

## War Song 881

### Chapter 881

Zoey had a clear purpose for coming here today-she wanted to inquire about the embroidery workshop and the women's academy. If the people of Hell Monarch Estate were indeed establishing a women's academy, she hoped to secure a spot for her daughter.

Normally, she would have brought her daughter with her, but doing so would make her intentions too obvious. It would seem as though she was pressuring Carissa to accept her daughter, which might make the princess consort uncomfortable.

So, instead of bringing her daughter along, Zoey decided to gather information first and find out what was required. That way, she could go home and prepare everything.

'There's no need to be formal. Let's move to the side hall and chat,' Carissa said with a smile, leading them to a smaller chamber.

Meanwhile, Rafael, who had just woken up, was left facing Davis, who was still yawning.

Davis covered his mouth with his hand, stifling another yawn, and asked, "Are there any places to lie down here, Your Highness?"

Rafael was baffled.

At Davis' age, he was still staying up late and causing a ruckus? How shameless!

Knowing Violet played a key role at Skye Embroidery, Hannah asked, "Where is Ms. Spencer? I was hoping to discuss the embroidery workshop matters with her."

Carissa felt sorry for Violet and had planned to let her sleep a little longer. But since Hannah had asked for her, Carissa had no choice but to send someone to wake her.

Hannah had a well-thought-out plan. The workshop, being located in a somewhat remote area, needed a storefront to sell its handmade goods. She planned to allocate a shop specifically for selling these items, with all profits going to the workshop. Whoever made the items would receive payment based on how much they sold.

Hannah also added, "I won't charge rent. It'll be my contribution to this good deed. As for the shop assistants, I'll cover their wages until the store begins to make a profit. Once the goods start selling and we're not at a loss anymore, we can take a share of the profits to pay the shop assistants. How does that sound?"

Violet thought for a moment before responding, "For now, that seems like a workable plan. At the moment, we don't even know if there will be customers for the embroidery products. If everything runs smoothly, we could have the women with good speaking skills go out to sell. They'd already be looking for work, so there's no need for them to worry about whether or not they're putting themselves in the spotlight."

Hannah nodded. "The only issue is that since they're likely women who have been divorced, they probably won't be ready to face the public. If we send them out to sell the items, they may not be able to handle the judgment and gossip from others."

Carissa chimed in, "So, we need to help them rebuild their confidence. The workshop isn't just a way for them to make money. More importantly, it's about restoring their hope for life and their belief in themselves. That's why we also need to find someone to teach them."

They continued discussing, with Zoey occasionally offering her thoughts. At first, since finding out about the women's academy had been her priority, she had simply been asking about the embroidery workshop with the intention of donating some money. But as she listened to their conversation, she realized how meaningful this initiative was and wanted to be involved.

Luna, being from a merchant family, wholeheartedly agreed with Violet and Carissa's views.

"What's the big deal about women stepping into the public eye?" Luna said. "They've already been divorced, so why worry about their reputation? The idea that a woman from a good family should never be seen in public is laughable. Just look at those women selling groceries or street food-many of them are married women too."

While the discussion raged on in the side room, there was nothing but the sound of loud snoring in the main hall, courtesy of Davis.

Rafael couldn't believe it. He wanted to get some rest too, but with all that noise, how could he sleep? It wasn't like he could return to his room and leave Davis alone here either.

But how could someone be so clueless about manners? Coming to someone's home in the morning just to nap? No wonder Hannah was so sharp with Davis-there was a reason for it.

More than two hours later, after the group of guests had been seen off, Violet's three apprentices, along with their wives, arrived to pay a visit. Having heard their husbands had taken a young woman as their mentor, the wives of Michael, Max, and Alistair were curious and insisted on coming along to meet her.

The visit may have been for formalities, but their true intention was to size Violet up. When they saw her, radiant and imposing, they were relieved to see their husbands behaving like subservient children in her presence. Each of the men had prepared two gifts-one for Carissa, their superior, and one for Violet, their mentor.

The gifts delighted Travis, who was overjoyed. Violet had promised that all these gifts would eventually be his. At first, he hadn't expected them to arrive so soon to pay their respects. Now, he realized that meant he could head back to Meadow Ridge the following day.

## Chapter 882

At first, Violet tried to keep things relaxed with her apprentices. After all, it was the New Year-what was the point of acting all high and mighty as their mentor?

But when she saw the three couples treating her with such reverence, and when Max's wife, Esther, personally took a cup of coffee from a servant and handed it to her, she realized that the role of a mentor had to be taken seriously. The other two women stood by Violet's side attentively, as if she was their mother-in-law.

At that point, even Violet had no choice but to play her role. Still, she couldn't help but wonder-did it really have to be this way?

Back at the Inferno Guild, she wasn't treated like this. Most of the time, it was her mentor who pampered her. As for serving refreshments, that was usually left to the new apprentices. What

business did she, a senior apprentice, have doing that? But when she first joined, no one had treated her that way either.

A sense of guilt stirred within Violet, and she found herself missing her mentor a little.

The next day, Travis packed up large bundles and headed off for Meadow Ridge. This time, he took Leah and Alana along, as it had been a while and it was time to visit their mentor.

The two women had insisted they wouldn't accept any monthly stipends, but Leona had bought them many gifts- mostly fabric and some daily necessities for women, along with plenty of warm clothing.

Originally, they had planned to ride horses back. But now, they were taking two horse-drawn carriages, both packed full with gifts. Even the exterior of the carriages was loaded with bundles.

Since Alana and Leah didn't want money, Carissa had given Travis extra funds, which he gladly accepted without hesitation.

Travis had bought makeup last time, which earned him a good scolding from his mentor. But he didn't let that stop him this time. He had his reasons-women had the right to beautify themselves. Whether or not they actually used the makeup was their business, but they couldn't be without it. What if they wanted to use it someday?

Even though Violet had warned him that if anyone used the makeup, they would face punishment, Travis didn't care. If it meant looking beautiful, then it was worth the price. Surely, they would accept the punishment as long as they got to look good.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere in Hell Monarch Estate continued to be as busy as ever, with new invitations arriving every day-either formal invitations to pay respects or requests for Carissa to visit others. Rafael had his own round of visits to make too, starting with his uncles and other family elders in the capital.

First, he went to visit Hayden. The bustle at Willowbrook Estate was all for Chaya. Hayden's son was now a county duke and couldn't return to the capital without a royal edict. Usually, Hayden quietly spent the New Year alone.

However, the quiet atmosphere in Willowbrook Estate during New Year was largely due to his own preference for keeping to himself. The only exceptions were Rafael and Carissa, to whom he had extended his courtesy.

After they had finished their meal and spent some time conversing with the elderly man, Rafael finally asked, "At the palace banquet, you mentioned Uncle Yuvan's devotion to his mother. After that, everyone knew it was just a front he had put on. Why did you get involved in that?"

Hayden knew more than he let on-Rafael had been aware of this for some time. But Hayden had never involved himself because his family was at their fief. Whether it was offending Yuvan or angering the king, it could endanger his family, so it was better for him to stay out of it.

But bringing it up at the banquet had undoubtedly offended Yuvan.

Hayden looked at him helplessly. "Would you believe me if I said I acted out of impulse?"

"Impulse?" Rafael paused, exchanging a surprised glance with Carissa.

That answer was completely unexpected.

With a sigh, Hayden continued, "You know what they say-never play games with the younger generation. Ever since that little chubby one showed up, I've felt like a fool. Watching Yuvan fawn over Ruth, only emerging at the banquet to pretend to be so devoted, was infuriating. I just couldn't hold it in and blurted it out."

Rafael was still trying to figure out who the "little chubby one" was, but when he saw Chaya enter with servants bringing refreshments, it clicked. He couldn't help but laugh.

But there was no denying it-Chaya seemed to have gained a bit of weight.

Rafael shook his head. 'Please don't get involved in this any further. It doesn't matter who gets offended. One side is reckless, and the other is full of suspicion. You should just enjoy your life. Spend time with whoever you like, and leave the rest alone.'

In matters like this, with Hayden's status, he certainly had the ability to speak up, stir the pot, and even influence things. But when it came to the conspiracy against the throne, it was best for him to stay far away.

"It was one mistake, but I won't make it again. Don't worry," Hayden assured, taking Rafael's advice to heart.

## Chapter 883

For the next two or three days, Carissa didn't have time to entertain guests. There was still much to handle with the Mystic Army, and she couldn't leave everything to others. Plus, she had to head back to the Capital Guard headquarters soon.

Meanwhile, Rafael and Jacob were inspecting the site for the women's academy. There was a lot of repair work to be done, along with expansion plans, and the cold weather didn't help. Progress had slowed as they approached the New Year, but fortunately, the funds were in place, so things could move forward smoothly now.

On the eighth day of January, Barrett submitted a formal application for mourning due to his mom's passing. He first presented it to his superior, Carissa, who then passed it on to the king.

Salvador took a quick glance at the application and asked, "What do you think?"

Carissa paused, wondering what the king meant.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but I'm not sure what you're asking."

'Military generals don't observe mourning. There's a law for that,' Salvador replied.

Carissa understood the reference, but that law applied to military generals stationed on the front lines, not to military officers like Barrett, who was based in the capital. But based on Salvador's words, it seemed like he wasn't inclined to allow Barrett to mourn.

'Everything is up to you, Your Majesty,' Carissa answered, not wanting to say much more.

If she suggested Barrett shouldn't observe mourning, it would imply he wasn't fulfilling his duty to his mother. But if she said he should be allowed to mourn...

Well, the king had already spoken on it. What else could she say?

Seeing how decisively she had answered, Salvador couldn't help but smile. "We'll set it aside for now. He's still in special training anyway. Whether or not he observes mourning can be decided later."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I will take my leave now."

"Commander Sinclair, Salvador called after her, gesturing for her to sit. "There are a few things I want to ask you." Since he addressed her by title, it meant this was a conversation between the monarch and a court official. Carissa bowed her head in acknowledgment, then walked over to take a seat. "Your Majesty, please go ahead." "The Mystic Army currently has the Garrison Unit, the Royal Guard, and the Capital Guard. Not to mention, the Garrison Unit alone is filled with idle noble offspring, just passing their time. Not only are they incompetent, but many are troublemakers. Managing these people must be very difficult for you," said the king.

The statement was indirect, but Carissa could read between the lines.

He mentioned the Garrison Unit, the Royal Guard, and the Capital Guard, but deliberately avoided mentioning the Crown Guard.

Carissa did as he wished, responding in a way that would please him. If he wanted her to say something, she would do it.

"Your Majesty is wise, I admit, I do feel somewhat overwhelmed."

Salvador's expression softened slightly. "I understand your difficulty. After all, this is your first time holding such an important position. I also wish to lighten your burden. Tell me, what do you think would make your duties easier?"

Carissa could tell what he was trying to do. Salvador wanted to separate the Crown Guard from the Mystic Army, but didn't want to say it outright. He was leaving it to her to bring it up, as if testing her.

After all, he was the king.

Carissa pretended to think for a moment, adopting an expression as if trying to guess his thoughts. She couldn't just say it outright-that would be the same as telling Salvador they already knew he intended to separate the Crown Guard from the Mystic Army.

"Perhaps the Royal Guard..." she began, watching the king closely as she spoke.

Continuing to look at her intently, his expression didn't change.

"Oh, or perhaps the Crown Guard..."

A faint smile tugged at Salvador's lips and his gaze softened considerably. Carissa felt a slight sense of relief, as though she had guessed correctly.

"I believe it would be best to separate the Crown Guard and place it under its own leadership. That way, the burden on me would be significantly lessened," she suggested.

Salvador furrowed his brow in thought. "Since you put it that way, I see no reason not to be understanding. You've worked hard, so endure a bit longer. After the New Year, I will issue an edict to remove the Crown Guard from the Mystic Army. I believe all the court officials will understand. After all, you are a woman, so it's only natural that there are some limitations."

Carissa seemed to relax, and she stood to express her gratitude.

Look at that.

If Rafael were still the commander of the Mystic Army, no one would question his abilities. No one would doubt

him.



But when it came to her, it was different. She was a woman, and managing the Garrison Unit, the Capital Guard, and the Royal Guard was already a difficult task. Taking the Crown Guard out of the equation was a logical solution.

That way, if anyone thought she lacked the ability, the king would still gain a reputation for showing compassion toward a female official.

## Chapter 884

The announcement would be made after the New Year festivities, which meant that either a new leader for the Crown Guard would be appointed or Barrett would not be allowed to observe mourning for his mom.

After Carissa left, Salvador examined Barrett's mourning application once more before tossing it back onto the desk.

He turned to Derek and asked, "What do you think? Should Barrett be allowed to observe mourning?"

Derek bowed respectfully. "Your Majesty, this is a matter of selecting officials. I dare not offer my opinion."

"Although it's a matter of appointing officials, this is about someone serving directly under me in the Crown Guard. Speak freely."

Derek thought for a moment before shaking his head. "I don't know, Your Majesty."

Salvador's eyes sharpened, his gaze growing cold. "Is it that you don't know, or that you don't dare say?"

Derek had served Salvador for many years and understood his temperament well. If it were any other official, one whose position could be easily filled or replaced, the mourning application would have been settled long ago, without requiring further discussion with Carissa.

But with Barrett, Salvador was clearly looking for someone to support his decision.

Derek couldn't bring himself to recommend Barrett. But even though his opinion had little weight and couldn't change the king's decision, he couldn't say it.

"I've always valued your service, but it's clear your heart belongs to the Sinclair family," Salvador said, his voice calm but causing his aide to break out in cold sweat.

"Your Majesty!" Derek knelt, his voice filled with urgency. "I have been loyal to you. How could I possibly be swayed by the Sinclair family?"

Salvador's eyes narrowed, cold and sharp. "Melanie Sullivan saved your life, so you owe her a debt of gratitude that you should never forget. But you shouldn't forget your place, either."

Derek's mind was in turmoil.

How could Salvador know of that old matter? Had he sent someone to investigate him?

"Rise," Salvador commanded, his tone still chillingly indifferent. "I know you dislike Barrett because of how he wronged Carissa."

Derek stood, pale as a ghost, and bowed deeply. "I am indeed grateful to Madam Sinclair for saving my life. And do not like Commander Warren. That is why I did not dare give any rash advice-I feared my personal bias would influence your decision, Your Majesty."

Salvador scoffed. "You still can't influence my decision."

"Yes, of course. It was my mistake to overestimate myself," Derek said, lowering his head.

"Bring me another cup of hot coffee. This one has cooled," Salvador instructed, picking up his cup.

Derek hurriedly took the cup and, after briefly leaving the room, returned with a fresh, steaming cup of coffee. He placed it on the desk before stepping aside, his posture respectful.

"Barrett's mistake lies in his failure to keep his word, but do you truly believe Carissa was completely in the right? \*Salvador said, his voice thoughtful. "Men often take multiple wives or concubines. Why couldn't she tolerate Aurora as a rightful wife with the same rank as her?"

"I granted Carissa leniency and allowed her to divorce, not just for her dad and brothers' sake, but also out of respect for the past connection between the royal family and the Duke of Northwatch's family."

Derek wiped his forehead, not daring to refute Salvador's words. With the king's suspicions now turned on him, further arguments would only seal his fate.

He could only reply, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Seeing Derek's obedience, Salvador's tone softened as he added, "But Barrett is indeed disappointing. I've tried to elevate him multiple times, but he's indecisive and drags his feet, always falling short. It's a trait he inherited from his domineering mother. Now that she's gone, perhaps things will change."

Derek once again replied, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Salvador tossed him a list. "Tell Ian to have someone keep an eye on him. If Barrett, in his grief, is reluctant to let go of his position in the Crown Guard and associates with those people, deal with him immediately."

Derek took the list, though he dared not look at it. Still, at a quick glance, he caught Yuvan's name. It was clear Salvador still harbored doubts about him.

He folded the list, his hands shaking slightly. "I will take my leave and see Ian now, Your Majesty." Blowing on it gently, Salvador took a sip of his coffee. The cold air in the room meant that, after only a few moments of conversation, the once-steaming coffee had already cooled down considerably.

This was the last chance Salvador was giving Barrett.

On the night of the twelfth day of the New Year, a messenger pigeon arrived at Hell Monarch Estate's council hall with news-the king of Westhaven had passed away.

The crown prince, Edmund, had ascended the throne. The first thing he did as the new king was to imprison his uncle, Liam, on charges of illegally altering border lines, which resulted in the loss of Westhaven territory.

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For a moment, no one spoke.

Though it had been anticipated that the new king of Westhaven would inevitably investigate the Fawnrune City incident upon his ascension, no one had expected Edmund to act so quickly. He had barely settled into the throne, which was still warm from his predecessor, yet had already begun the investigation, going so far as to imprison Liam immediately.

Liam had only just survived an assassination attempt, and his body had not fully healed. Now, with him thrown into the dungeon, no one knew if he could endure the harsh conditions.

Rafael finally broke the long silence, saying. "The second thing he will do as king is likely to directly confront Starhaven and hold us accountable for what happened in Fawnrune City."

"That's without a doubt," Jacob responded.

Carissa turned to Rafael, concern in her eyes. "Have Scott and Wilfred managed to infiltrate Westhaven yet?"

Those two members of the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team were from Stonebrook District and had planned to return to their hometown after receiving their rewards. However, they had chosen to continue serving the court. After visiting their families, they immediately headed to Westhaven.

"They've already settled into the capital, Rafael confirmed.

"Are there any others with them?" Carissa pressed.

\*There are 13 others. General Wallace has already sent some people in as well. Altogether, there are about 40 to 50 people.

Wallace Sullivan was Dominic's eighth son, who had been adopted. He had always been with his father at Victory Pass. Now, other than Wallance, Dominic only had Wyatt, who was his third son who had lost an arm, as well as a nephew, Shane, whom everyone viewed as his sixth son.

Shane's father was Dominic's half-brother, the governor of Greenvale City. He had been in office for ten years and had never returned to the capital. His entire family had moved there instead.

Thus, aside from the Sinclair family and Heather, there were no other relatives of the Sullivan family left in the capital.

Seeing Carissa's anxious expression, Rafael gently reassured, "Don't worry too much. We've already begun managing this situation. If His Majesty truly summons your grandfather back to the capital to face charges, we've already made the necessary arrangements with the court. We can ensure he won't suffer."

Carissa nodded, though her unease still lingered. She knew that panicking would not help the situation. She needed to stay calm.

Taking a deep breath, she remembered Salvador's decision to separate the Crown Guard from the Mystic Army. It was likely he would form an elite personal guard, which meant that this case might not be handled by the Supreme Court or the Ministry of Justice. It could very well be dealt with by his newly formed guard.

The Royal Guard was something Salvador could never fully trust. To him, they were outsiders and hard to control. He needed to tighten his inner circle to ensure absolute loyalty.

"He's pushing to make the Crown Guard an independent force now. Who knows if he'll use my grandfather to test their loyalty?" Carissa pointed out.

Everyone fell silent-that was a real possibility, one that had crossed all their minds.

"There's no need to worry too much," Rafael said, pausing as his mind raced. "This is likely just to appease Westhaven. After all, hasn't the king still kept Aurora alive? King Edmund seems focused on her too, since he captured her at the Southern Frontier. He won't be satisfied until his revenge is complete."

Jacob sighed. "The real issue is, with the boundary lines now in place, I doubt His Majesty will agree to any changes. King Edmund has already stirred up public sentiment in Westhaven, claiming that the border is unfair and that Starhaven has been bullying them. Now, the people of Westhaven want the boundaries redrawn."

Kyle added, "The boundary issue has been contentious for years, but when the previous king of Westhaven was in power, the two kingdoms reached an agreement using the current border as the line. If they're willing to negotiate, we have the original maps and agreements to bring to the table."

"A new king comes with fresh ambitions, and in his case, he wasn't originally the crown prince. He was only appointed after the previous crown prince died, so he's got shallow roots and needs to win over the people. A victory over the border dispute would be a political achievement," Rafael said, feeling that Kyle was being overly optimistic.

"If they were willing to negotiate, we wouldn't have had skirmishes nonstop for years. The conflict between our two kingdoms hasn't let up," he added.

Carissa leaned back, her gaze dark and troubled. "The problem is, the new king of Westhaven needs to secure the border to win public support, while our king has to hold the line to keep our people's faith intact."

Rafael's sharp features darkened after hearing Carissa's words. "Harvey's just looking for an opportunity. If we give in, they'll accuse the king of ceding territory and giving up our border. If we refuse, then it means war, and the unrest at the border will create more opportunities for them to stir up trouble."

Chapter 886

"Has Harvey really left the capital?" Carissa asked.

"We sent people to check for several nights. Dylan reported last night that Harvey isn't at his estate anymore. We've already sent men to track him in all three different directions. But if he's disguising himself, it'll be hard to catch him," Rafael replied.

Jacob cursed under his breath. "This was a miscalculation. I didn't think he would dare leave the capital now." Carissa studied her nails, her eyes cold. "If it's confirmed, then it's time to let the king know Harvey isn't in the city."

Rafael thought for a moment before coming up with a plan.

"Have Mom go to the palace tomorrow and ask the queen dowager to send a physician to Hartstone Estate. You should teach her how to speak in front of the queen dowager... It'd be best if Leona went, but don't disturb her and let her enjoy her life for now," he said.

Helen had returned to Hell Monarch Estate on the eighth day of the new year. After staying in the palace for ten days, she was tired of it and yearned for the freedom that she had at home. The palace was strict, but in Hell Monarch Estate, she made the rules.

Carissa stood up. "I'll go see her now."

Helen had already gone to bed. As a beautiful woman in her middle years, she needed plenty of rest to maintain her beauty. Being pulled from her warm bed by her daughter-in-law left her glaring with all the resentment she couldn't voice.

Carissa knew she couldn't let Helen lie, and there was no room for subtlety here.

She said directly, "When you see the queen dowager tomorrow, tell her that Harvey has been ill since before the New Year and hasn't gotten better. I don't know if he's seen a physician yet, but if he hasn't, ask her to send a royal physician to Hartstone Estate. After all, he's King Sigmund's younger brother."

Helen immediately bristled. "You woke me up just for that? His whole family treated you poorly, and you're still thinking about them?"

Oh, what a fool!

Carissa could only sigh. "Ultimately, he's still Leona's dad. We can't just ignore him."

With that reasoning, Helen relented, her heart softening when she thought of Leona's plight.

"Fine, I'll go tomorrow. I'm tired now. Let me sleep."

"Rest well, Mother. Sorry to disturb you." Carissa quickly excused herself.

Helen flopped back onto the bed and was soon fast asleep, her mind at ease, with not a worry in the world. The next day, she took Gillian with her to the palace. Carissa's instructions to her weren't entirely remembered, but Helen did recall a few key phrases-Harvey was sick and a royal physician should be sent.

"What kind of illness do you think Prince Harvey has, Victoria? How could he have been sick for so long without getting better? It's not like he went out and caught some sort of dirty disease, right? We should get a royal physician to check on him. Don't let him embarrass the royal family," Helen said with a hint of concern.

Victoria frowned. "What nonsense are you talking about? What kind of dirty disease?"

It was true that Harvey had been ill for a long time. He hadn't even visited the queen dowager in the palace during the New Year celebrations. Heather had come by once, and when asked, she mentioned that her husband was still sick.

Victoria knew Harvey well. He was a man who lacked courage, the epitome of weakness. Because of Leona's

marriage, he had long been disliked by the other members of the royal family.

But hearing Helen's words, Victoria couldn't help but reconsider.

She called for Keith Finley, her head chamberlain, and instructed, "Send a royal physician to Hartstone Estate to check on Prince Harvey's condition. You should accompany him."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Having served Victoria for many years, Keith was known for his unwavering loyalty and remarkable ability. Among the chamberlains in the palace, few could match his skills.

Seeing that Victoria had given the order, Helen felt confident that her daughter-in-law's request had been taken care of. So, she focused on her own matters.



"Victoria, I heard the palace had a new batch of jewelry delivered, including a pure-gold tiara with seven different colored gemstone inlays. I want it."

Victoria glared at her sister. "You think just because you want it, I'll give it to you? Who do you think you are?" Helen wasn't at all bothered by the queen dowager's sharp tone, adding, "Carissa has a bracelet, given to her by the matriarch of the Marquis of Ironridge's family. She said it was made for Carissa by her mother at The Golden Tower. I'm not sure how it ended up with Margaret, but it has now been returned. Still, I think just the bracelet is a bit too plain, so I was hoping to ask for that tiara to match it."

"It's for Carissa?" Victoria looked at Helen for a moment, intrigued. "I didn't know you were so fond of her. If you're asking for her sake, then I'll give it to you. As for who you give it to, that's your business."

With both Kylie and Sylvia wanting the tiara, the queen dowager had been unsure of who to give it to.

"Solana, bring the tiara. Make sure to tell everyone else that I've given it to Helen," Victoria ordered.

Solana smiled and said, "It's well known that Your Majesty dotes on your sister. I'll go get it right now."

Solana was one of the four main maids who accompanied Victoria, along with Summer, Sienna, and Shannon. Now, only Solana and Summer remained, as Sienna and Shannon had long since passed.

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Since Helen had requested the tiara for Carissa, Victoria gave it to her. Helen immediately took the opportunity to ask for another one for herself. When a middle-aged woman pouted and acted coquettishly, even someone as high and mighty as Victoria couldn't refuse. She ordered that the newest pieces of jewelry be brought out for her sister to choose from.

Naturally, Helen couldn't resist. She picked out seven or eight pieces without hesitation.

Victoria didn't care much for material things, but if giving jewelry to her younger sister made her happy, then it was worth it.

Meanwhile, Keith and a royal physician, Seth Wright, headed to Hartstone Estate.

Seth had long been trusted by Victoria. He was somewhat like his elder relative, Irvin, the Oversight Minister- stubborn, unyielding, and upright.

Such a personality would have made it impossible for Seth to get far in the Royal Medical Academy, but Victoria had promoted him. Through him, she even knew the Wright family well enough to marry her daughter, Meredith, to his nephew, Levi.

When Heather heard that Keith and Seth had come to Hartstone Estate to check on Harvey, she froze in panic. Oh god, what should she do?!

Harvey wasn't in Hartstone Estate. He had left before New Year after telling everyone that he needed to rest due to his illness.

Harvey and his family had always been ignored by others. No one ever came to visit. Even if they did, the excuse of illness could easily send them away.

Over the years, Harvey and his family had remained inconspicuous, never drawing attention, regardless of whether the estate's occupants were present or not. The royal family seldom paid any visits.

So, why had Victoria sent a royal physician here?

"Um..." Heather stammered in a panic. "Prince Harvey has already seen a physician. It's nothing serious. There's no need to trouble you to check on him, Mr. Wright."

'Since we're already here, we might as well have Mr. Wright take a look," Keith replied calmly. "After all, this is the queen dowager's order. How can we report back without checking on Prince Harvey's health? Mr. Wright would have difficulty explaining to Her Majesty if we don't follow through."

Heather was at a complete loss. She didn't even know what Harvey had gone off to do. He hadn't told her his purpose for leaving, only stressing repeatedly that no one was to know he had left.

Now, what should she do?

Heather frantically searched for the steward, Horace, but he was nowhere to be found. Left with no other choice, she reluctantly invited Keith and Seth into the main hall and offered refreshments, telling them she needed to inform Harvey of their presence.

Before long, Horace appeared. "Greetings, Mr. Finley, Mr. Wright. After His Highness took his medicine, he fell asleep. I'm not sure if he can be examined while asleep."

"Of course, we can examine him," Seth replied. "But it's not just about checking his heart rate. If His Highness is asleep, we'll wait to check his heart rate. After that, I'll need His Highness' medical records. I can make a proper diagnosis based on that."

Horace froze.

By now, he had already arranged for someone to lie in Harvey's bed and had drawn the curtains. If it was only

about checking his heart rate, it would be as simple as extending a hand, and the person he had chosen did have a lingering cough that flared up every winter, so they could easily claim it was an illness.

But there were no medical records to speak of

"The medical records... are with the physician," Horace said.

"Isn't the physician one of your household physicians?" Seth asked, looking at Heather.

She opened her mouth to speak but stopped when Horace gave her a pointed look. She quickly closed her mouth and shook her head.

"No, we've always used physicians from outside the estate."

Keith spoke up, "Well, doesn't that make things simple? Just send someone to retrieve the medical records and prescriptions."

It wasn't difficult to forge medical records and prescriptions, but the challenge lay in making it match the symptoms of the person they had prepared.

Horace was momentarily at a loss, his mind racing.

After a moment, he suggested, "The physician has been treating His Highness for a while without success. Perhaps he's been using the wrong medicine. Would it not be better to have Mr. Wright check His Highness' heart rate first?"

Seth nodded. "That works as well."

Chapter 888

The thick curtains were drawn so tightly that not a breath of air could pass through. There were four or five charcoal burners scattered throughout the room. With the windows slightly open and the charcoal not producing smoke, the air circulated just enough to make the room warm without feeling stifling.

Horace moved a stool into the second layer of curtains, then approached and gently placed the hand of the person lying in bed on the edge.

"Mr. Wright, please sit and check His Highness' heart rate."

Seth sat down, intending to lift the curtain to see Harvey's face, but Horace stopped him.

"His Highness mustn't be exposed to the cold."

"It's necessary to observe his complexion, not just his heart rate, Seth said, frowning.

What was going on? If Harvey was sick, it was only right to focus on treatment.

Keith stepped forward and pulled back the curtain with one swift motion. The figure lying in bed was trembling uncontrollably-he was clearly not Harvey.

As Horace's face drained of color, his mind raced with several possible explanations, but none of them were plausible. They had never expected any issues with this. No one had ever paid much attention to Harvey and his family. Over the years, whenever the prince left the estate, no one had come to inquire.

"This is truly absurd," Seth said, stunned. "You got someone to impersonate Prince Harvey?"

Horace could only smile bitterly. "To be honest, His Highness has gone to a secluded residence to rest, but Her Grace didn't want to seem unappreciative of Her Majesty's kindness, so... she arranged for someone to pretend to be His Highness."

Keith nodded, his expression indifferent. "Well then, shall we report this to the queen dowager?"

Seth nodded slightly. "Lady Heather, we'll take our leave."

Before he left, he glanced once more at the figure on the bed. Though covered by blankets, the coarse fabric of the clothing at the neck was clearly visible-it was obvious this person was a servant from the estate.

To deceive Victoria, they had made a servant sleep in Harvey's bed. How would Heather sleep in the same bed after this?

Keith cast a look at Heather. "Is His Highness still traveling?"

Heather, whose nerves were still on edge, instinctively nodded. "Yes, he's been away for a long time."

Keith said nothing more, only giving a slight nod before he and Seth took their leave.

After returning to the palace, Keith reported everything truthfully to Victoria. Upon hearing the news, she wasn't the least bit surprised.

She simply murmured, "A silent dog can bite the hardest."

She turned to Solana, instructing, "Go and inform the king that he's to join me for dinner tonight."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Solana accepted the command before leaving.

It was not unusual for the queen dowager and the king to dine together in the palace. Salvador was an extremely devoted son, and whenever he had time, he would come to accompany Victoria. The queen dowager usually ate in silence, without discussing state affairs.

Tonight, once the meal was finished, the servants came to clear the dishes and brought them water to rinse their mouths.

It was only after they left that Victoria calmly said, "Your Uncle Harvey has been ill for some time. Today, I sent a

royal physician to treat him, only to find a servant lying in his bed. That family, despite their quiet appearance, is utterly without discipline."

Salvador's eyes flickered for a moment.

It wasn't just a lack of discipline. It was far worse there was something sinister at play.

How had he not seen it before?

When Salvador was still the crown prince, Harvey kept a very low profile, appearing both timid and cowardly. Salvador recalled a royal banquet where several dancing women performed a sword dance. One of them made a mistake, and the sight of it was enough to make his uncle scream and faint.

From then on, it was well known that Harvey was a coward.

His fief was located in a remote area, and because of his cowardice, he didn't dare go there. He begged Sigmund to let him stay in the capital, and the king at the time, seeing that his brother was utterly spineless, had no objections.

Living in the capital, Harvey had to be overly cautious and was afraid of offending anyone. Even when Leona was bullied by Samuel, the prince didn't dare step in. His timidity was so extreme that it was unmatched anywhere in Starhaven.

He had always been this way, but no one had ever stopped to consider that such excessive weakness was abnormal.

'Sometimes, if it weren't for the palace banquets, I would forget all about that uncle of mine,' Salvador muttered, so preoccupied with his thoughts that he accidentally sipped the water meant for rinsing his mouth.

It was the first time since ascending the throne that he felt so unsettled.

He had investigated everyone he was suspicious of, even sending people to follow them. But Harvey, who had always been right under his nose, had never seemed to pose a threat. Salvador had briefly considered that his uncle might not be as simple as he appeared, but then quickly dismissed the thought.

After all, Harvey had always been so meek and harmless-there couldn't possibly be anything more to him. Or so Salvador thought.

## Chapter 889

After collecting his thoughts, Salvador was struck by a question-why had his mom suddenly sent someone to treat his uncle?

He paused, deep in thought, then asked, "I heard from the palace servants that Aunt Helen came by today."

Victoria chuckled. "Yes, I asked her to come. The Treasury Office sent over a batch of new jewelry, and among them was a pure-gold and seven-colored gemstone tiara. Kylie and Sylvia both wanted it, so I was caught in a dilemma.

"Kylie is the queen, so if she liked it, it should've gone to her. But Sylvia is carrying your son, which gives her great merit. I couldn't decide who to give it to, so I gave it to your aunt. Little did I know, she was like a thief-she not only took that tiara, but also snatched up seven or eight other pieces. I really regret it."

Salvador laughed along with her. "If she likes it, then it's good. If she's happy, then you're happy, Mom."

He wasn't concerned about material wealth. Making his mom happy was what mattered most.

After dinner, Salvador excused himself and left. Victoria went out for a walk with Solana and Summer by her side. It was a habit she had maintained for many years. No matter how cold the weather, she would always take a short rest after dinner before going for a stroll.

The cold northern wind howled through the air as she lifted her gaze to the endless rows of palace lanterns. The further the lanterns stretched, the more they seemed to dissolve into mist, their lights blurry and distant, like glazed glass submerged in water.

Solana thought Victoria might say something, but they walked all the way to the Royal Garden in silence. The only sounds were the wind and their footsteps, and not once did the queen dowager even sigh.

Solana knew that Victoria had long been worried about Salvador's suspicions regarding the Hell Monarch, which could cause a rift between the brothers.

Though Victoria and Salvador shared a deep bond as mother and son, when it came to political matters, she had to be cautious with her words. Anything she said carried weight, and because of that, she had to speak carefully, lest Salvador think that Rafael had used some method to sway her loyalty.

Meanwhile, Helen gave Carissa the pure-gold and seven-colored gemstone tiara, while Violet received a crystal bead bracelet. Helen kept the rest of the jewelry for herself as a reward. She would use them and dress up every day.

Victoria had said it before-no matter the circumstances, a woman should always dress well within her means to please herself.

Salvador had dispatched people to keep an eye on both Barrett and Hartstone Estate. Likewise, Hell Monarch Estate was keeping a close watch on both parties as well.

Barrett found it strange. He had already submitted a mourning application, so why was Salvador still sending him to the Capital Guard headquarters for special training?



So many things had happened recently. His sister-in-law was gone, as was his child, and even his mom too. All the deaths left him emotionally shattered.

He thought to himself that perhaps this was just how his life would be—three years of mourning, and then either a position with the Crown Guard or back to the Capital Guard. He might even be sent to guard the city gates.

His future seemed bleak, but for some reason, he felt a strange sense of relief. However, it didn't last long. His second aunt still insisted on splitting the family, while his dad was avoiding responsibilities. And his elder

brother, having lost his wife and status, had become completely listless. Viola's gaze nowadays was filled with hate and irony, and Aurora was still hiding away in Blessed Haven, unwilling to offer any support.

All of it weighed on him.

After selling off many of the servants, Valor Estate felt cold and empty. It no longer felt like a home, but more like a desolate tomb.

The moment Barrett stepped through the door, the suffocating feeling would hit him, making him feel as though the air was being squeezed out of his lungs. Every step forward felt like he was drowning. There was a tightness in his chest, and a suffocating sense of helplessness would overwhelm him.

He knew he couldn't go on like this, but what hope did his family have left? What hope did he have?

He drank, and once drunk, he passed out and slept for two full days in his study, completely indifferent to everything around him. Emptying his mind of thoughts felt oddly comforting—peaceful, even.

On the third day, he called for more wine. As he poured a glass, he stared at the rippling liquid. He longed for it, yearning for the numb tranquility of drunkenness that felt like a different world. He realized he was craving alcohol and that numbing escape it brought with it. The longing frightened him. Every time he craved something, things seemed to get worse.

A chill ran through him.

He couldn't keep going like this. If he did, the Warren family would truly be doomed. So, he spent the night in his study, not touching a drop of alcohol, his mind swirling with the events of the past days, as well as the words Sebastian had spoken to him.

The next day, he took inventory of his mom's treasure vault, leaving behind one or two items and selling off the rest.

After Rebecca passed, Charlotte had arranged the funeral. Now, she was still insistent on splitting the family because she was deeply disappointed in Barrett. He agreed to the split, but any debts owed to his second aunt had to be repaid.

The accounts were muddled and impossible to sort, but he would sell whatever he could and pay her accordingly.

Chapter 890

Barrett called for the shopkeeper of The Grand Vault to come over, asking him to bring the staff along to appraise and price everything. As they cleared out one box after another, Barrett was surprised to find that Rebecca had hidden away gold ingots, as well as a large collection of valuable jewelry.

Tara explained that some of it had been his mother's dowry, while some had been passed down from his grandmother. Since the family hadn't been split yet, it hadn't been given to the second branch of the family. There were also gifts from Carissa, which Rebecca had hidden away when she left the family. Thankfully, Carissa never asked about them.

Barrett instructed Tara to separate the items that had been gifts from Carissa, planning to return them once they were sorted.

Tara sighed. "To be honest, even if you return them to her, she probably won't want them. It might be better to give them to Madam Charlotte. After all, she and Lady Carissa were close."

"Whether she gives them to Aunt Charlotte is her business, but we can't make that decision for her," said Barrett, firm in his stance.

Viola didn't agree. It wasn't about the money or jewelry. She simply didn't want to be involved with the people from Hell Monarch Estate anymore. Since Carissa hadn't taken the items, they could sell or pawn them. Whatever money they got from it would go to Charlotte anyway.

"She won't care about the jewelry. Besides, didn't Amelia pawn some items off before she died? Wouldn't it be better to redeem what she pawned and return only those to Carissa instead?" Viola said.

"Amelia intended to return them herself," Barrett replied, feeling that his wife's reasoning didn't quite make sense. "If we're not to be involved with them, then we should return it all. Even if Carissa throws it away, it's her decision."

Viola was clearly upset with his decision but didn't want to cause a scandal with The Grand Vault staff present, so she pulled him aside to speak privately.

Once outside the storeroom, Barrett took off his cloak and draped it over Viola's shoulders without a second thought. After giving birth prematurely, her health hadn't fully recovered, and with the cold weather, she must be feeling it even more.

Viola froze for a moment, staring at her husband's pale face. The anger that had been building inside her dissipated by half. But that small feeling of gratitude didn't change the situation. Her expression softened slightly before hardening again.

"If this is just an attempt to persuade me, it's pointless. I'm not the kind of person who can be swayed with small gestures. You know the situation at Valor Estate. I'm not opposed to giving money to the second branch of the family, but if those pieces of jewelry go back to Carissa, then we'll have to pay even more to the second branch. Don't blame me for being selfish. You know how things are right now. I can't ignore our future."

Barrett studied his wife's nose, which was reddened by the cold wind, as well as her face, set in a challenging expression. If this had been any other time, he might have let it slide to avoid an argument. But some things were too clear to ignore.

If they knew they were in the wrong and didn't change, what difference did it make from being ignorant?

He set his jaw, his tone firm as he declared, "I'll find a way to make money. But what's owed to others will be returned-every last bit of it. That's final.

Without leaving Viola any room to argue, he turned and walked back into the storeroom.

Viola reached out as if to stop him, but her hand grasped at air. She froze for a moment, taken aback by the realization that Barrett was defying her, refusing to listen to her when it came to household matters.

As anger surged in her, she turned sharply, walking off without another word.

The Grand Vault had offered 13,000 silver coins for the goods. That price didn't even include the items Carissa

had gifted. The real value lay in the heirlooms passed down from the Warren family. But even those would lose their worth once sold off, and the depreciation was significant.

13,000 silver coins wasn't a small sum, though.

Even if Barrett gave all of it to Charlotte, he still had a bit of money left-about 2,000 silver coins from the first sale, though it had been stretched thin with funeral expenses. He would have to make do with that.

Barrett helped The Grand Vault staff pack up the items to be taken away, fully aware that selling off his family assets would likely become a topic of ridicule. But at this point, he didn't care.

He had already heard worse.

Just as Barrett was about to leave with the carriage, a voice called out from behind him, "Commander Warren!" He turned around to see a middle-aged man dressed in indigo attire and a black cloak, standing beneath the flag of The Grand Vault. Despite his worldly attire, the man carried an air of quiet elegance, almost ethereal.

Barrett didn't recognize him. "May I ask who you are?"