanders, the fire was

couldovelis

extinguished before it could spread,

avoiding a devastating catastrophe.

The incident sparked outrage across the city, especially when it came to light that the young man held a position in the Garrison Unit.

Stories like the competing for the top courtesan were the talk of the town, and the people loved to gossip about it. Soon, rumors were all over the city, with everyone revealing the reckless behavior of some young troublemakers in the Garrison Unit. The Oversight Department caught wind of it and reported it, and the matter eventually made its way to the court.

While Salvador had been reluctant to act against the Garrison Unit before, the public furor left him little choice. He ordered Carissa and Max to conduct a thorough investigation and restore order.

For days, high-ranking officials knelt outside the royal study, weeping and pleading for leniency for their sons. Their tears only served to sour Salvador's mood further. Dismissing them with a scathing rebuke, he grudgingly promised to show some mercy.

Once the court had dispersed, Salvador summoned Carissa to the study.

Carissa entered with calm determination, presenting her findings before he could even speak.

Salvador flipped through the documents, his expression growing darker with every page. At first, he had assumed the matter was simply a case of spoiled noble brats bullying merchants and causing minor trouble.

But as he read on, the full extent of their crimes came into view-arson, murder, and the abduction of young women, all in collusion with ruthless moneylenders.

"Hand them all over to the Supreme Court," Salvador thundered, his voice cold with fury. "Let the law deal with them harshly!"

Carissa knelt, bowing her head in acknowledgment. "Yes, Your Majesty. I will see to it immediately."

Salvador knew that the decision to crack down on the Garrison Unit was hers. He had been somewhat angry at first, but now, the evidence she had uncovered left no doubt these men were dangerous and needed to be stopped before they brought ruin to the empire. His anger softened, and he offered a few words of commendation, his tone begrudging but sincere.

## Chapter 1052

Thanks to Carissa's efforts, the Supreme Court had its hands full. She was everywhere, personally bringing meals to Rafael, making sure he was well taken care of comfortable in every way possible.

The evidence had already been collected, but the Supreme Court needed to verify it. Then, they would arrest the culprits for questioning. This was a task Rafael technically didn't need to bother with, but each of these criminals had powerful backers. Rather than risk Carissa offending anyone, it was better for him to be the one to handle it. Let the noble families be angry with him. The one most pleased by this turn of events was Max. Lately, he had been training with renewed vigor; he was confident that once the Garrison Unit was properly purged, it would become a solid shield protecting the capital. Alas, his joy was premature.

After the Supreme Court's thorough investigation began, petitions flooded in, with many suggesting that the Garrison Unit's duties overlapped too much with the Capital Guard's. They called for the disbandment of the Garrison Unit.

The claim had merit, and Carissa submitted a formal request to redefine and separate the roles of the Garrison Unit and the Capital Guard.

Salvador did not give a ruling in the court that day, but summoned Carissa to the royal study afterward.

"Yesterday, I visited the queen dowager," he began, settling into his seat. "She asked about the women's academy. How are you progressing with that?"

"Your Majesty, the repairs to the academy building have been completed. We've already acquired desks, chairs, and all the necessary supplies. We are currently looking for a teacher," Carissa answered.

"The queen dowager takes the women's academy seriously, so focus on that for now. As for the Garrison Unit issue, leave it for now."

Acknowledging his command, she responded dutifully, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Carissa wasn't surprised by his words. During the court meeting, she knew the matter was unlikely to succeed when the king didn't approve her request. She guessed that Salvador likely really wanted to disband the Garrison Unit. Some personnel would then be reassigned to the Capital Guard, while the rest would be sent to the Nightsteel Guard or dismissed entirely.

Seeing her obedient response, Salvador felt a rare sense of relief. At least she wasn't like Rafael, who had become quite a troublemaker. Salvador could tolerate him for now, but when the time came, he would enjoy correcting the man's arrogance.

His expression softened as he said, "The queen dowager misses you. When you have the chance, go visit her."

Carissa nodded. "Of course, Your Majesty. I will visit the queen dowager with my mother-in-law on my next day off."

Salvador gave a slight nod, his gaze drifting over Carissa once more. Though she wore her formal attire, the elegance of her features was still evident. A fleeting memory of a past thought stirred in him, but he quickly suppressed it.

As king, certain things were simply beyond his reach.

"Alright. You're dismissed," he said, dismissing the thought with a wave of his hand.

"I will take my leave, Your Majesty," Carissa bowed, then turned to leave.

As she walked out of the royal study, Barrett stopped her at the end of the corridor. "Carissa," he called, his voice carrying with a touch of urgency.

Carissa stepped back, raising her eyes to meet his. She noticed the eyes of several people upon them and felt the weight of their scrutiny. She furrowed her brow slightly, her expression distant.

"Is there something you need, Deputy Commander Warren?"

Barrett studied her for a moment,

then said in a low voice, "There's something I wish to warn you about, Commander Sinclair. His Majesty knows you're behind the Garrison Unit's plans, and he has his own arrangements for it. I suggest you focus on your duties and avoid upsetting His Majesty. If you're not careful, it might be you who suffers the consequences."

Carissa's expression remained unchanged, her gaze steady and unflinching.

"Thank you for the advice, Deputy Commander Warren," she replied calmly.

Barrett blinked, somewhat surprised by her lack of reaction. "You knew about it already?"

"I would never presume to guess His Majesty's intentions. If that's all, I must take my leave." She stepped around him, preparing to walk away.

Barrett called after her, his voice

tinged with frustration. "There's no

need to distance yourself like this.

I'm only offering some friendly advice with no ulterior motives."

Carissa didn't answer, continuing on her way.

Barrett paused, then quickly moved to block her path.

Carissa stopped, clearly annoyed now, her eyes lifting to meet his once more. "If you have something to say, say it directly. There's no need to hide behind false concern."

Barrett hesitated; he opened his mouth, but then paused, his words coming out haltingly.

"I... I was wondering if you know how Westhaven intends to deal with Aurora. Could you...could you tell me?"

Carissa glanced at him with a cool, dispassionate look.

"I don't know," she answered flatly, then turned on her heel, walking away with purposeful strides.

Barrett lowered his gaze. He didn't try to follow her this time.

Chapter 1053

Since Aurora had been taken away by Westhaven's envoys, Barrett had been tormented by nightmares every night. He dreamed of her being tortured, her flesh slowly carved away, each strip of skin torn from her body while her blood surged like a tidal wave and drowned him.

Even in the daylight, when he was on duty, he would sometimes hear her voice. Sometimes it was a cry for help, other times a bitter accusation of betrayal, and at times, the sound of her agonized screams.

He felt like he was losing his mind.

His guilt weighed heavily on him, yet part of him still believed he had done the right thing. The internal conflict had worn him down, leaving him exhausted, mentally and physically drained.

He knew his position as deputy commander was more of a title than a real responsibility. The king never assigned him any duties. Day after day, he wandered the halls, his mind unsettled. At home, there was no peace either. Viola's constant complaints, Serena's goading to seek justice for her from the Marquis of Ironridge-it all gnawed at him.

No matter where Barrett was, he couldn't find solace. He longed for someone to confide in, someone to share his frustrations with-but he had no friends left. No one wanted anything to do with him anymore.

However, Carissa knew the truth. Aurora was still alive. There had been word from Skywing Spire. Lisandra was still trapped in Fawnrun City.

When Leroy returned to Fawnrun City, he had taken command of the military. Although he hadn't attacked immediately, he had stationed the troops and refused to retreat. He was calculating and weighing his options.

After the negotiation with Starhaven, he understood the situation was more complex than he had originally thought. To go to war would mean a lack of supplies-food, weapons, and horses. To hold back would anger the king, who had issued secret orders he could not ignore.

Yet, the decision of whether to fight or not wasn't his to make. Lisandra would handle the negotiations with the generals. His role was simply to follow whatever path the situation demanded.

Meanwhile, Lisandra had no time for Aurora. Aurora was locked away, her fate uncertain. As for Zeke and the others, they had been executed before the journey even began. Their heads were now a grim trophy brought back to Fawnrun City.

That evening, after finishing her discussion with Max, Carissa walked out of the Capital Guard headquarters, only to find Rafael's carriage waiting at the door.

He sat in the carriage, lifting the curtain and smiling at her. "Tomorrow's a rest day. Today, we'll go pick up Ryan before Lord Klein gets his hands on him."



It had been days since Carissa had last seen Ryan, and she missed him dearly. Without hesitation, she climbed into the carriage.

The weather was beginning to turn warm. Rafael removed her heavy cloak and handed her a paper bag. "I picked up some crispy yellow pastries for you. They're fresh-eat them while they're still warm."

The tempting fragrance filled the air, but Carissa neatly wrapped the paper bag back up. "I'll save it for Ryan. He loves these."

"Of course, I bought some for him too," Rafael replied, unwrapping the bag again. "This one's for you-eat it while it's still crisp."

The scent was irresistible, and Carissa couldn't help but take a bite. The crunchy exterior gave way to a soft, fragrant sweet filling, rich and flavorful with every bite.

She continued nibbling for a few moments before remembering to ask, "Have you had any?"

"I ate mine when I bought them. Now, hurry up and eat," Rafael said with a small grin. He reached over and dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a handkerchief, wiping away the golden crumbs. "Ist good?"

"It's delicious," Carissa replied, savoring another bite. The flavor lingered as she continued, her voice muffled by the treat, "You're out so early today. Have you finished your cases?"

"I handed it over to Matthew. This morning, I went to the Supreme Court to check in, then went out to handle some matters. Luckily, I finished everything just in time to pick you up."

Carissa, aware of the ongoing investigation, asked, "How's it progressing?"

Rafael gave a relaxed smile. "Slowly but surely."

The pace was slow because they had already gathered some information some backed by evidence, some not. The king had only asked Rafael to assist, so he was subtly guiding Ian, letting the latter

gather the evidence. As for the cases that were already backed by proof, Rafael would release them when the time was right.

The investigation into Yuvan's private army was Rafael's main focus. While Yuvan didn't have many connections in the capital, the people who had once rallied behind Eleanor now kept their distance after

his fall. It was better to leave that for

lan to investigate.

Carissa took another bite of the crispy pastry, then said, "Barrett stopped me in the palace today and asked if I knew anything about Aurora's current situation."

A flicker of displeasure crossed Rafael's eyes.

"If he wants to know, he should come ask me."

Chapter 1054

Rafael's expression darkened, though not out of jealousy he was more annoyed that Barrett was being so thoughtless.

Carissa had just come from an audience with the king, and Barrett had the audacity to stop her and ask questions. Didn't he realize that the royal study wasn't just full of palace servants? Ministers and officials were coming and going, too. "I didn't pay him much mind," Carissa said, "but it surprised me that he'd still ask about Aurora."

"Forget him," Rafael muttered, then opened his arms and pulled her into an embrace. "Let's go get Ryan."

As the carriage rolled on, the golden hues of the setting sun filtered through the curtains and cast a warm glow on their faces, as if the world itself had been dusted with sunlight.

When they arrived at the academy, Dylan parked the carriage and went inside to fetch Ryan. Moments later, he returned, guiding Ryan out to the carriage.

Ryan had matured noticeably. When he had first started at the academy, he would have bounded out of the gates at the sight of his aunt and uncle. Now, though still visibly excited, he walked out in a proper and orderly manner. Once inside the carriage, he greeted his uncle politely before immediately burying himself in his aunt's arms.

"Aunt Carissa, today my teacher praised me," he said, his voice bubbling with pride. "He said my writing was good."

Carissa took a handkerchief from her bag and gently wiped Ryan's face, smiling. "Oh? You're writing now?"

"Yes!" Ryan nodded eagerly, then pulled several sheets of paper from his bag and handed them to her. "Aunt Carissa, look! This is what I wrote."

Carissa's heart swelled as she looked at his handwriting. It wasn't the most fluid yet, but each letter was neat and firm, with ink that seemed to pulse with life. She praised his handwriting first, then began reading the essay.

It was a bit rough, naturally. The words were simple and the structure lacked sophistication, but the clarity of thought was evident. It was clear that Ryan had a quick mind, his thoughts flowing steadily from one point to the next. Once she finished, she showed it to Rafael, who read it over with equal approval.

"We'll take him to the palace tomorrow," he said. "Let him have a meal with the queen dowager. She'll be pleased to see him."

Ryan's eyes lit up. "I like going to the palace! Her Majesty is always so kind to me."

Carissa gently ruffled Ryan's hair. "Come here. Let me see if you've gotten thinner."

Ryan looked up, blinking his bright eyes. "No, I haven't! The academy feeds me very well."

Carissa studied his face, which resembled her second brother's so closely, and a pang of emotion tightened her chest. She tapped his nose lightly. "Your uncle bought you some crispy pastries. Eat them while they're fresh."

Ryan's eyes lit up with excitement. "Really? I've wanted those for so long! Thank you, Uncle Rafael!"

Rafael chuckled, handing him the fragrant pastries.

"You little glutton," he teased fondly.

Ryan eagerly took the pastries, tearing open the paper bag and taking a big bite. "It's delicious! So good!"

Carissa and Rafael exchanged a look, both laughing at his enthusiasm.

The next day, the carriage from Hell Monarch Estate made its way to the palace.

Helen had planned to skip visiting today. She had been going to the palace a lot lately, and both she and her sister were starting to get tired of seeing each other so often. Helen believed it was better to space out visits to keep their relationship

warm.

But Ryan had insisted on her coming, and of course, she couldn't disappoint him. So, Helen agreed and went along for Ryan's sake.

Upon seeing Ryan, Victoria was overjoyed. She took his small hand in hers, asking if he was finding his studies difficult, if he was eating well, and if he was sleeping soundly.

Ryan answered each question

obediently, then excitedly told Victoria some of the funny stories from the academy. Victoria was like any fond grandparent, and she adored hearing about the playful antics of children. She listened intently, thoroughly enjoying the conversation.

During that time, Kylie also brought the eldest prince to visit Victoria.

The eldest prince, Connor, was just a year older than Ryan. Ideally, they should have been able to play together. However, Connor didn't like Ryan and wasn't interested in playing with him at all. Connor didn't even bother to hide his dislike. When Victoria asked the attendants to take the children outside to play, he shot Ryan a disdainful look.

"He smells funny. I don't want to play with him."

"That's enough. Don't speak like that," Kylie scolded him lightly, her tone firm.

"But Mom, he really does stink," Connor persisted, scrunching his face in disgust. He shot Ryan another venomous glare. "Stay far away from me!"

Chapter 1055

As soon as Connor said those words, the mood in the room shifted.

Ryan stood beside Carissa, awkwardly fidgeting with the hem of his garment. There was indeed a scent about him. Every time he returned home, he had to soak in the medicinal bath Sebastian prepared. He had grown accustomed to the smell, and so he thought it had faded. A quiet feeling of shame rose within him. When he had been a beggar, the most frequent insult he had heard was, "You stink! Get away!"

Carissa squeezed his small hand, brushing her other hand across his cheek. "I like the fragrance of the medicine."

Ryan lifted his eyes, finding solace in his aunt's warm gaze.

Right-wasn't it just a few remarks? Was he really so fragile that he couldn't handle that?

He smiled at her. He didn't mind what others said.

Kylie noticed Victoria's expression darkening and quickly stood up, pulling Connor over with a stern look. "Who taught you to speak like that? Apologize to Lord Ryan."

Connor raised his chin. "I won't apologize to a beggar."

As soon as those words left his mouth, he felt as though the ground had vanished beneath him. Before he could react, two sharp slaps landed on his backside, making him wail in pain. "Hold back those tears!" Rafael snapped, gripping him firmly.

No matter how spoiled Connor was, he was still just a seven-year-old child. Rafael's stern demeanor was too much for him to bear.

His sobs quickly died down, replaced by soft whimpers. His large eyes filled with tears as he looked helplessly at Kylie, silently pleading for help.

Kylie's eyes darkened, her expression hardening. "Apologize, or I'll have your uncle tell your dad."

She shot a quick glance at Victoria, who calmly sipped her tea, her face betraying no emotion.

Connor reluctantly apologized. Ryan said it was fine, but the prince bit his lip, turned, and ran off without even bowing to Victoria before leaving. Kylie quickly stood. "Mother, please calm down. I'll go teach him a lesson."

Victoria gave a slight nod. "Go on."

Carissa rose. "Your Majesty, please take care."

Kylie's gaze flicked briefly to Carissa's face, and she forced a smile. "Please, stay seated. When you have the time another day, come and visit me." "Yes, Your Majesty," Carissa replied.

Before turning, Kylie cast a look at Rafael. The coldness in his eyes almost made her lose her composure. She quickly averted her gaze and hurriedly left the room.

Helen immediately rushed to Ryan

and hugged him tightly, her heart full

of both concern and anger. If it

weren't for her sister being here, she

would have taught Connor adesson

herself.

"If the queen can't teach him properly, she should let my sister raise him. Letting him turn out this spoiled-how is he ever going to be fit to be the crown prince?" Helen snapped. Victoria glared at her but then smiled at Ryan, waving him over. "Ryan, come here, dear."

Ryan obediently walked over. "Your Majesty."

Victoria smiled warmly, her voice soft. "You did well just now. You were generous and forgave those who insulted you." Her smile remained, radiating kindness.

"But remember, Ryan, you're still a

child. If someone insults you, you have every right to respond in kind. Your grandfather and your father were both strong men. They were fierce warriors who gave their lives to protect Starhaven and all of its people. As long as you haven't wronged anyone, no one has the right to bully you."

Tears welled up in Ryan's eyes. "Yes, Your Majesty, I understand."

Victoria gently patted his hand, then stood. "Come now, stay with me in the palace today. When it's time for the palace gates to close, I'll have someone escort you back to the estate."

Carissa understood Victoria's

intentions; she hesitated for a

moment before saying softly, "Your Majesty, why don't we have lunch and I'll take him back afterward? His uncle is likely sending someone to fetch him."

"No need," Victoria replied with a raised hand, her tone slightly sharper now. "You may return. There's no need to stay for lunch. The king is coming to dine with me."

## Chapter 1056

Salvador listened to Derek's report, his face darkening with anger. "Wretched little fool!" he muttered.

"Your Majesty," Derek continued, "the queen dowager has instructed Lady Helen, Prince Rafael, and Lady Carissa to leave the palace. She told them she wanted Lord Ryan to stay for lunch, and she will send him out when the palace gates close." "Go to the kitchen yourself. Have them prepare some of Her Majesty's favorite dishes. I will join her for the meal," Salvador said.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then go to Everspring Palace and deliver my command. Have Barrett take Connor to kneel in the royal chapel. Barrett is to recount every battle the Sinclair family has fought. I will interrogate him on the details."

Derek thought this was an excellent idea, particularly the bit about sending Barrett to handle it.

After Derek withdrew, Salvador stared at the stack of reports before him, his mind drifting.

In recent years, the calls to appoint the crown prince have grown louder. Throughout history, the competition for the title of crown prince has always been fierce, involving the royal family, the palace, noble families, and various other factions.

But in this era, there was no real debate. The selection of the heir was based on birth order and legitimacy. Since Connor was both the eldest son and the legitimate son, his position was unmatched by any other princes. Therefore, there was no doubt that he would be appointed as the crown prince.

Kylie and her family tried several times to test the waters, but Salvador still couldn't make up his mind. The only reason was that, in terms of both ability and temperament, Connor was not suited to be the crown prince. Salvador had a thousand worries about handing the kingdom over to him.

Fortunately, Connor was still young, and the matter of appointing the crown prince could be delayed. However, as a king, Salvador's thoughts reached beyond the present, looking toward the



future. Though he had a legitimate eldest son, the boy was not suited for the role. It left Salvador feeling disheartened.

At lunch, the table was set with exquisite dishes. However, Victoria had specifically instructed that no one wait on her. She sent everyone out, leaving them to stand by the door. Since no one was serving Victoria, Salvador didn't dare to eat either and stood beside her to serve her food.

Ryan also considered standing, but Victoria gently pressed him back into his seat. She personally picked up some food for him, speaking in a soft, comforting tone to ease his nerves.

"Mom, this is your favorite. Eat a bit more," Salvador said quietly.

Victoria remained silent. Whatever dish Salvador placed before her, she ate without protest. Yet, her appetite seemed subdued. She barely touched her food, instead focusing on encouraging Ryan to eat.

Ryan felt nervous inside, but he didn't show it. His hands held the cutlery steady, without the slightest tremor. He thanked her politely and ate slowly, his manners impeccable.

Even Salvador couldn't help but admire Ryan's composure. The boy was remarkably steady for his age.

Once the meal concluded, Victoria's mood had noticeably improved. She called for a few young servants to take Ryan outside to play, leaving Salvador alone in the hall with her. Victoria's expression remained warm as she spoke.

"Do you think Ryan is promising?"

Salvador nodded, his approval clear. "He's promising and well-behaved."

"I remember you and the second son of the Sinclair family had been very close," Victoria said.

Mentioning old friends brought a

slight ache to Salvador's heart. "Yes, we were of similar age. He spent a year as my study partner in the

palace, and we fought side by

on the battlefield. I would call him a brother."

"He was your brother, your comrade, and your subject. The Sinclair

family's contributions to Starhaven are beyond measure. You know this better than anyone. Now, Ryan is the only one left of the Duke of

Northwatch's family to carry on their name.

"As his honorary uncle, you must protect him from anyone who dares to bully him, especially your son. Connor's words were unforgivable Don't be too quick to blame the queer If you're to assign blame, you should start with yourself. You've

failed to teach Connor what the

Sinclair family means to Starhaven."

Victoria took a slow sip of coffee, her eyes sweeping over his face. When she saw a trace of guilt, she continued.

"Since your ascension to the throne, I've refrained from interfering in your decisions. I know all your decisions are carefully considered and weighed, and often, you have no choice.

"But when it comes to Ryan, that is different. I not only ask that you do not allow anyone to harm him-I demand that you protect him."

Chapter 1057

Salvador's eyes were filled with guilt. "It is my fault, Mom."

"I could remind you of your bond with the Sinclair family, speak of the past, and ask you to forget your position as king and treat Ryan as an elder would," Victoria continued, "but I will not do so. If you need to be reminded of a relationship to remember it, then that bond was never genuine in the first place. So, I will be direct with you: You must treat him well. No one is allowed to bully him."

Her words stirred many memories within Salvador.

It was as if he had just remembered that he too once had had close friends. When he formed his alliance with the Sinclair family, he didn't act with ulterior motives-his friendship with them had been sincere.

When Hector and his sons died on the battlefield for the kingdom, Salvador had recently ascended the throne. His mind had been consumed with securing his position, gaining the loyalty of his subjects, and building achievements.

He valued the success of reclaiming the Southern Frontier, and when he first learned of the Sinclair family's deaths, he didn't immediately mourn. Instead, he was consumed with worry. He sent his younger brother to the Southern Frontier, always waiting for news of

success.

In the midst of waiting, he had inadvertently pushed aside the grief over the Sinclair family's men's sacrifice. By the time the great victory came, all he felt was happiness.

Now, Victoria's words brought it all back to him. He lingered in those memories, the weight of guilt and sorrow slowly creeping into his heart. As he stood, his eyes were brimming with tears. He bowed deeply, his voice thick with emotion.

"I swear this will never happen again, Mom. As long as I live, no one will dare to harm Ryan Sinclair."

Victoria finally allowed a smile to touch her lips. "I believe you, my son. Your word is as good as law."

Later that day, Salvador personally arranged for Ryan to be sent out of the palace, providing him with two carts of rewards as well.

Once Ryan had left, Salvador made his way to Everspring Palace.

Inside, Kylie was kneeling, her face filled with worry. She had been deeply frightened when Barrett arrived to take Connor to the royal chapel earlier.

Kylie had been angry when Rafael disciplined Connor, but with the queen dowager present, she dared not show any emotion. After bringing Connor back to Everspring Palace, Kylie couldn't bear to scold him. Instead, she had to calm him down, reassuring him until he was settled.

Kylie knew in her heart that she was spoiling her son, but she simply couldn't help herself. Connor's birth had given her enough confidence-she didn't need to fight for anything. His future as the crown prince was assured.

Because of her deep affection for him, she naturally became more indulgent and lenient.

Salvador walked in without a word, sitting down without immediately addressing her. He had already learned that Kylie had not only refrained from punishing Connor, but comforted him instead.

Kylie slowly turned to face him. Her eyes flicked up nervously, her heart fluttering, but she knew she had to speak up for her son. "Your Majesty, it is my failure as a mother. I am at fault. I've already punished him."

Salvador's tone was calm. "How did you punish him?"

"I... I struck his palms," she answered quietly.

He raised an eyebrow. "How many times?"

Kylie hesitated and averted her gaze. "Twenty times."

A servant entered with coffee. Salvador slowly took the cup, sipping it thoughtfully. Still, he didn't allow Kylie to rise. He simply asked, "Did he understand his mistake?"

Kylie was relieved he seemed to believe her and quickly responded, "He knows he was wrong. He said that the next time Ryan visits, he will apologize to him properly." Salvador nodded slightly. "It seems the punishment worked, then."

"Yes, of course." Kylie breathed a sigh of relief. "He won't dare make the same mistake again."

Salvador fixed his gaze on her, setting the cup aside. "Since you say you'll strike his palms twenty times, bring him to me once he finishes his kneeling at the royal chapel. I will personally ensure it's done."

Kylie's face drained of color, and she looked up at him in shock. "Your Majesty, I've already punished him."

Salvador's voice remained steady,

though there was an edge to it. "Think carefully before you respond. If you didn't actually strike him, and you say you did, then perhaps it's best to send him to the queen dowager to be raised. So, did you punish him or not?"

Kylie's voice trembled. "Your Majesty, twenty strikes to his palms could ruin his hands. He's still so young. Surely, if he spoke out of turn, it can be forgiven... It's not unforgivable."

Chapter 1058

Kylie's words incensed Salvador to the point of fury. With a swift motion, he swept the cup off the table, sending it crashing to the floor in a sharp clang that startled Kylie into silence.

She felt his reaction was somewhat excessive. "Your Majesty, it was just a careless remark from a child! It didn't hurt Ryan. Why such an outburst over something so trivial?"

Salvador's voice was cold as ice. "If you'd rather Connor remain a mere child with no responsibilities or expectations, I will gladly grant your wish."

Kylie was stunned. "Your Majesty, you can't say such things! If word of this gets out, I fear the ministers will take it to heart!"

Salvador sneered. "And what's wrong with that? After all, you've made it clear you hold no great hopes for him. If he's to be nothing more than a lazy prince begging for scraps from his younger brother, so be it."

Kylie's vision blurred, her mind reeling with the shock of his words. She nearly fainted, and a cold dread settled in her chest.

She had been living in the lap of luxury for so long that she had forgotten the dangers of wielding power. How could she expect to gain everything just because of her status?

With trembling hands, she pleaded, "Your Majesty, it's all my fault. I failed as a mother. I've spoiled him and let him run wild. If he lacks the ability or temperament to fulfill his duties, I will never blame anyone but myself. From now on, I will oversee his education with greater care, ensuring he grows up to be compassionate and wise-

Salvador cut her off sharply. "I don't want to hear empty promises. You have one year. If, by the end of that time, he remains as reckless and ignorant as he is now, then he will no longer be worthy of my consideration."

Kylie's heart sank at the mention of a deadline, but she was relieved to hear there was still time. "Yes, Your Majesty. I know what to do."

Salvador's gaze remained cold and piercing. "Good. Tomorrow, have him come to see me. I want to see his palms for myself."

Kylie's stomach turned at the reminder of the twenty strikes to Cooner's palms. Her heart ached for her son. From the moment he was born, he had been precious and pampered. How could he endure such punishment?

A surge of resentment toward Carissa and Ryan welled up within her. No matter how grand their ancestors' accomplishments had been, Connor was still a child. To be struck over a few harsh words-wasn't that going too far?

Meanwhile, Barrett was still in the

royal chapel, overseeing Connor's punishment. He didn't know the full details, only that today was supposed to be a day off. Ian had sent for him to bring Connor to the

royal chapel and inform him of every

battle fought by Hector.

The Duke of Northwatch, Hector Sinclair, was like a sacred being in Barrett's heart. He could recount every battle the elder man fought as if it were a treasured memory.

As he spoke, he suddenly collapsed and started crying, scaring Connor.

Outside, Derek listened to the sound of Barrett's weeping without showing any emotion. Regretful tears were the least useful of all.

When Connor returned to Everspring

Palace, Kylie's face was cold as she issued a punishment. The twenty strikes to his palms were not to be softened in any way, especially since Connor was expected to see the king the next morning.

The harsh discipline of the ruler's discipline left Connor's hands raw and bleeding. Connor cried painfully, his face turning purple.

"I just said one wrong thing... Why is Dad so heartless? I'm his son! But Ryan is nothing-nothing at all!"

The servants in Everspring Palace also began to weep. Connor had grown up before their eyes, and his status was so high-how could the king bear to punish him so?

Kylie's heart ached seeing her son in pain, but she couldn't show it. She wiped away a tear in secret and ordered the royal physician to tend to Connor's wounds. She knew she couldn't display any softness.

Not everyone in Everspring Palace was loyal to her. If they were, Salvador wouldn't have learned that she hadn't struck Connor's palms before this.

Not only did she have to hide her sympathy, but she also had to remain stern.

"You went to the royal chapel today with Deputy Commander Warren to hear about the Duke of Northwatch's feats. After hearing all of that, howe can you still speak like this? It seems Deputy Commander Warren's words went in one ear and out the other. After you pay your respects to your dad tomorrow, you will kneel at the royal chapel again."

At the mention of having to kneel again tomorrow, Connor broke into another round of sobs. He cried for nearly half an hour before his wailing finally subsided.

Chapter 1059

That night, the Hell Monarch Estate was brightly lit.

Jacob personally recorded Salvador's gifts, carefully cataloging and setting them aside. When Ryan returned to Northwatch Estate to inherit his title, Jacob would send the items there.

happened.

Carissa held Ryan's hand as they strolled through the garden. After today's events, she feared they might have left a lasting impact on Ryan's spirit. She decided to take him out for a walk, hoping to ease his mind and inquire about his feelings and thoughts on what had

To her surprise, her worries were unnecessary. Ryan was calm as he looked up at her.

"What's the big deal? It was just one comment. There's no reason to be upset over it. The queen dowager and the king have been kind to me. They've given me so many gifts-shouldn't that outweigh a single remark? Besides, Prince Connor is still young. Once he grows up, he'll learn to respect others."

Carissa playfully tapped his nose. "You clever thing! Saying Prince Connor is still young-how old are you, then?"

"Well, I'm at least a bit older than Connor," he quickly reassured her.

Ryan was sensitive enough to notice that his aunt was worried about him. Even his uncle didn't feel completely at ease-after all, Rafael was sneakily following right behind them.



In a relaxed tone, Ryan continued, "This is nothing. After you both left, the queen dowager told me that from now on, I must live each day happily and joyfully. Our ancestors and parents have borne all the burdens and misfortunes of the Sinclair family so that we can enjoy happiness. If we are happy, it is their happiness too."

Carissa's heart tightened as if something had pricked at it.

Though these words were meant to comfort, she and Ryan knew there was little they could do for their family members who were gone. The best way to honor them was to live joyfully and happily—that was what their family wanted to see from them.

The aunt and nephew walked hand in hand for a while.

Then, Ryan said, "I need to see Lady Helen today. I didn't spend enough time with her at the palace, and I'll be returning to the academy early tomorrow. I can't neglect her. I want to spend more time with her."

Carissa chuckled at his serious tone, as though he were already a little adult. "Alright, I'll take you to her."

Helen had been sulking since her return that day. Gillian had tried several times to comfort her but had failed. When Helen saw Ryan eagerly running toward her, something inside her softened. Her nose tingled, and she nearly shed a tear. She quickly reached out to embrace him. "Good boy, you've had it rough."

Ryan nestled in Helen's arms, waving behind him to signal Carissa to leave. Then, he began to comfort Helen.

"Don't worry, Your Grace. I'm not upset at all. The king gave me so many gifts! I'll have Mr. York send them here for you. You can pick out whatever you like, or take it all if you want."

Helen's heart, already tender and

soft, ached at his words. Tears welled up in her eyes, falling in steady streams. "We'll go pick them ourselves. When you come back from the academy, we'll go o together."

Carissa quietly stepped out. She didn't realize that Ryan was so good at comforting others now.

Rafael had been following them at a distance. When he saw Carissa emerge, he approached her and softly asked, "Is he alright?"

Carissa looked at his worried expression. Without thinking, she slipped her arm through his. "He seems fine. Let's go, we'll leave him to spend time with Mother."

She gently looped her arm through his, the movement natural. To Rafael, this felt different from holding hands-it was a sign of trust, an unspoken connection that drew her closer to him. Holding hands, after all, still left a certain distance between them.

"Prince Connor's temperament..." Carissa began slowly, carefully choosing her words. "I didn't know he was...so spoiled."

Rafael hummed; he didn't seem eager to discuss this, but since Ryan had indeed been wronged today, he offered an explanation.

"The queen favors him greatly. She's

certain his position as the crown prince is secure, so she dotes on him even more. As a mother,

sometimes it's hard to see your net

child's faults. Even when she does, she feels it's not such a big deal."

Carissa had never been a mother and couldn't fully empathize, so she analyzed it rationally. "The king must know about this, right?"

"I'm not so sure. Even if he does, I

doubt it's much. How often does the king see him? His Majesty is busy with state affairs and hardly visits the palace. Even when he calls for Connor, it's only for a few words or to share a meal. In front of the king, Connor would never act out."

Carissa hummed thoughtfully, her brows furrowing. A seven-year-old could be playful and mischievous, but how could he harbor such malice toward others? And he was to be the future crown prince, too!

## Chapter 1060

Before today, Carissa had never paid much attention to the question of who would succeed the throne.

First, Salvador was still young; it seemed unlikely that he would appoint a crown prince so soon.

Second, the royal family already had a legitimate eldest son, which was rare. Even in noble families, it wasn't uncommon for a legitimate son to be born after a concubine's child. There were many women in the king's harem, and it was always possible for a lesser concubine to bear the first son.

In many noble families, it was customary that before the primary wife entered the household, no other concubines were allowed to bear children. Even during the nights of intimacy, a special medicine was consumed to prevent conception. If a woman were to accidentally become pregnant, a medicinal abortion was a common solution.

However, the royal family was different. Any child born to a concubine, boy or girl, was still considered part of the royal bloodline.

One of Salvador's concubines, Penelope, who had conceived before Kylie, had once made Kylie anxious. She had feared that Penelope might give birth to the eldest prince. In the end, Penelope bore a princess, and Kylie was relieved.

Carissa had heard these stories from her mother, but she had never really given them much thought since then.

She had assumed that as the king's legitimate eldest son, Connor would be carefully nurtured and trained. What she hadn't anticipated was that he would grow up with such a character.

Kylie's actions were also puzzling-she had been a celebrated talent in the capital, accomplished in every art from painting to poetry, and had studied the classics.

How could she not know that indulging a child only harmed the child? Especially when that child was the future crown prince.

"Don't think about these things. It's upsetting," Rafael said, his hand gently massaging her brow. His handsome face was softened by the dim light, making his features appear even more serene.

"Appointing the crown prince is something His Majesty will handle with great care. As for us, we are in no position to interfere with the succession. We can only watch and wait. And though Mother doesn't currently involve herself in politics, when it comes to appointing the crown prince, she will undoubtedly discuss it with His Majesty."

Carissa nodded. She had been thinking the same thing. Not only was it beyond her influence, but it would also be unwise for Rafael to interfere. Such actions might invite suspicion from Salvador.

Since Salvador was already wary of Rafael, the best thing to do was to stay out of it. That way, nothing would go wrong and no one could find anything to use against them, which would put them in a vulnerable position.

Having a sense of boundaries was essential-after all, they were brothers in a royal family, and maintaining harmony between ruler and subject was the most basic foundation.

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As night fell in Fawnrun City, the moon hung in the sky like a silver plate.

Lisandra sat in the courtyard of the marshal's residence, Warhawk Keep, the tense atmosphere that had gripped her fading. She felt utterly drained, as though she lacked the strength even to speak. Fortunately, her headache hadn't returned. Otherwise, she feared she wouldn't have been able to hold on, and the battle would have already begun.

"Your Highness, the wind is strong. You should return and rest," Aria said, draping a cloak over her shoulders. Her eyes lingered on Lisandra's pale, gaunt face, and a wave of pity swept over her. Lisandra tightened the cloak around her. "How is Aurora now?"

"She's being held. She's half-dead already. We've severed her tendons, but she's stubborn-still clinging to life, hoping someone will come to rescue her."

Lisandra raised an eyebrow. "Still hoping for rescue? Did she say that?"

Aria nodded. "When she was delirious, she kept muttering something like, 'Since you took my money, you have to save me. Don't let me down. You won't disappoint me, right?'" A cold glint flashed in Lisandra's eyes.

"She won't get that chance. Send her to Grapevine Village and Melondrop Village tomorrow and let the people exact their vengeance. Keep a close watch on her. When she dies, cut off her head and take it to Westhaven

for the ritual sacrifice."

"Understood!" Aria's voice was full of grim resolve. "She has no right to keep living. Every day she spends in Fawnrun City is an insult to its people."

Lisandra's gaze hardened. "Send

word to the army. Anyone who

wants to see it can come. The anger

has been building for too long, and only when they see Aurora's blood will their resentment be quelled."

She paused before continuing, her voice colder still. "Take Penny with you. Doesn't she want to avenge Arthur? Let her witness it."

Aria nodded sharply. "Yes, Your Highness."

As they spoke, Yuna stepped forward to help Lisandra inside. She guided the grand princess to lie on the bed before gently massaging her aching scalp.

"It's nothing. It hasn't flared up,"

Lisandra murmured, her eyes half-closed in exhaustion. Despite

her weariness, she couldn't allow t

herself a moment's respite, not when there were still battles to fight upon returning to the capital.