

War Song 1281

Chapter 1281

Since it wasn't Wayne, Yuvan shifted his gaze to Harvey.

He was just about to defend himself when Yuvan shook his head. "It's not you, either."

Harvey was speechless. He wasn't even worth suspecting?

It was only natural that Yuvan didn't suspect Harvey. The latter had arrived in Valken with nothing to his name, and in all those years in the capital, he hadn't achieved anything noteworthy. He was far inferior to Eleanor.

When Harvey first came to Valken, the people addressed him politely to his face. But behind his back, they all looked down on him. He had no sway over someone like Craig.

Yuvan took a slow, measured breath, gradually regaining his composure as he sank into his seat. His gaze swept over both men.

"Tell me, is it Craig who's been bought off, or is someone plotting to take what is rightfully mine?" he asked.

Wayne was still kneeling on the ground. He pondered for a while before he said, "It's impossible for him to have been bought off. Only a few days have passed since you issued the proclamation. Our forces are scattered across five or six districts, and it took us over half a year to move them into place. The court has no way of uncovering that, let alone tracking down Craig to turn him."

Yuvan's gaze turned icy, piercing to the bone. "So, someone is indeed trying to steal from me. Who is it?" Over the years, Yuvan had gathered a mix of followers, including members of the royal family. But among the princes, only he and Harvey held real influence. The things they had wasn't something just anyone could claim.

Yuvan ran through the list of suspects in his mind but came up empty-handed. Among his followers, the royal relatives were the least competent and capable. They might not all be as hopeless as Tiberius, but none of them posed a real threat.

The most suspicious person was still Wayne.

But ever since Yuvan had begun plotting rebellion, Wayne had been nothing but loyal. Many of his plans and strategies had come from Wayne's counsel. Without him, Yuvan wouldn't have his current strength, as he wouldn't have managed to gather such a private army.

If Wayne truly had ulterior motives, he wouldn't be kneeling here now. The moment Yuvan issued the proclamation, he would have fled.

"Harvey, take the men and head there tonight. Wayne, you will stay here."

Yuvan couldn't fully rule out Wayne as a suspect and needed to keep him close. As for Harvey, he was the one Yuvan trusted most.

Yuvan immediately ordered them to prepare ink and paper. He penned a letter and handed it to Harvey. "Tell Craig to take Sableton, Montfield, and Glenmoor at once. Then, detain the head of the Spencer family and bring him before me."

Harvey took the letter and nodded. "Understood. I'll leave tonight."

"Go," Yuvan said with a slight nod. Then, turning to Wayne, he ordered, "Summon Samson and Saul to see me."

When Wayne and Harvey left the room, they exchanged glances without a word.

It wasn't long before Saul and Samson arrived.

By now, Yuvan had shaken off the frenzied state from earlier and regained his composure.
noveldrama

Calm and collected, he began issuing commands, "Saul, we must hold Valken at all costs. Including the officials in the local authorities, how many men can we muster?"

"Your Highness, we can gather about 4,500 men, 2,000 of which are trained soldiers," Saul replied. 4,500 men were a sizable force for Valken, but Yuvan shook his head. "Too few. The city gates must be defended. No one is to enter or leave."

If the court dispatched troops to suppress him, 4,500 men wouldn't be enough to hold Valken. Fortunately, the court was still preoccupied with bandit suppression. So far, Yuvan's moves had gone according to plan. If they hadn't, his uprising would've been nothing more than a joke.

"I've already ordered the city gates closed and the main roads to be dug up," Saul reported.

Yuvan turned to Samson. "If war breaks out, we can't run short on grain. Though we haven't prepared adequately, starting tomorrow, you'll purchase all the grain in the city and stockpile it."

Samson had already drained most of his family fortune over the years. Yuvan clearly didn't intend to fund the effort himself, and he even asked Samson to pay for it.

Samson frowned, clearly dissatisfied. "I'm afraid all the grain shops in the city will close. Procuring supplies won't be easy."

A cold gleam flashed in Yuvan's eyes. "Then, break down their doors and take it."

Samson froze. "We're a righteous army. If we loot the grain, won't we be no better than bandits? How can we expect the people to follow us after that?"

Yuvan sneered. "Are you dense? Have the local officers seize the grain under the pretense of sending it to the Southern Frontier for the war effort. This will enrage the people of Valken, and we can send someone to rally them to join the uprising. It's a win-win situation."

Hearing that he wouldn't need to spend his own money, Samson was visibly pleased. "Understood. In that case, I'll coordinate with Mr. Harper."

Chapter 1282

That night, Yuvan didn't sleep at all.

This was never the plan he and Wayne had carefully devised.

Starting a rebellion in a remote province, with no allies in the capital and attempting to storm it head-on- how absurdly difficult would that be?

Their original plan had been far more calculated. The idea was to amass an army large enough to begin a slow, deliberate march toward the areas surrounding the capital. There, they would establish a foothold and wait for an opportune moment.

At that point, with Eleanor scheming inside the capital and securing support from several influential families, they would have allies to bolster their position. After all, they had placed many of Henry's daughters in noble households as concubines to curry favor.

Then, they would choose the perfect time, preferably when a war broke out. When the bandits and refugees caused havoc, Yuvan's forces would then converge just outside the capital before marching straight in and storming the palace.

But all of that had crumbled because of the incident at Stone Village.

Tiberius had been captured and the suicide soldiers were now in enemy hands, forcing Yuvan's hand far earlier than planned.

That was why he had hesitated for so long before taking action. The odds of success were far too slim. An uprising in the districts had little hope of shaking the capital.

Although the people knew about it and it sparked some discussion, many thought the so-called uprising and proclamation were just too ridiculous.

For one, the claim that Sandoria was attacking the Southern Frontier was dubious at best. Even if it were true, Sandoria's ambitions had been a known threat for years. They had attempted comebacks before, so how could anyone pin that on Salvador's supposed incompetence?

And as for the accusation of inept generals there hadn't even been a battle yet, let alone a defeat. On what grounds could anyone claim the generals were useless?

Moreover, Starhaven was wealthy and prosperous. Valken was part of Ebonflow, one of the most affluent regions in the realm. Life there was good. What grievances could possibly justify such drastic actions? Who would believe it?

Instead, the people were waiting. Waiting to see when Yuvan would be captured.

Rebellion was a crime punishable by death, and who knew how many people Yuvan had in his household? The crowds were eager for the executions.

After all, Starhaven had the Hell Monarch-a legendary figure who had driven the Sandorians back before. Could a few traitors like Yuvan truly pose a threat to him?

And so, the common folk found themselves pondering an unexpected question: Why would Yuvan rebel? Sure, the desire to become king was understandable. Who wouldn't dream of ruling the kingdom? But the risks were staggering. Why abandon the wealth and stability of being a vassal prince, only to gamble the lives of his entire family on a near-impossible chance? Wasn't that sheer madness?

Some speculated it might be vengeance for his mother, Ruth. But even that didn't hold up.

Before her death, Ruth had been ill for several years, and Yuvan had returned to care for her during her final days. Victoria had even shown Ruth exceptional kindness during her lifetime. If anything, Yuvan should have been grateful, not plotting rebellion.

It seemed more likely that power had gone to his head, blinding him to reason.

Yuvan had always been a man of low presence. Throughout his life, he had been overlooked, barely noticed even during Sigmund's reign. He was the sort of prince most would struggle to recall.

And it wasn't just the commoners scratching their heads-many officials were equally baffled.noveldrama

Why would Yuvan, of all people, throw away his relative safety and privilege? If he truly intended to rebel, why not wait until the court was occupied with a foreign war? Rising up now, at such a precarious time, seemed like a surefire way to lose.

The court officials weren't worried in the slightest. In their minds, Yuvan's forces would never make it anywhere near the capital. Chester's troops would crush the rebellion long before that could happen. Life in the capital remained undisturbed, filled with music, revelry, and feasting.

Even at Hell Monarch Estate, everything seemed calm—at least on the surface.

Meanwhile, Salvador issued an order to Chester to eradicate the bandits, ensuring they couldn't wreak havoc on the local populace. As for Yuvan's rebellion, Salvador didn't even bother convening his ministers for a discussion. Instead, he spent more time dining with Rafael at the palace.

In the royal study, the two brothers sat together after finishing their meal, reviewing the reports from the frontlines.

"There's still no movement," Salvador remarked, frowning. "It's odd. By now, the person pulling the strings behind Yuvan should have made a move."

"Patience," Rafael said, his voice calm and measured. He seemed to have an inkling of what was happening. "For now, the focus should be on Sandoria and Westhaven."

"You don't think this is just a distraction?" Salvador asked.

"Prince Yuvan believes it is," Rafael replied with a slow shake of his head. "But I don't think so. Even if Sandoria isn't planning a large-scale invasion, they won't leave the Southern Frontier in peace."

"Doesn't it strike you as strange how quiet things have been there these past two years, Your Majesty? Do you really think Sandoria has simply accepted losing the Southern Frontier without stirring up trouble?"

Chapter 1283

Salvador glanced at Rafael and said, "Of course, it must be your reputation that has struck fear into Sandoria. Even their marshal, Victor Crow, is clearly afraid of you."

Rafael naturally didn't think his brother was speaking sincerely.

With a wry smile, he said, "Your Majesty, you overestimate me. I don't possess such an overwhelming influence. Marshal Crow isn't afraid of me. They're just exhausted, with no way out after being defeated." "And yet, if they've been beaten so badly, surely they couldn't have regained their strength in just two or three short years," Salvador replied.

"Under normal circumstances, that would be true," Rafael agreed. "But even if they haven't fully

recovered, they wouldn't let us expand the Southern Frontier uncontested. They should be harassing us at least occasionally, yet they've been unnaturally quiet."

Salvador studied him for a moment. "You think someone is conspiring with them? That they're biding their time?"

"It's a possibility, isn't it?" Rafael replied.

They had discussed this before, and Salvador himself had leaned toward this theory. But Rafael knew his brother well-somewhere deep down, the king didn't want to acknowledge it.

Salvador made a noncommittal sound and said nothing more.

Rafael's gaze lingered on him. Words hovered on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed them back. There was no point in pressing the issue now.

The truth was, Salvador knew Oliver wasn't fit for command anymore. If they were to truly guard against Sandoria, sending Rafael back to the Southern Frontier would be the most logical move. But the king wasn't ready to take that step.

He had previously stripped Rafael of his military power, using Carissa as a means to do so. To reinstate him now would mean undoing that decision-a bitter pill Salvador clearly wasn't prepared to swallow. Until he had no other choice, he wouldn't play that card.noveldrama

And so, despite these days of discussions in the royal study, no real progress had been made.

The room fell into a heavy silence, neither brother speaking. Standing by the door, Derek quietly signaled for another round of coffee to be served, hoping that a hot drink might loosen the tension.

After a long pause, Salvador finally broke the quiet, saying, "I trust your instincts and believe in your suspicions, Rafael. But I also trust General Quinton and General Farrell. Even if Marshal Prince hasn't been on the battlefield in years, I'm confident he can manage with their support. Marshal Prince may not have your boldness, but he's a veteran soldier on the battlefield. He's not entirely useless." Rafael remained silent.

Neither agreement nor disagreement would serve him here.

He couldn't bring himself to agree. Salvador's confidence in Oliver stemmed from a handful of victories in years past. Yet those victories had been hollow, achieved with overwhelming numbers rather than strategic brilliance. Moreover, ever since he was injured, Oliver had developed a fear of fighting. The man had made almost no achievements while stationed at the Southern Frontier. He neglected military drills and spent his days indulging in pleasures.

How could Salvador not know this?

Still, Rafael knew better than to voice his objections now. It would only risk provoking the king, potentially leading him to make impulsive decisions out of defiance.

At its core, the issue was trust-or rather, Salvador's lack of trust in him.

With that understanding, Rafael rose to his feet and bowed. "I'll take my leave."

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Salvador waved a hand dismissively. "Go."

Back at his estate, Rafael found Jacob waiting with the latest intelligence. The news came from the spy network they had built through the efforts of Wilfred and a few others, corroborating what Winona had already reported.

Sandoria had mobilized their forces.

300,000 soldiers were marching toward the border, and Victor remained their marshal. While the figure of 300,000 was likely exaggerated, Rafael estimated the actual number wouldn't fall below 200,000. "His Majesty will likely hear of this by tomorrow-no later than the day after. Our scouts passed the information to General Quinton, who'll send it back to the capital via an urgent courier," Jacob added. Rafael nodded. None of this surprised him.

"Do you think His Majesty will send you back to the Southern Frontier?" Carissa asked. Rafael let out a dry laugh. "I have no idea."

Carissa frowned. "He used to trust you. Why does he waver when it matters most?"

Jacob interjected, "It's a different kind of trust. His Majesty trusts His Highness to carry out missions, but when it comes to relinquishing control of military power, he hesitates."

Carissa was really fed up with all this suspicion, but she had to accept their king was that kind of person. "What about Victory Pass? Any updates from there?" she asked.

"None so far," Jacob replied, then paused and added, "Even if something were to happen at Victory Pass, it wouldn't be serious. The Sullivan Army is well-equipped to handle it. Westhaven won't launch an all-out assault. Any overt action on their part would destroy the opportunity for negotiations over the border territories."

"What about Westhaven? Has Grand Princess Lisandra taken full control yet?" Carissa pressed. Rafael shook his head. "It won't happen so quickly. She might have a firm hold on the court for now, but consolidating power takes time. For now, we should focus on keeping an eye on General Stellwyn."

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Chester carried out the bandit suppression with precision and order.

The places Rafael mentioned were already under Chester's surveillance. He had already scouted and set up defensive measures quietly. As soon as any signs of unrest emerged, his forces swiftly moved in. Though they hadn't achieved complete control yet, the mountain bandits had been forced into hiding, too scared to come down and cause further trouble.

Meanwhile, Salvador received Louis' urgent report, confirming that Sandoria's army was indeed marching towards the border. The report estimated their numbers at 250,000, still led by Victor.

Salvador convened the officials from the Ministry of Defense, demanding an evaluation of the Southern Frontier's ability to repel such a massive force.

Davis felt that Salvador's question was wrong, because whether they could win and whether they could win quickly were two different things.

"The Southern Frontier has endured years of war and unrest. While the land can bear the scars, its people cannot. If we really have to fight, it's best to strike quickly and retreat. Otherwise, the Sandorian army will be like locusts, returning year after year to harass us. Such a situation will harm the long-term peace of the Southern Frontier," said Davis.

Salvador frowned. "Are you suggesting the combined forces of the Sinclair Army and Hell Monarch Army cannot swiftly repel them?"

"Your Majesty, there's no such thing as the Sinclair Army or the Hell Monarch Army anymore. They're all part of the Southern Frontier Army now."

Davis made it a point to clarify so that Salvador wouldn't think the Sinclair family or the Hell Monarch could still command the army. But to the king, that distinction didn't matter.

If the war at the Southern Frontier dragged on, and Rafael handed over military power after six or seven years, then he wouldn't worry.

But now?

Oliver's failure to command the respect of the troops made it evident that regardless of the name the army bore, it was still Rafael who held their loyalty. Sending him back to the Southern Frontier would effectively mean giving him military control back.

Now that Yuvan had already rebelled, those behind him were waiting for the right moment. If they were to lose control of the Southern Frontier now, Rafael could easily use the same justification Yuvan had that the kingdom was vulnerable and turn his forces against Salvador.

No one would be able to stop him.

It was too great a risk, so Salvador wasn't willing to let Rafael return to the Southern Frontier battlefield. "Your Majesty, the Hell Monarch's reputation is already a weapon in itself. The Sandorian soldiers fear him. They know his strength and dread the prospect of facing him in battle. If he leads the charge, this war will be swift and we'll minimize casualties," Davis persisted, determined to make his case. The officials in the Ministry of Defense all agreed with him, each of them speaking in favor of the suggestion.

For an hour, their discussions continued, with the king's growing impatience becoming more apparent. What he had hoped to hear today were voices supporting his decision, but instead, every recommendation pointed to Rafael.

Salvador's tone turned cold as he finally said, "The Southern Frontier Army already has a commander. I wasn't aware the Ministry of Defense held such little regard for Marshal Prince. If that is the case, why didn't any of you object when I assigned him to the Southern Frontier in the first place?"

"Your Majesty, it is not that we doubt Marshal Prince's abilities. The issue lies in Sandoria's overwhelming aggression this time, coupled with their apparent collusion with the traitors. This situation demands swift and decisive action. We cannot afford to let the war escalate and allow the conflict to stretch out further," Davis replied.

Salvador's expression hardened. "If a major battle is upon us, then it is all the more reason to avoid replacing commanders at such a critical moment. There is no precedent for such a reckless move before a battle. This matter is no longer open for discussion. You are all dismissed!"

Davis opened his mouth to protest again, but the newly appointed Ministry of Defense deputy minister, Steven Quinton, subtly tugged at his sleeve, signaling him to back down.

Reluctantly, Davis lowered his head and said, "Yes, Your Majesty. We will take our leave." noveldrama

Outside the palace, Davis made his way to Jeremiah's residence to meet with him.

After hearing Davis' account, Jeremiah let out a soft, bitter chuckle and said, "I've already sought an audience with His Majesty on this matter, but he has refused to see me. It's clear he does not want me involved in this discussion."

Davis stared at him, incredulous. "But you are the prime minister! How can you not have a say in matters of such national importance?"

The power of the prime minister was immense, after all!

Jeremiah rose from his seat, his hands clasped behind his back as he walked to the window. His smile held a trace of resignation.

"No matter how great the power of the prime minister, it cannot surpass royal authority. His Majesty no longer needs me as a pillar of support his rule is secure, and my influence is not what it once was," said Jeremiah.

Davis clenched his fist, then struck it against his chest in frustration, as though trying to knock the weight of his indignation free.

"But the Southern Frontier cannot afford delays! There's no need for them either. I know the exact state of the Southern Frontier Army over the past two years. His Majesty knows this as well. In peacetime, it might not matter. But now that war is upon us, why is he allowing this to happen?" Davis ranted.

Jeremiah patted Davis' shoulder and sighed lightly. "You must trust General Quinton and General Farrell. As for Marshal Prince... he is unlikely to make rash decisions at a time like this. He doesn't know the Sandorians or their tactics, and if he has any sense, he will rely on General Quinton and General Farrell for guidance.

"The Ministry of Defense must avoid direct confrontation with His Majesty on this matter. It will do no good. It'll only make him think the ministry is siding with the Hell Monarch."

Chapter 1285

"I dare not speak further today, nor would I approach Prince Rafael. I fear His Majesty might misunderstand," Davis replied.

Jeremiah nodded gravely. "Yes, the Ministry of Defense should avoid any private dealings with the Hell Monarch. For now, it's best to keep your distance."

He paused, his brow furrowing as he suppressed his growing concern over the Southern Frontier. Then, he said, "Recommend someone to act as the military overseer. Or if you believe Marshal Prince cannot handle the command during wartime, perhaps recommend General Thomas as an alternative." Davis raised a brow. "General Thomas is already the commanding officer of the military outposts. It wouldn't be right to transfer him to the Southern Frontier. It might be better to have General Timothy and General Quinton jointly lead the campaign instead. Besides, with the internal strife in the capital, the military outposts here cannot go without a general."noveldrama

Jeremiah considered this and thoughtfully said, "That's a valid point. However, when presenting your recommendations to the king, you must propose more than just the Hell Monarch.

Davis slumped into his seat, throwing up his hands in frustration. "I'm not one for finesse. I speak plainly, and the facts are clear-the Hell Monarch is the most suitable choice. As for the rebels... they're not much of a threat for now. They're trapped in Valken and can't escape, and they have no intention of attacking. General Murray can handle them."

Jeremiah waved a hand dismissively. "Do not underestimate the rebels. You know well that they have ties to Sandoria. Anyone capable of such an alliance surely has been scheming for a long time. It's more complicated than you think."

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Davis paused, taking in Jeremiah's words before replying, "You make a fair point. Then, perhaps I should go before the king tomorrow and suggest that the Hell Monarch be involved in addressing the internal unrest. That might be acceptable, right?"

Jeremiah gave a small, approving nod. "Yes, that could work."

Tiberius was temporarily thrown into the dungeon. Although Salvador hadn't issued an official edict yet, Rafael believed Tiberius couldn't escape a death sentence-it was just a matter of how he would die. Thomas, who was on leave due to his upcoming wedding, visited Hell Monarch Estate that evening. The Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team had not disbanded, and their network of communication remained intact. Thus, Thomas was well-informed of the situation outside the capital.

As soon as he entered, he wasted no time and immediately said, "Marshal Prince is unfit to lead. A commander who hesitates in battle will surely destroy the morale of the entire army."

As his former brother-in-law, Thomas knew Oliver all too well.

Timothy had written to Thomas about Oliver's actions at the Southern Frontier. Many of these letters were written when Timothy felt frustrated and needed someone to vent to, so they contained every detail, no matter how small.

"Marshal Prince is used to a life of indulgence. If it comes down to a real battle, he'll back down. His resolve represents the will of the Southern Frontier Army. No matter how much effort General Timothy or General Louis put in, Marshal Prince is still the commanding general on the frontlines.

"If he chooses to hold back or retreat, and General Timothy and General Louis disobey him, any defeat or heavy casualties could result in Marshal Prince submitting a report that would cost them their heads." Rafael stayed silent because Thomas was stating the hard truth.

Once the war began, if Oliver was willing to listen to Louis and Timothy, there would likely be no major issues. Both men were experienced in fighting the Sandorian forces and were familiar with their tactics and strategies.

But Oliver had never been the type to listen to his generals. He craved recognition, so he might keep rejecting Louis and Timothy's suggestions just to assert his authority as the commanding general. Rafael's greatest fear, however, wasn't just Oliver's disregard for his subordinates-it was the man's potential fear when facing the ferocity of the Sandorian forces. If Oliver faltered, how could the Southern Frontier Army find the resolve to fight?

Noticing the troubled look on Thomas' face, Rafael tried to reassure him, "Your big day is coming soon, so don't worry about the Southern Frontier for now. General Timothy and General Louis are there. The Southern Frontier will hold strong."

Thomas sighed deeply. "It'll hold, yes, but I fear the fighting may drag on too long and the casualties will be heavy. The people of the Southern Frontier have just started to live in peace after years of suffering. And now, war looms once again..."

His voice faltered as a painful weight settled in his chest. So many soldiers' spirits had been lost in that land, their bodies buried deep within the soil. After all the bloodshed and hardship, they had finally managed to find a fragile peace.

And now, war was coming once more. When would the people's suffering end?

"Forget it. I sound like a gossiping old woman, constantly speaking ill of others," said Thomas, pressing his palm to his forehead. "Perhaps, when the battle truly begins, Marshal Prince won't be so indulgent. After all these years stationed at the Southern Frontier, I'm sure he must feel some attachment to the land and its people."

Convincing himself to trust Oliver was no easy task. But for now, Salvador had yet to issue any orders. Once the Sandorian army arrived at the border, it would be too late to send a general to the frontlines.

After urging Thomas to return, Jacob sighed and said, "It's only natural for them to feel this way. They've given their best years for the Southern Frontier. Now, just as they've seen a glimpse of peace, war threatens once again. How could General Farrell bear to see it all undone?"

As he spoke, he glanced at Rafael, knowing that the prince was the one who could truly understand Thomas' frustration.
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Rafael remained silent for a long time, his expression unreadable. Finally, he said, "Keep a close watch. If there's any news, report it immediately."

Jacob nodded. "Understood, Your Highness."

Rafael shifted the topic, asking, "What of Valken? With the city gates closed, has any news made it out? Is there any progress? Have they begun to follow the plan?"

"No news yet, but I trust Mr. Moore. He's a capable man, one who can stir things up when necessary," Jacob replied.

Rafael nodded. "If you trust him, then he has my trust as well."

Cole Moore was one of the deputy governors of Valken. When Rafael first learned of Yuvan's rebellion, he had sent someone to make contact with Cole, who was quite cunning and talented in both civil and military affairs.

He had been the runner-up in the national examination during the 11th year of Sigmund's reign. However, over the years, he had only reached the position of deputy governor because of his arrogance.

He was known for his poetry, much of which expressed cynical views of the world. Yuvan had seen this as dissatisfaction with the court and had drawn him into his circle. For years, Cole had lived a solitary, secretive life, abandoning any chance of promotion just to stay in Valken, quietly gathering evidence of Yuvan's treason.

But Yuvan had remained patient, his core military forces hidden from Cole's reach. No letters had been exchanged, and Cole had been excluded from many of the critical meetings and left to handle the lesser affairs for Saul.

Without evidence, Cole had held his peace. But when Rafael sent someone to find him, he gave up searching for proof. Instead, he kept a watchful eye on their movements, quietly recruiting his own allies and waiting for instructions from Rafael.

He was a sharp individual, and his advancement was naturally not an issue. Often, his success relied on effectively utilizing the talents and efforts of the people working under him.

Having thoroughly vetted him before putting his faith in him, Jacob trusted Cole's abilities. Even when they had previously investigated Valken's military strength, he deliberately chose not to involve Cole to ensure he wouldn't be easily discovered and could maintain a low profile.

Carissa returned later than usual. She had spent her day working at the Capital Guard headquarters, then gone to Gracewood Women's Academy to teach martial arts with Cynthia before making a final stop at Škye Embroidery.

Although the situation was chaotic, Carissa remained determined to focus on her responsibilities, making sure to do what was required of her.

When she returned to Orchid Hall, Qiana quickly approached and softly said, "Your Grace, His Highness has been drinking alone for about an hour now."

Carissa glanced toward the inner room but didn't see anyone.

She asked, "Where is he drinking?"

"He's in the bedroom," Qiana replied.

Carissa nodded, then hurried inside.

It seemed Rafael had chosen the solitude of their bedroom, likely to avoid Jacob's notice. She lifted the curtain to enter and was immediately hit by the sharp, overpowering scent of alcohol. He must have had quite a bit to drink.

As she walked closer, she saw him sitting on the settee. There was no wine bottle in sight, but there was a large jug resting nearby. His cheeks were slightly flushed, and he seemed about half-drunk.

When he saw her, he flashed a faint smile. "You're back?"

His voice carried a husky tone, and the soft light illuminated one side of his handsome face, while the other half was lost in shadow.

"You've drunk this much?" Carissa asked, reaching for the jug only to find it empty. "Is something bothering you? Worried about the war?"

Rafael reached out, pulling her to sit beside him, then wrapped his arms around her waist. "I haven't had

a drink in so long. Tonight, I suddenly felt like getting drunk. There's always something bothering me, but I don't let it weigh on my mind."

"Yes, we shouldn't let it weigh on our minds," Carissa said as she gently stroked his forehead.

She understood him well enough-he must have been hurt. With war on the horizon and Salvador still doubting his loyalty, it wasn't easy. Her own mood wasn't much better. Scenes like this had likely played out before in the past.

She remembered when her own father and brothers needed support on the battlefield, and Salvador had delayed allowing Rafael to go to war. It wasn't until her father and brothers perished in battle that Rafael was allowed to lead the Hell Monarch Army.

Because of suspicion and fear, many military generals and soldiers had already sacrificed their lives. Was that going to happen again now?

Chapter 1287

Rafael leaned back against the soft cushions, feeling as though every ounce of strength had been drained from his body.

Ever since returning from the Southern Frontier and relinquishing his command, Salvador continued to regard him with suspicion. Rafael could choose not to care. If some things were restricted, he would find other ways to achieve his goals.

He held back to avoid further widening the gap between him and his brother. It wasn't until the

negotiations with Westhaven that he became more proactive. But even after that, he knew when to step back again.

Rafael only hoped that if war did come, Salvador might doubt him less. noveldrama

"He knows that Sandoria's return this time is likely tied to traitors within the Southern Frontier who've helped them prepare for this attack. Yet, he still believes that I am more of a threat to him than Sandoria's armies at our doorstep," said Rafael, laughing bitterly as he drained the last of his wine.

Carissa's gaze darkened. "This isn't the first time he's done this."

Rafael pulled her into his embrace, his fingers gently combing through her hair as he remembered the last time such a thing had happened. How suffocating that situation had felt.

As he sat here alone tonight, drinking to dull the ache, he found himself repeatedly mulling over the same question would he be condemned to live in this suffocating situation forever?

"I won't let the same tragedy repeat itself," Rafael said, pulling away from Carissa slightly and fixing her with a cold, determined stare. "I should learn from you."

He thought back to the time when Carissa had entered the palace with critical intelligence, only to be rejected by Salvador. Rather than waiting idly or stepping aside, she had single-handedly gone to the Southern Frontier to find Rafael. At that moment, she had placed her life in jeopardy, disregarding the

consequences.

Their hearts were in sync, and Carissa understood his meaning instantly.

She nodded firmly. "I support you. Go ahead. If His Majesty remains silent, I will stay here in the capital. But if he moves against you, I'll scatter the people in Hell Monarch Estate and help them escape."

A sense of clarity washed over her as she spoke, a plan forming in her mind. She had always been the

one to hesitate, the one unsure of the consequences. But now that she had voiced her support, she would be his strongest pillar. With that, he no longer needed to fear any consequences.

"Tomorrow, go to Arcane Sanctum and ask Sebastian if there's any medicine that might cause a change in pulse after consumption. If so, I'll take it, and then you can immediately call for a royal physician," Rafael instructed.

"Got it," Carissa said, nodding firmly.

Rafael's large hand gently cupped her cheek, his rough fingers brushing over her lips. "I won't let the same tragedy repeat itself."

Carissa's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "Good!"

The past most likely still haunted him.

But things were different back then. At that time, the Hell Monarch Army wasn't at the Southern Frontier. If Rafael wanted to lead them there, it couldn't be done without anyone noticing, and it wasn't a matter that involved just him, it also involved 100,000 soldiers from the Hell Monarch Army.

Right now, he could pretend to be sick and buy some time. Even if Salvador wanted to punish him when

he arrived at the Southern Frontier, it would have to wait until he returned victorious.

If the punishment that awaited him was death, Carissa would face it with him.

The following day, she made her way to Arcane Sanctum herself. As soon as Sebastian heard her question, he knew exactly what she intended.

"This is too dangerous. It's not worth it," he commented as he led her into the back room, his expression somber.

"It's worth it," Carissa replied with fierce conviction, her eyes shining. "For the Southern Frontier, it's worth it."

Sebastian sighed. "The consequences are too severe. Even if Prince Rafael returns victorious and isn't punished, His Majesty will find a way to get rid of him."

"I know," she replied quietly. "He doesn't have an official edict and he's not a marshal, but he can still take the lead. That, alone, is a threat to the king. His Majesty won't kill him outright, but he'll make sure he is removed, one way or another."

"Then, why let him go? What about the dukedom? What about Ryan?" Sebastian asked, his voice tight with frustration.

"I'll make sure Ryan is taken care of." Carissa took a deep breath. "There's nothing really left of the duke's household anyway."

"Ryan isn't the only one left of the Sinclair family," Sebastian reminded.

"His Majesty won't hold it against them. As long as he acknowledges the contributions of my dad and brothers, he won't touch the Sinclair family. Ryan might not even be in danger."

Sebastian shook his head. "The king's heart is unpredictable. I can't let you two take such a risk. Why should you? Time and again, he's willing to throw away his own throne, and yet you expect others to risk their necks for him?"

"We're not doing this for his throne," Carissa said, shaking Sebastian's arm gently. "Help us just this once. I believe my dad would support this decision if he were still alive."

Sebastian fell silent for a long moment, clearly weighing her words. He thought about his late friend's character and whether Hector would have supported this choice.

The answer came swiftly: he would have, without a doubt. He had never concerned himself with the question of what was 'worth it' or not. As a soldier, his duty was to protect the kingdom, even at the cost of his life.

Chapter 1288

However, Sebastian was clearly still worked up and grumbled, "I'm not helping you two idiots. You're both fools."

Carissa flashed a charming smile, trying to lighten the mood.

"Someone has to be the fool, right?" she said playfully. "I promise, just this once. After this, I won't be foolish again."

Clearly not impressed, Sebastian continued to grumble, "I'm afraid you won't have a chance to be foolish again. Who knows what'll happen when you get back? Whether your heads stay on your shoulders is another matter."

"If it comes to that, I have my ways. You don't have to worry," Carissa assured him confidently. Sebastian knew that her promises didn't guarantee much, but he couldn't help but agree with her.
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someone always had to be the fool. The common people needed fools like them. Still, a part of Sebastian wished the fools weren't Rafael and Carissa, but someone else.

He walked over to a dusty shelf and pulled down a small wooden box. Blowing off the dust, he wiped it with a cloth before carefully opening it. Inside was a small, dark pill, about the size of a peanut.

"Remember this. It's poison. When taken, it'll cause a disruption in the pulse, making it seem like an acute illness has struck, with an immediate effect on the heart. This isn't a false symptom-it will really happen. It will last for three days, and after that, he must take Snowdrop Pills. If he doesn't, his heart will suffer permanent damage," Sebastian explained.

Carissa hesitated, looking at the pill in the box. "Is it really dangerous?"

"Of course it is. It's poison."

"Then, after taking the Snowdrop Pills, will everything return to normal?"

"No, not immediately. He'll need to rest for several days. After you've deceived the king, he can't leave right away. Understand?"

The idea of causing such harm to Rafael's body made Carissa hesitate.

Instead of taking the pill, she asked, "Is there anything else? After deceiving the king, he'll want to head to the Southern Frontier immediately. He can't afford to actually be poisoned or sick."

"He can take half a pill. It'll only last for 72 hours, but he'll need to take Snowdrop Pills right away." Sebastian rummaged through the medicine cabinet, pulling out several porcelain bottles. "These are for restoring strength, replenishing energy, and fortifying the body. Have him take one a day until they're finished."

Carissa took them all in one sweep. "One type a day, or one of each a day?"

"Take at least three different kinds every day. He can mix them together. He can't skip even a day. With his temperament, once he's on the battlefield, he'll throw himself into the fight without holding back. If he doesn't recover properly, it's a death sentence," Sebastian warned.

"I understand," Carissa replied.

Still concerned, she asked one more question, "The half dose won't cause that much harm, right?"

"A half dose means half the poison, so the symptoms and damage will be reduced by half. With two Snowdrop Pills, his heart will be protected, and the rest can be dealt with through gradual recovery. There shouldn't be any major issues. You still have Snowdrop Pills, right?"

"I do!" Carissa answered quickly.

She knew Snowdrop Pills were in short supply. She had enough on hand, so she didn't need to ask for

more.

Sebastian nodded. "If you have them, then I won't give you any. I'll keep them for someone who truly needs them. Two of the ingredients for those pills are becoming harder to find."

"Thank you, Sebastian," Carissa said sincerely.

Just as she was about to put the pills away, Sebastian took the poison from the small box. He cut the pill in half and handed her one of the halves.

"If the king sends someone to guard Prince Rafael for 72 hours, then the plan will have to be canceled," he said, putting the other half away. "When will he take it? I'd better leave the city first."

Whenever someone from Hell Monarch Estate fell sick, they rarely called for a royal physician, instead usually choosing to go to Arcane Sanctum for treatment. So, Sebastian needed to give them a legitimate reason to call for a royal physician.

"Tomorrow morning. Ideally, it should happen when he's at work," Carissa said.

Sebastian frowned. "I have a dinner appointment tonight. Never mind, I'll manage."

He called out, "Ivy, prepare the medical kit and carriage. You'll accompany me out of the city for a few days."

Chapter 1289

That evening, Carissa handed Rafael the pill and explained its potential dangers.

Noticing the hesitation in her eyes, he smiled and said, "What's a little harm? There's medicine to counteract it. After the royal physician examines me, I'll immediately take Snowdrop Pills. On the road, I'll follow Sebastian's instructions. I'll take the medicine daily to build up my strength."

"It's still poison," Carissa countered, her brow furrowed. "Maybe we should think of another solution."

"I think this plan is fine. Sebastian is just being cautious. If the poison was truly dangerous, he wouldn't have given it to me," Rafael reassured.

Carissa looked up at him. "Should we talk to Jacob about this?"

"No need." Rafael set the medicine down and pulled her into his arms. "The fewer people who know, the better. When I collapse at the Supreme Court, Matthew can use my emblem to summon a royal physician. If the royal physician accompanies me back to the estate and sees everyone in a panic, there won't be any suspicion."

Carissa rested her head against his chest, feeling a strange sense of vulnerability. She had always been decisive, but now, her worries clouded her thoughts.

"I'm just worried. If you don't fully recover before you set off for the Southern Frontier despite taking the medicine, and then don't get proper rest on the journey, how will you be able to fight when you arrive?" Her voice trembled with concern, but Rafael's heart warmed at the sight of her care for him.

He smiled and reassured her, "I may not even replace Marshal Prince. I'll just look for General Quinton and blend in with the army. If Marshal Prince is reliable, I'll just treat the Southern Frontier trip as a little vacation."

Carissa's worry didn't ease, because it was exactly due to Oliver's unreliability that they had to take this risk. But the decision had been made, so hesitation could no longer be afforded.

"Alright. Tomorrow, take the pill at a good moment at the Supreme Court," she said, still concerned. Rafael looked into her eyes, his gaze soft and full of tenderness. "Yeah. Don't worry."

The next day, he tucked the half pill of poison into his pocket and went to the Supreme Court. At lunchtime, he dined with Matthew and even invited Randall to join them, casually asking about his work at the Supreme Court.

Randall had been feeling uneasy these past few days. Though he had made his choice, with his dad now rebelling and besieging Valken, he couldn't help but wonder if innocent lives would be lost. He also worried about how deeply this situation would affect him.

Now that Rafael was speaking to him kindly, Randall's anxiety was somewhat soothed. If the prince still cared about his well-being, it seemed that his position was secure for the time being, and perhaps he wouldn't be caught up too deeply in the storm.

But what of the people of Valken?

Unable to shake his concern for them, Randall asked hesitantly, "Your Highness, do you think the people of Valken will suffer because of my dad's rebellion?"

Rafael looked at him in surprise.

How could such a question even be asked?

Matthew's expression tightened. He wanted to say that throughout history, it was always the common people who suffered in the aftermath of treason. But feeling like it was pointless to explain, the words stalled in his throat.

If someone didn't think with their heart, they wouldn't ask a question like that.

Randall quickly realized the foolishness of his question. Perhaps, in his subconscious mind, he had believed that Yuvan's rebellion would be easily contained and that nothing too catastrophic would come of it. That must be why he had asked such a naive question.

Not wanting to embarrass him further, Matthew simply replied, "Yes."noveldrama

Randall awkwardly muttered an acknowledgment and seemed to shrink back into himself, his mood visibly dropping.

After lunch, they had a cup of coffee. While the other two were distracted, Rafael quietly took the pill. At first, he didn't feel any immediate discomfort, so he assumed the effects wouldn't kick in so quickly. Turning to Randall, he asked about Tiberius, who was still imprisoned.

"Nothing out of the ordinary, Your Highness," Randall replied. "Except for asking every day when he'll be released, there's nothing strange."

Matthew snorted. "He wants out? Ridiculous."

Rafael tapped his fingers on the table, his mind racing. "His Majesty hasn't disposed of him yet. He's probably keeping him alive to intimidate the rebels. Better to placate him for now, lest he tries to starve himself again-"

Before he could finish his thought, a sharp pain suddenly gripped his chest. It felt as though something was surging violently through his veins, and he felt a pressure he couldn't contain.

Blood spilled from his lips as he collapsed to the floor.

"Your Highness!" Matthew shouted, leaping forward just in time to catch Rafael's falling body.

Chapter 1290

In Salvador's study, one of the royal physicians, Robert Lester, bowed respectfully as he reported on Rafael's condition.

Two hours earlier, Matthew had arrived at the Royal Medical Department, bearing the Hell Monarch's emblem. He reported that Rafael had suddenly collapsed at the Supreme Court after vomiting blood. As the incident was sudden, it was soon reported to Salvador.

"Your Majesty, my diagnosis suggests that it was a sudden heart ailment. The situation was rather grave. When I arrived, Prince Rafael had already fainted, and it took some time before he regained

consciousness after needle treatment. However, he was unable to move and had to be taken back to his estate by carriage.'

"Why would he have a sudden heart issue? He never mentioned suffering from heart problems before," Salvador said, furrowing his brow.

Despite his concern, there was a sense of wariness. After all, they were brothers by blood-caution was a natural instinct, but it was mostly precautionary.

"Mr. York told me that His Highness has not been resting properly since his return from his trip away. He had bouts of coughing and complained of a heaviness in his chest, though he didn't pay it much attention. I suspect that an untreated cold invaded his heart, which caused the heart ailment," Robert explained. Salvador recalled Rafael's previous report from Lunvale, where he and the others

had spent several days in the mountains, enduring freezing nights with limited fire for warmth. It was entirely possible that Rafael had caught a severe chill during that time.noveldrama

But questions still lingered in Salvador's mind.

"If it was simply a cold, how did it not worsen over time? The symptoms should have escalated. Why did they remain so mild that they were ignored?" he asked.

Robert bowed lower. "Your Majesty, according to Mr. York, His Highness has been too busy to rest since returning to the capital. I believe that the strain on his body has been growing due to other worries, which His Highness may have ignored."

After a pause, Robert continued, "Also, this illness affects people differently. Some with strong

constitutions may not show obvious symptoms, but the illness could already be harming their lungs and heart. His Highness likely falls into that category."

Salvador, who wasn't well-versed in medical theory, focused on a simpler question, asking, "Is he better now?"

"His Highness is stable now, but will need a period of rest. The most important thing is that he cannot overexert himself."

Salvador sighed in relief. "As long as it's not life-threatening, that's a relief."

Just as he raised his hand to dismiss Robert, his expression shifted slightly. "Were you the one who escorted him back to Hell Monarch Estate? What was Lady Carissa's reaction, and how did the people at the estate respond?"

Robert pondered for a moment before replying, "When His Highness was sent back to the estate, Lady Carissa wasn't there. She only arrived later, after a messenger was sent for her. As for the others at the estate, they were in a state of panic.

"Mr. York's face was ashen, and he immediately sent someone to fetch Mr. Dalton. However, he couldn't be reached as he had already left the capital with his apprentice for a medical visit."

"Was Lady Carissa there when you left?" Salvador asked.

"Yes, she was there. Upon hearing that His Highness had suffered a sudden heart ailment, she burst into tears," Robert replied truthfully.

"She cried?"

Salvador was taken aback, his mind flashing with the image of Carissa's usually strong and determined face.

She had cried?

"Indeed, Your Majesty. Seeing her tears.... It really broke my heart too," Robert said, sighing.

Salvador's eyes darkened, his mind a swirl of thoughts. It took a long moment for him to dismiss Robert. Once the physician had taken his leave, Salvador's gaze turned toward Derek, who stood nearby with a look of concern.

"Tomorrow morning, go to the estate with Mr. Lester. Bring some of the finest medicinal herbs with you," Salvador instructed.

"Understood, Your Majesty." Derek nodded without hesitation.

Salvador's tone shifted, becoming more deliberate as he added, "And make sure the queen dowager doesn't find out. We don't want her to worry."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Derek affirmed.

As Derek left to carry out his orders, Salvador summoned Galen and said, "Find out if Mr. Dalton has truly left the capital. See if it's true that he's gone out on a medical visit."

Not long after, Galen returned and reported, "Your Majesty, it's true. Mr. Dalton and his apprentice left yesterday to attend to a medical matter and to gather materials for making Snowdrop Pills."

Salvador nodded slowly, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Do not mention to anyone that I had you investigate Mr. Dalton's whereabouts."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

Galen was quick-witted enough to realize that Salvador was suspicious about Rafael's sudden heart ailment.