

## War Song 871

### Chapter 871

Whether criticized or understood, news about the embroidery workshop ultimately spread far and wide. The official establishment of the workshop right after the New Year was thanks to Jacob's diligent supervision and the fact that the necessary paperwork had been completed early, with Luke in charge of procurement.

Violet tossed a bundle of banknotes into the air and confidently declared, "If it's not enough, just ask me for more!"

Luke didn't go shopping by himself. He was accompanied by the Defense Minister's wife, Hannah. They bought everything imaginable-furniture, bedding, pots and pans, looms, assorted threads, embroidery needles, and even chamber pots.

Having managed a household for many years, Hannah worked seamlessly with Luke, who oversaw the daily affairs of Hell Monarch Estate. Within just a few days, they had acquired all the essentials. Any custom items would be delivered after the New Year.

The embroidery workshop was named Skye Embroidery. Kyle personally wrote it, which was then carved into a plaque that hung over the entrance.

The townsfolk were puzzled; they had no idea who the name belonged to. They wondered why the workshop, which was intended to shelter women, didn't have a name like Compassion Embroidery.

However, it wasn't long before someone discovered that Skye was the middle name of Amelia, the deceased lady of the Warren family. Upon learning this, many people sighed and stopped targeting the embroidery workshop. Instead, they remarked on how Carissa seemed to care about her previous relationships.

Everyone knew that Amelia had thrown herself into the river, and that it was Carissa who had saved her. Though she had saved her the first time, she couldn't save her the second time.

That was the reason Carissa had established the workshop to provide refuge for abandoned women, right?

Once a tragedy had a poignant backstory, it was easy for the community to empathize. No one criticized Carissa or the Hell Monarch anymore.

Instead, the people praised their loyalty and generosity. It was known that if a woman remarried into another family, it was forbidden for her to maintain ties with her former in-laws. Thus, Rafael's broad-mindedness earned him respect.

With praise came criticism, and those who spoke out mostly scolded him for being foolish and for failing to recognize his status.

On New Year's Eve, Ryan returned home from the academy. After spending a day at Hell Monarch Estate, the Klein family came to take him to their residence. Though Carissa was reluctant, she understood how important it was for them, so she agreed to let him go.

However, Helen was furious. Ryan had just returned home the day before, and now, someone was whisking him away. Was he really going to celebrate the New Year with the Klein family?

Helen's anger didn't stem from a deep affection for Ryan. She liked him, sure, but it wasn't that serious. She had prepared a stack of whimsical stories, planning to ask Ryan to read them to her. He was clever and didn't just read the words flatly. He would mimic the quirky voices, sometimes eerie and sometimes playful, which made the stories all the more entertaining.

Furthermore, while the tailors were making clothes, she had specifically instructed them to prepare several winter outfits for Ryan to try on the next day. But before she could even rise, the Klein family had already taken him away.

Knowing how upset Helen was, Carissa suggested she go to the palace to keep Victoria company. Helen was open to the idea, especially since Violet had been absent from the residence lately, supposedly busy teaching those men martial arts.

Being left alone with Gillian had grown tedious, so it seemed better to go to the palace and spend time with her

sister and bicker with Dakota and Josephine.

As for Rebecca, she ultimately could no longer hold on.

Barrett personally knelt in front of Arcane Sanctum for several hours. At first, no one paid him any attention, but he knelt for eight hours until about five in the evening. Sebastian usually had coffee and a few pastries at that time, and he had Barrett brought into the back hall.

Barrett thought he finally had a chance. He dropped to his knees in front of Sebastian and said, "Whatever the price for the Snowdrop Pills, just name it. I'll pay it without haggling."

Rebecca had finally sold off some jewelry, and now they had 3,000 silver coins. She had even said that if that wasn't enough, she would sell more.

Sebastian regarded him, but didn't mention the Snowdrop Pills.

"I used to have high hopes for you," he said. "Who would have thought I misjudged you? You've truly disappointed

me."

Chapter 872

Barrett's eyes darkened with sorrow. "I know I've disappointed you, Sebastian. I regret my choices deeply."

"When the Duke of Northwatch's family was choosing a son-in-law, they set the bar so high. Yet, they chose you. Do you know what Madam Sinclair saw in you?"

Barrett's voice got stuck in his throat as Sebastian mentioned his late former mother-in-law.

"I do. She said I was earnest and honest, and that I promised I would never take a concubine.... It was my fault. I broke that promise. I let her down."

"That's part of it," Sebastian said. "The second reason is that, even though you're the second son, you were willing to shoulder your family's burdens. It showed you had a sense of responsibility. To put

it bluntly, it was going to be hard to restore your family's reputation then, and even harder with just you at the helm.

"In the struggle to carve out a future, she believed you would have the same tenacity and focus as the late General Sinclair. People who are solid and responsible act that way. With you managing the outside affairs and Carissa handling the home front, you might not achieve great heights, but securing a military honor and a position in the capital shouldn't be out of reach. While you may not live a life of grandeur, you would at least have stability. What she desired was simply a smooth life for her daughter.

"However, she was mistaken in assessing you through the lens of her worldly experience. Your ancestors were once prominent, but by your father's generation, the family had declined. There was a lack of strict family teachings and a nurturing mother, so you never really gained much experience or encountered significant temptations. Your self-discipline is lacking, and your ability to discern right from wrong is insufficient.

"The burdens you carry are solely the heavy expectations forced upon you by your family, and you yourself wish to bring your family back to its former glory. To be frank, you have talent, but you're not exceptionally gifted.

"If you had taken one step at a time, with General Sullivan and Carissa to assist you, you would have ultimately achieved something worthwhile. While your family may never have returned to the heights of the past, you could have at least carved out a place for yourself.

"When you met Aurora, you were taken aback by her supposed strength as a woman. If only you had more insight, you'd have realized her words were all misguided. When a woman belittles others to elevate herself, she inherently disrespects all women. And after she achieved her success, you were further enamored by her. Back then, Aurora stood out brilliantly among the officers, and you thought Carissa could never compare to her. "Your mistakes stem from your youth, your lack of experience, your muddled thinking, and your blindness to the corrupting influence of wealth. You naively believed you had found true love. At that point, you weren't beyond saving. If you had returned to the capital and had elders to help you analyze your situation, you should have been able to regain your clarity.

"But your mom's short-sightedness led her to repay kindness with cruelty. Instead of comforting Carissa, she oppressed her as her mother-in-law. She tried to force Carissa to give you and Aurora money for the wedding. When that didn't work, she plotted to have you divorce Carissa and seize her dowry.

'Surprisingly, you didn't stop her. Instead, you actively took part in her schemes, and one misstep led to another. When you all acted that way, the dead end was laid out before your mom. It was only because of Amelia that she managed to survive this long.'

After finishing his remarks, Sebastian drained his cup and turned to Barrett.

"She should have been long gone, yet she lives on thanks to the devotion of her two daughters-in-law. She should have considered it a blessing. But now, one is no longer part of the family while the other is dead, and that blessing has vanished.

\*And you... You're not innocent in this at all. Didn't you realize that some things were fundamentally wrong? You knew they were, yet you still did them. While you may not have committed great evils, the things you've done are utterly repulsive. Because you haven't engaged in truly monstrous acts, you still have a chance to redeem yourself. I hope this heartfelt conversation will wake you up."

Barrett trembled, his face pale.

Each of Sebastian's words struck him like a hammer, forcing him to relive his past mistakes. Step after step, he had gone wrong. Just as Sebastian had said, he did know some things were wrong, but why had he chosen to act that way?

"Go home. There's no need to kneel in this freezing weather. You're the dignified commander of the Crown Guard. Do you have any idea how much trouble you're inviting by kneeling in front of my shop? You're dishonoring General Wyatt, who sacrificed an arm for you."

Barrett felt a deep shame and a dull pain in his heart.

Ultimately, Rebecca was still his mom. He had no choice but to plead once more.

"Sebastian, just one pill. Let her get through this New Year, please?"

"She doesn't deserve it! Sebastian snapped, then gestured to his staff. "Escort him out!"

Chapter 873

Barrett left Arcane Sanctum in a daze.

Ivy stepped in and asked, "Sir, why did you say so much to him?"

She was confused. Her mentor had always harbored a deep disdain for the Warren family. He rarely bothered to acknowledge them. Yet, Sebastian had spent his break time trying to reason with Barrett today.

Sebastian sighed softly. "I don't want the world to think that Madam Sinclair was blind and muddle-headed for marrying her daughter to him. While it's true, I just don't want to hear others say it."

He stood up and placed a piece of charcoal into the brazier to warm his hands.

"Besides, he's not truly wicked. He can tell right from wrong when it counts. General Wyatt lost an arm saving him. If Barrett doesn't wake up and continues to be led astray by his mom, then that lost arm will be a tragic injustice," he added.

"Is there something else?" Ivy felt there was more to it.

When Sebastian loathed someone, he wouldn't waste his breath speaking to them.

Sebastian's gaze darkened. "Don't ask. I hope it won't be necessary."

Barrett returned home empty-handed. Everyone in the household had already prepared themselves for this outcome. After so many failed attempts to obtain the medicine, what could he do differently?

Moreover, Sebastian despised him most of all, so it was even less likely he would succeed.

Rebecca was still conscious, aware that her son had gone to seek the medicine. She held onto a flicker of hope in her heart.

Sure enough, when Barrett returned, he was holding a small wooden box. She recognized it immediately—it was the box that contained the Snowdrop Pills.

Her heart raced with joy. "Did you... manage to get it?"

Barrett hid the bitterness in his eyes and instructed, "Bring a small cup of hot water to prepare the medicine."

Tara knew the situation and followed his orders. Once the medicine was brewed and turned into a liquid, Rebecca couldn't wait to drink it. However, the moment the liquid touched her tongue, she realized something was wrong.

The taste was completely different.

Snowdrop Pills had a faint aroma of Evergreen Root and a refreshing taste. After consuming them for so long, Rebecca could easily discern even the slightest difference, and this was completely unlike what she was used to.

She gasped and knocked the medicine away. "No... This isn't it!"

"Mom!" Barrett's voice was heavy with concern as he looked at her. "This medicine was prescribed by another physician. It's meant to treat your illness. It may not be as effective as Snowdrop Pills, but it should help you feel a little better."

"I don't want it!" Rebecca seethed, becoming more breathless by the moment. "Only Snowdrop Pills... only Snowdrop Pills work!"

"Madam Rebecca, don't be unreasonable. This medicine is quite expensive too," Tara pleaded through her tears. "All of you are useless!" Her gaze swept over everyone in the room. "Where's Serena? Call her back... The Marquis of Ironridge's family can buy them!"

"If she wanted to come back, she would have already. We've sent people to escort her several times, but she refuses to come," Barrett replied, his heart heavy with pain.

Yet, as the pain piled on, he found himself growing numb to it. Instead, he felt a rising irritation within him.

How had Carissa managed to care for someone so ill for an entire year without a single complaint? Even as Rebecca's son, he felt utterly drained.

"Useless! All of you are useless!"

Rebecca's anger flared again. The dull pain in her chest intensified, making it hard for her to breathe.

She gasped, struggling for air, her voice rising in desperate moans, 'Help... help me.'

Barrett sent for the physician, who had visited several times already and had long since determined that Rebecca wouldn't make it to the New Year. That she had held on this long was a testament to her tenacity.

After the examination, the physician came out to speak with them.

"It's only a matter of days now. Prepare for what comes next. She will suffer more from here on out. The difficulty in breathing may lead to some hallucinations, and she might say strange things. Don't be alarmed if she claims to see ghosts."

As he finished, the physician added, "There's no need for a prescription either. It would be pointless. Taking the medicine will only cause more suffering.

Chapter 874

On the evening of the twenty-sixth, Rebecca indeed began to hallucinate. Strangely enough, her condition seemed to improve.

She could even sit up as she pointed at the air and shouted, "Get out! Go away! You're all useless, nothing but worthless trash! Amelia, how dare you touch me? You're so disrespectful..."

Rebecca clutched her own throat as if struggling to breathe, her face turning a deep shade of purple.



Since the physician had warned them about her condition, no one thought she was actually seeing ghosts. Barrett rushed to pry her hands away and shouted, "Mom, there's no one here! Amelia isn't here!"

"She's come to take revenge! She hates me!" Rebecca grabbed Barrett's sleeve, her fierce expression shifting to one of terror. "Tell her I didn't want her dead! I just wanted to enforce some rules! I needed to teach her a lesson! Ah... Stay away, Amelia! How dare you!"

Rebecca swung her arms wildly, slapping Barrett across the face again and again. He stood still, letting her strike him.

It took an hour before she finally quieted down.

Her breaths were shallow, with more air escaping her than entering. Sometimes, Rebecca seemed aware. She opened her eyes to look at the people gathered around her. Yet each time, she didn't see Benjamin or her grandchildren.

She moved her lips, whispering, "Benjamin...."

Barrett was sitting by her bedside. "Mom, would you like some water?"

"Benjamin..."

Where was her eldest son? Where was he?

"He stepped out for a moment. He'll be back soon," Barrett reassured.

Bryan stood nearby, wiping his tears away, his voice filled with anger as he spoke, "Benjamin is heartless. Mom has been so good to him, and he can't even come to see her off at the end."

Rebecca's eyes widened in shock. See her off? Was she really dying?

She was dying.

Her eldest son was absent, and her daughter hadn't even taken a moment to check on her. Not a single person from the second branch of the family had visited.

Was she truly so hated?

Rebecca refused to accept it-she simply couldn't. All her hard work had been for the family. She had hoped to restore them to their former glory. Didn't she do it all for them?

She felt as though something was choking her throat, making it increasingly difficult to breathe. She was so cold; she couldn't stop shivering.

This wasn't how it was meant to be. She should have had the best physicians and taken the most expensive medicine. Though her husband hadn't achieved much, he listened to her. And her daughters-in-law... No, they had all left, every last one of them.

"I regret it..."

Thick tears streamed from the corners of her eyes, but she couldn't voice any other words.

What she regretted, no one knew.

At 10:45 that night, Rebecca drew her last breath. Her eyes remained open.

Barrett cried for a long time before he began to arrange her funeral.

With only a few days left until the New Year, the funeral preparations were rushed. They set up a table for a day to allow visitors to pay their respects.

With the court on break and the Supreme Court closed for the holiday, Carissa could take a break. However, for the Capital Guard, the Garrison Unit, the Royal Guard, and the Crown Guard, the New Year was usually their busiest time. There could be no slackening in their duties.

Carissa would occasionally return to check in, but she didn't remain at the Capital Guard headquarters or the Central Command Office all the time.

The following day, news of Rebecca's death reached Hell Monarch Estate.

No one said much about it. After all, news that she was nearing her end had long since spread.

Jacob did remark, "Well, with this, Barrett will have to enter his mourning period. Is the Crown Guard about to lose its commander?"

Salvador had already intended to separate the Crown Guard from the Mystic Army, which meant having a commander was essential. Previously, whether there was a commander or not didn't matter as much. Now, it was crucial.

However, with Rebecca's death at this time, it was the son's duty to mourn, and such mourning meant Barrett would be sidelined. At the moment, there was no sign that Salvador would reinstate him.

To put it plainly, the Crown Guard didn't necessarily have to have Barrett as its commander.

Chapter 875

Violet felt no sympathy for Barrett.

"I heard from Claire that Serena didn't return for the funeral, but Aurora left Blessed Haven to don mourning attire for that old hag," she said.

Ever since the assassination attempt, Aurora had rarely left Blessed Haven. She wouldn't even make an appearance when Rebecca was nearing death, so it was strange that she would come out now to mourn. If someone wanted to kill her again, infiltrating the household during the funeral wouldn't be too difficult.

But Aurora was probably smart enough. The treason case had just happened, and it wasn't resolved yet. Who would dare to act recklessly at this time?

"Who's helping to handle the funeral arrangements?" Carissa asked.

Viola had been in poor health since giving birth, so she couldn't manage it. Aurora likely wouldn't be taking charge either.

"Madam Charlotte," Violet replied. "After all, they're sisters-in-law. It's not like they have a lot of grievances against each other. Plus, the family hasn't truly split up, so she'll handle what needs to be done."

"Aunt Charlotte is quite loyal and principled," Carissa remarked. "That's rare."

Everyone nodded in agreement. They genuinely respected someone like Charlotte, who could clearly distinguish between love and hate. While they admired her, they couldn't help but silently curse Rebecca.

Only Rafael refrained from cursing her. He certainly resented Rebecca, but her cruel and ungrateful nature had led him to marry Carissa. His anger toward her was only because she had mistreated Carissa.

Rafael's injuries had mostly healed, though he still walked a bit awkwardly. The bump on his forehead had faded to a light bruise, but at first glance, it still gave the impression of an ominous shadow.

Jacob said that Rafael's forehead didn't look very auspicious and insisted that Dylan hold him down while he applied some powder to cover it up. Now, Rafael mostly stayed indoors unless he had to go out.

Fortunately, Helen had gone to the palace to keep Victoria company. Otherwise, she would have nagged him endlessly about the state of his forehead.

The weather was cold, and Victoria had moved to the warm quarters of the palace. The concubines would come to pay their respects on the first and fifteenth days of the month, while Salvador visited every other day. No matter how diligent he was in his duties, he never forgot to check in on her.

Even while investigating the treason case, he would take time to drop by and see her. Helen had been living in the palace for a few days and had seen Salvador several times.

Victoria was aware of Rebecca's death. She remarked, "Well, she died at just the right time. This year will be peaceful."

Helen raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "Who told you that? I've seen you holed up in here all day. Did someone in the palace spill the news? Are they even prying into matters concerning the Warren family?"

"What's wrong with knowing a little about what's happening outside?" Victoria didn't directly answer Helen's question, but tapped her on the forehead. "Don't be so closed-minded. You should keep yourself informed. Now that you're out of the palace and staying with Rafael, you ought to help a bit. Don't just focus on enjoying yourself." "If my son is doing well and my daughter-in-law is dutiful, shouldn't I be enjoying life?" Helen shot back. "After all the hard work raising my son, it's only natural to want to enjoy the fruits of my labor. Am I supposed to keep toiling away for them? I'm not that foolish."

In front of her sister, Helen always spoke her mind and was accustomed to being unrestrained in her words. If she said something wrong, it was only a few rebukes from her sister. What did she have to fear?

Victoria chuckled. "You're quite lazy, you know. You have no ambition at all."

"What do you mean? Since entering the palace, how many concubines have turned against me? I've fought through so much to get to where I am today. I wouldn't have such a peaceful life if I hadn't done all that," Helen retorted.

Victoria looked at her dim-witted sister and sighed. Fine-if Helen thought she got through it all on her own and wanted to be proud of it, let her be.

Helen carefully arranged the sugar cubes on a plate, making them neat and tidy. "Why say that the year will be peaceful since that old woman is dead? Did she make you suffer while she was alive? Do you have a grudge against her?"

Victoria gave her a disdainful look. "Are you so heartless? She treated your daughter-in-law poorly. Don't you hate her for that?"

Helen's eyes widened in disbelief. "Why are you still holding grudges against an old woman? Does she even deserve to be in your thoughts?"

In Helen's memories, Victoria had always seemed indifferent to everything and maintained a carefree expression. Whatever happened, her face was always the same, except when she was angry with Helen.

Why would that old woman merit such attention from her sister?

Victoria shot her an irritated glance. "Who exactly is Melanie Sullivan to me?"

"A friend, of course."

"That old woman picked on Carissa, and now she's dead. Death took her before the New Year, so isn't it like giving Melanie a big gift? Why wouldn't I feel at ease because of that?"

Helen waved her hand dismissively. "Come on, she's going to hell! How could she possibly meet Melanie? If they were in the same place even after death, it wouldn't be a good thing."

Victoria regarded Helen for a moment, as if considering her words. Perhaps she had a point.

Chapter 876

New Year's was rather dull.

At the palace banquet, some royal relatives, who only made an appearance once a year, came with their families. The men congregated in one area, while the women gathered in another.

Carissa, along with several princesses and consorts, accompanied Kylie and the concubines to greet Victoria.

The honored and noble concubines were all together, with Helen among them.

Molly and Fiona stayed in Ruth's palace and accompanied her, so they didn't come over.

Everyone exchanged airy pleasantries-some compliments here, a bit of flattery there-while competing in beauty and showing off their jewelry.

Salvador's concubines were also present, leaving Carissa dazzled. She only recognized Kylie, Sylvia, and Salvador's other concubines, Penelope and Grace, while the rest were little more than strangers to her. Those of lower rank mostly kept their heads down, occasionally smiling apologetically or daring to glance up.

Salvador only had a few offspring. Perhaps it was due to his dedication to governance that he spent little time in the harem.

Kylie's son, the legitimate eldest son, appeared quite composed for his age. He walked much like Salvador, with his hands clasped behind his back, chin slightly raised and back straight. If not for his short stature, one might mistake him for an adult.

Sylvia had a son and a daughter. The son she raised wasn't her biological child. The wet nurse brought him over to greet Victoria before taking him back. The princess was well-behaved, her hair styled in two pigtails. She was about four years old and was still quite innocent, but she had been taught proper manners and didn't fuss. Penelope also had a daughter, the eldest princess, who was three months older than Sylvia's girl. Grace had a son, the second prince, who was only two years old.

The second prince was chubby, running with a wobbly gait. Victoria took a great liking to him, holding him close and giving him a few affectionate kisses before turning to Carissa.

"You should hold him too. May you give birth to a plump little one next year."

Carissa looked at the pudgy child and smiled as she extended her arms. "Your Highness, may I hold you?"

The second prince hesitated for a moment, glancing back at Grace, who smiled and said, "Go on. Your aunt will take good care of you."

Only then did the second prince open his arms for Carissa to hold him. She first looked at Victoria. While the queen dowager wore a smile, her eyes held a hint of chill.

After holding the heavy child for a bit, Carissa set him down, laughing as she said, "The second prince is truly adorable."

Grace smiled. "That's good to hear. I wish you all the best in getting what you desire soon."

Although Carissa wasn't thinking about having a child just yet, she still felt it necessary to express her gratitude. Carissa had no idea if the other concubines had children. None of them had brought any with them. She rarely pried into palace matters. Rafael and Jacob might know, but such topics were rarely discussed within the household.

Since Salvador ascended the throne, five years had passed. Some ministers had brought up the issue of naming an heir, but their interest wasn't particularly strong, so the matter had yet to be officially addressed.

However, Kylie had a legitimate son-an eldest son, no less. So, as long as nothing drastic happened, the succession seemed largely uncontested. That was why the ministers, although they had raised the issue, weren't in a hurry to settle it.

Victoria radiated warmth when with her grandchildren, but there was a palpable distance between her and the concubines. Even the queen remained somewhat estranged from her. Yet, Victoria was slightly closer to Carissa.

Meredith arrived fashionably late. As Victoria's daughter, she naturally commanded attention. She was dressed in a stunning pomegranate-red gown embroidered with golden thread and a white fox fur cloak. 16 pure gold hairpieces with emerald inlays adorned her hair, and she exuded a regal grace.

Henrietta teased her, "You're always the last to arrive each year. Did it take you half the day to get ready?"

Meredith shot her a playful glare. "You dare tease me? I'll tear your mouth apart if you don't watch it."

Henrietta was Josephine's daughter, and she was straightforward by nature. She quickly covered her mouth and called out to Victoria, "Mother, save me!"

Victoria rarely appeared so entertained. "You're usually so dignified and gracious, but you have such a sharp tongue when it comes to your sister. If you want to be torn apart, I can't help you."



Laughter erupted around them. As they chuckled, there was a lingering sense that something was missing this year, and it was as if the atmosphere was notably warmer than in years past.

Ah.

It was the absence of Eleanor and Jessica that made this year's gathering particularly harmonious. Meredith first called over the eldest prince. She watched as the little boy tried to mimic an adult, then playfully swatted him on the backside. "Hey now! Greet your aunt!"

The eldest prince frowned but dutifully uttered, "Greetings, Aunt Meredith."

Kylie lowered her gaze, but it was clear from her expression that she was displeased. Carissa noticed this. She could see that Kylie disapproved of Meredith's playful swat, which had turned the otherwise dignified eldest prince into a mere child in front of everyone.

Chapter 877

Next came the evening banquet. Yuvan arrived with Molly and Fiona. After greeting Victoria and Kylie, he exchanged pleasantries with the other nobles.

From Harvey's side, only Heather came. She mentioned that Harvey had caught a chill in December and hadn't fully recovered yet. Victoria expressed her concern and ordered some precious herbs to be sent for his recovery.

At the lavish banquet, Rafael sat beside Carissa. He picked out the dishes she loved, while willingly accepting the ones she disliked and pushed aside.

Seeing this, Kylie suddenly smiled and said, "The prince and his princess consort are truly affectionate.

Kendrick and Adelaide looked up, thinking she was referring to them, but soon realized Kylie was speaking about Rafael and Carissa. They exchanged glances.

Salvador cast a cursory glance their way but said nothing. However, when he raised his glass, he shot a cold look at Kylie.

Carissa sensed a hint of jealousy in the queen and remarked, "With such a deep bond between His and Her Majesties, it's only natural for us to follow suit."

Kylie smiled faintly and remained silent. The burden she carried was hers alone to bear. The affection between Salvador and her was merely for show, while he truly favored Sylvia.

If Salvador had treated her even half as well as he did Sylvia, Kylie wouldn't have felt the need to pressure her son so much. The issue of succession was supposed to be straightforward, but with Salvador's favoritism toward Sylvia, there was always the risk of him fathering another son.

If that happened, how could Kylie not strategize for her child?

Lost in her tumultuous thoughts, she suddenly noticed a palace maid approaching with a cup of medicine for Sylvia.

The maid softly said, "Your Grace, it's time to drink your prenatal tonic."

Kylie's head spun at the news, her eyes flashing with sharp light, but she quickly masked her reaction with a feigned smile. "Sylvia, you're pregnant? Why didn't anyone inform me of such wonderful news?"

Sylvia's face was delicate, and there was a hint of radiance now that she was pregnant. She looked up with a smile and said, "I didn't inform you earlier as the pregnancy was unstable, Your Majesty. Please forgive me."

Kylie chuckled. "What's there to forgive? This is joyous news! You're contributing to the royal line. I should reward you instead."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Sylvia remained seated, simply offering her thanks.

The subtle tension between Kylie and Sylvia was something only women could sense. Still, since this was a joyous occasion, everyone raised their glasses to congratulate Salvador and Sylvia, as well as Victoria, on the prospect of another royal child.

Once the toast was finished, Salvador smiled and said, "Tonight's family banquet is a relaxed affair. Feel free to enjoy yourselves without restraint."

Yet, his smile didn't reach his eyes. He wasn't pleased that Sylvia had made her pregnancy public without prior notice. It was something he hadn't even shared with Victoria.

As the queen was in charge of the inner palace, Kylie should have been informed before anyone else. Sylvia's lack of respect for that duty irked him. While he cared for her, he couldn't overlook her breach of propriety, especially in front of so many royal relatives. He felt it was disrespectful to Kylie, and the public nature of Sylvia's announcement only amplified his displeasure.

Kylie's declaration that she was unaware of Sylvia's condition didn't help matters. In the wake of such news, she

should have offered some guidance on nutrition and prenatal care instead of highlighting Sylvia's failure to inform her.

As Salvador's mood shifted, tension settled over the room, leaving everyone momentarily at a loss for words.

At such gatherings, Helen typically preferred silence, speaking only when provoked by her rivals among the concubines. So, she simply indulged in the food and savored every bite. Among all the guests, she alone feasted with such abandon.

Victoria shot her a glance. Perhaps being a little oblivious had its perks.

After observing Helen for a while, Victoria then turned her gaze to Kylie and Sylvia. Those two had been subtly clashing for some time. Their private skirmishes were one thing, but today was the New Year's Eve banquet. With so many royal relatives present, their willingness to reveal their little schemes was tantamount to dismissing Victoria's authority.

However, she chose not to confront them for now. After all, such occasions called for joy and celebration. During the meal, Hayden turned to Yuvan and asked, "How is Ruth's health? Has there been any improvement?" "Thank you for your concern, Uncle Hayden. Mom has shown some signs of recovery," Yuvan replied. Hayden nodded. "That's good to hear. Your trip back to care for her hasn't gone to waste. I'm only realizing now that you're quite the dutiful son."

Although it sounded like a compliment, there was a strange underlying tone that caught the attention of the others at the table.

## Chapter 878

Even Carissa shot Hayden a glance.

Hayden said that he now realized Yuvan was a dutiful son, which meant the latter hadn't always given that impression. At least, that was how it sounded to others.

Yet, among the royal family, this revelation left everyone puzzled. After all, Yuvan had always been dutiful. Each year, he submitted a request to return to the capital to visit his mom. Sometimes, it was approved, while other times, it was denied. It had been that way even back when the late emperor was still alive.

Such dedication-how could it not be moving?

But on a day like today, when spirits were high, not many paid much attention to Hayden's words. Salvador, however, cast Yuvan a meaningful look.

Yuvan's expression changed slightly before he smiled as usual and said, "Our ancestors ruled with kindness and devotion. How could I dare not be dutiful to my parents?"

Rafael glanced at Hayden but remained silent, continuing to enjoy his meal with Carissa.

After the palace banquet, the women went off to watch a play. The theater had performances lined up all through the New Year, continuing until the eighth day of the celebrations. It was nice to pass the time watching the plays- at least it made the hours fly by.

Though Sylvia returned to her quarters as she was pregnant, Victoria stayed with them for a while. Carissa was usually busy and rarely had the chance to visit her. Since she was finally in the palace, Victoria took her hand and chatted warmly.

Dakota was sitting nearby and asked, "You've been married for a while now. Why haven't you gotten pregnant yet?"

Carissa hated dealing with such questions. The decision of whether to have children and when to do so was something for her and Rafael to decide together.

Before she could respond, Victoria interjected, 'She's only just become the commander of the Mystic Army. Why should she rush into pregnancy? A man should prioritize his career, and a woman should be the same.'

Carissa had always found Victoria's views refreshing.

The older woman encouraged women to be self-reliant. When Aurora joined the military and achieved success in subduing bandits, Victoria was overjoyed. She held Aurora in high regard and even said she was a role model for women everywhere.

Just like now, Carissa was taken aback by Victoria's statement that women should prioritize their careers. If anyone else had said it, she might have thought they were against Rafael having children. But since it came from Victoria, Carissa believed she truly meant it.

Helen was engrossed in the play, but chimed in, 'Exactly! Why worry about having kids? You're the one making a fuss. I haven't even pressured her.'

Dakota made a half-hearted comment, but both Victoria and Helen shot her down, leaving her feeling bored and choosing to remain silent.

Meanwhile, Heather, who had been quiet until now, leaned over several people to ask Carissa, "Carissa, I heard you've opened an embroidery workshop for abandoned women."

"Yes, I have," Carissa replied nonchalantly.

"You named the place Skye Embroidery. Is it named after the late lady from the Warren family? I recall that was her middle name." Heather leaned in a little closer. "But she's dead. Isn't it bad luck to use the name of a deceased person?"

Carissa shot her a glance. "It's bad luck to divorce, and now it's bad luck when someone's dead. In your opinion, everything is bad luck, right? Perhaps you're just unlucky yourself, so you see everything as a bad omen."

Victoria frowned at Heather. "Why are you bringing up the Warren family on New Year's Eve? Are you trying to bring bad luck upon yourself? If you don't have anything nice to talk about, just keep quiet and enjoy the show."

Dakota felt a sense of balance return-Victoria was close to scolding Heather outright.

Dakota set aside her previous irritation and asked, "Is Prince Harvey feeling any better? Why haven't you called for the royal physician? Someone could go over and check on him."

"No, that's fine." Heather quickly waved her hand. "He... he's feeling much better now."

Penelope, who was sitting beside her, flinched at Heather's frantic gesture, puzzled by such a big reaction. It was just a matter of having a physician check in. Was there something embarrassing about it?

Carissa glanced at Heather but then shifted her focus back to the stage.

Was Harvey really too sick to attend tonight?

Earlier, they had speculated he might not have dared to show up. From their observations, however, Harvey seemed to have a far deeper scheming nature than Yuvan.

Chapter 879

After leaving the palace, Carissa spoke to Rafael about the matter while they were in the carriage.

Rafael recalled a report from Jacob, who had people monitoring both Edgeview Estate and Hartstone Estate. Ever since the rebellion case, Hartstone Estate had been eerily quiet and Harvey seldom ventured out. He had only left his estate two or three times, each time for a drink with someone. After a couple of outings, he had stopped altogether.

"There's a possibility that Harvey isn't ill at all but has actually left the capital," Rafael said, furrowing his brow." Even though our people have been keeping a close watch on Hartstone Estate,

there's bound to be a lapse after so long. If Harvey has changed his appearance or disguised himself, he might go unnoticed."

"Where would he go at this time?" Carissa asked.

"Let's get back to the estate first," Rafael replied, running the current situation through his mind and forming a hypothesis.

Tonight, Hell Monarch Estate was lively, with the staff from Northwatch Estate joining them for the New Year's Eve dinner. However, the Klein family hadn't sent Ryan back. They were aware that there was a banquet at the palace, and since Ryan would have needed to stay behind at Hell Monarch Estate anyway, it was better for him to celebrate with the Klein family.

After they returned to Hell Monarch Estate, the atmosphere was vibrant, with everyone coming to collect their New Year's gifts. Carissa was generous, leaving everyone delighted with their rewards.

Later, Rafael, Jacob, and Kyle retreated to the study. Carissa didn't follow them, as they would be fine without her.

The activities at Hell Monarch Estate were far more entertaining than those at the palace. Travis showcased a series of martial arts moves and swordplay, earning himself twenty silver coins. Luke joined in on the fun, singing a song that had everyone laughing and covering their ears.

"It's too awful! I demand compensation for my ears!"

Luke thrived on such teasing. It didn't bother him if others found his singing terrible-he believed it sounded good enough. Even if he had to pay for it, he would still sing. Originally intending to perform one song, he took the crowd's reaction as a challenge and belted out three consecutive songs, each more out of tune than the last, leaving Violet and Carissa in stitches, tears streaming down their cheeks from laughing so hard.

The servants each showcased their own talents-pitching arrows, throwing darts, climbing trees, and cutting paper. Even those who usually swept the floors demonstrated their speed in cleaning.

Violet rubbed her cheeks as she laughed. "I can't take it anymore! For a few coins, they're really going all out." With his chest puffed out, Travis declared, "I can do something even more difficult!"

The high-difficulty acts earned ten silver coins, while the standard performances only brought in one.

"What will you do that's difficult?" Violet asked, her laughter turning her voice hoarse.

His eyes sparkling with excitement, Travis replied, "Eating a basin of noodles for ten silver coins, or drinking a whole jar of wine for the same!"

"Dream on!" Carissa and Violet laughed together, shaking their heads.

"Five silver coins!" He raised his hand and held up five fingers. "Five silver coins for eating noodles and drinking. What do you say?"

Violet threw a piece of candy at him. "Do you want to die from overeating or from drunkenness? Jacob gave you a decent amount of money this year. Are you really that greedy for another five silver coins?"

Travis opened his mouth to catch the candy. "You can never have too much money! Besides, it's easy money. Why wouldn't I want it?"

The thought of eating and drinking while pocketing money was too good to pass up.

Realizing he had no hope of convincing them further, he sat down. "In a few days, I need to head back to Meadow Ridge to visit my mentor. At the same time, I'll be bringing some money back there."

"Sure, go ahead," Carissa replied.

"Vivi, don't you want to go back too? We could go together," Travis suggested.

Violet thought for a moment before replying, "If I go back to the Inferno Guild, I'll have to visit my family. It's that, or I don't visit either place at all. I have to be fair about these things."

"Well, you can go to both places. It's not like you have much else going on right now."



Violet took a stance and crossed her arms. "What do you mean I don't have anything going on? I have three apprentices! They're definitely coming to visit me for New Year's!"

"You sure are something, Travis grumbled. Then, his eyes lit up. "Your three apprentices come from good families, so they're bound to bring you lots of gifts! You wouldn't want them anyway, so just give them all to me. I'll take them back for my mentor."

"You're as greedy as ever," Violet replied, rolling her eyes.

Chapter 880

In the study, Jacob, Rafael, and Kyle had been discussing for over two hours.

If Harvey wasn't in the capital, there were three possible places he could have gone.

The first was Victory Pass. Yuvan, Harvey, and their people likely had planted some informants there. The second was Stonebridge County, where their private army was stationed. The third option was a military garrison outside the capital. Harvey had probably been covertly establishing connections there over the years.

No matter where he went, it indicated that they were taking action.

However, Rafael and the others had always believed that Harvey was the most patient among them. Why was he the one making a move first now?

'Perhaps he's going all in," Jacob said. "After all, Eleanor is still alive. They might prefer to take a gamble rather than live in fear."

Rafael shook his head. "I don't think it's a gamble. They've been plotting for too long. The best opportunity to strike was during the battle at the Southern Frontier, and they didn't do anything then. Without a justified reason, they're even less likely to act directly now. My greater concern is whether anything will go wrong on General Sullivan's side at Victory Pass."

"Westhaven!" Jacob's expression darkened.

The biggest variable at Victory Pass was Westhaven. It was likely that Harvey already learned that Westhaven's king was critically ill. If he had indeed headed for Westhaven, he probably already had planted someone there for a while. In fact, he might very well be close to the new crown prince.

Victory Pass, Fawnrun City, Westhaven-these combined were a ticking time bomb that was bound to go off sooner or later. Rafael and his group had made preparations, but when that bomb exploded, they might not be able to handle the fallout as well as they hoped.

No matter what they did or how they acted, one fact remained unchanged-the overall commander and marshal at Victory Pass was still Dominic.

That was the source of everyone's greatest concern.

Carissa didn't have much family left, so they had to protect whoever was left of it.

'Let's enjoy the New Year first,' Kyle said. 'I'll write to Winona and ask her to keep an eye on any news from that side. If there's any movement, she'll report back quickly.'

"Okay, thank you, Kyle," Rafael replied.

They had to make the most of the New Year, as there were only a few peaceful days left. They stayed up almost until the early hours of the morning.

Rafael's leg had healed. When he returned to his room, he decided to take a more active approach. The couple were busy for quite a while before they finally fell asleep. But it didn't feel like he had slept long before a knock at the door interrupted him-someone had arrived to give their New Year's greetings.

Rafael blinked his bleary eyes. "So much for a peaceful New Year."

Carissa was already up and dressed. "Yeah, it's not just them coming to greet us. We have to visit others too. There will be several banquets we can't avoid."

The visitors that morning were from the Lloyd family. Most importantly, it was Hannah who had come. Davis wouldn't normally be up this early. Since he was a court official and usually woke up early, he had intended to enjoy his holiday, but had been dragged out of bed by his wife.

Hannah was dressed in a blue gown, wrapped in a cloak, and holding a hand warmer. As she entered, she kept glancing back at Davis, urging him to hurry. When she saw Jacob waiting to greet them, her expression brightened with a smile.

She hadn't brought her children and grandchildren this time. It was just the couple who had come. She was not only there to pay New Year's greetings, but also to discuss Skye Embroidery with Carissa.

The matter had been weighing heavily on Hannah's heart, and she had felt a surge of enthusiasm lately- something she hadn't experienced in years.

They had barely settled in their seats when Rafael and Carissa emerged.

After the customary greetings, Hannah was about to suggest moving to the side hall for a chat when they heard an announcement from outside.

Zoey had arrived.

Before the New Year, Zoey had been officially granted her second-rank noble status. While she had always been the Earl of Silverstone's wife, her husband's title meant she should have been recognized as a noble. However, Sigmund had kept the Earl of Silverstone's family at arm's length and had kept the titles for the female family members on hold.

"Oh, if it isn't Madam Zoey." Hannah smiled and went to greet her.

She didn't call Zoey "Mrs. Prince" but rather "Madam Zoey", showing her admiration for Zoey as a person and not the family she was associated with.

Zoey had also come without her family. She was accompanied only by her sister-in-law, Luna, and her maid, Jane, who was carrying gifts.

Zoey and Luna stepped forward. "Greetings, Your Grace, Mrs. Lloyd."

