

War Song 911

Chapter 911

Rafael and Carissa were sitting in a private room on the second floor of a tavern not far from the city gates. The room offered the best view in the place. With the windows pushed open, they could see the entire area around the gates.

Since their schedule had always been fixed, Rafael had reserved this room in advance so Carissa would be able to see Dominic from there.

Carissa's gaze never left his face, her eyes hungry as if she couldn't get enough of him. She wanted nothing more than to rush down, throw herself into her grandfather's arms, and cry like she used to when she was little.

She would pour out all the grievances she had been holding inside, and her grandfather would gently pat her head, promising that anyone who dared hurt his little granddaughter would have to answer to him.

But now, all Carissa could do was stand on the second floor, watching as Dominic's horse was surrounded by the masses, listening to the deafening roars of support. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Her grandfather had aged. Really, truly aged.

In the past, even though his hair was graying at the temples, his spirit had been sharp and his will unwavering. When he returned to the capital, he could spar with her dad without even breaking a sweat.

Now, Dominic's hair was fully white, with hardly a trace of black left. The long journey had taken its toll, and while his commanding presence was still strong, the weariness was clear. He had also become much thinner. His once dark and full cheeks now looked hollow, the skin still the same color but the flesh underneath sagging.

That was the mark of old age. Her grandfather had truly grown old.

Dominic trudged forward through the crowd, moving slowly. At times, he raised his hand to thank people. Other times, he glanced anxiously at the Crown Guard, worried that they might accidentally hurt someone in the crowd as they drove people away.

It took nearly an hour before the procession finally reached the area below the tavern.

Originally, the Garrison Unit and the Capital Guard were supposed to help clear the way, but the crowd was simply too thick. What started as a few people pushing through had turned into an unbreakable wall of bodies. At first, there had been some space to move, but now, the people had formed a human barricade, surrounding Dominic for protection.

There had been some who tried to confront the Crown Guard, but they were immediately shouted down by others who insisted that causing trouble with the Crown Guard would only bring trouble to Dominic.

Gradually, the crowd began chanting their belief that the king would treat the old general fairly, as someone who had guarded the borders for so many years.

Eventually, the chants morphed into a steady roar, with everyone shouting "His Majesty is wise!" and "His Majesty is virtuous!"

The transformation had been so natural, it seemed effortless. An hour was long enough for those hidden among the crowd to turn the tide, shifting from initial anger and support to overwhelming praise for the king.

Among them was a man dressed as an ordinary civilian, whose voice was the loudest. He led the others, and it wasn't just his loud voice that mattered. The disguise had been carefully crafted—thanks to the skills of Claire and the others.

No one recognized them as members of Hell Monarch Estate.

In addition, Travis was originally from the martial world and had a rough, unrefined air about him. Even though he now served as a guard leader in Hell Monarch Estate, his roots still clung to him. With so many people around, it was impossible to identify anyone with certainty, even if someone tried to scrutinize the faces below.

The repeated chants of 'His Majesty is wise' seemed like a tribute to Salvador.

Once, this was the praise Salvador had most wanted to hear from the people.

But not today.

Now, it symbolized the people's expectations of how Salvador would handle Dominic. This expectation could only be met by a king known for his wisdom. That meant Salvador had no choice but to be lenient in dealing with the general.

Dominic finally lifted his head and saw Carissa.

The moment his eyes met hers and saw her mouth the word "Grandpa," his eyes, already bloodshot, couldn't hold back a single tear. The moment the tear fell, Carissa's tears broke free, streaming down her face.

He sighed. That child rarely cried, but when she did, it was never easy to comfort her. And now, with her tears flowing like that, who could possibly console her?

Dominic noticed the Hell Monarch standing beside her, his hand resting on her shoulder. He was holding her tightly, projecting a calm and reassuring presence.

Good. Someone was there to comfort her.

Chapter 912

Eventually, Michael and Max, accompanied by the Capital Guard and the Garrison Unit, managed to push through the crowd, gradually clearing a path so that Dominic and the Crown Guard could pass through unhindered.

The Crown Guard led Dominic into the palace to see the king. Before they arrived, reports of the uproar caused by the citizens and the chants they had shouted had already been delivered to Salvador.

The king's brows furrowed. The repeated cries of 'His Majesty is wise' had coiled around him like a noose, tightening with each passing moment.

Originally, he had planned for Dominic to be taken directly to the Ministry of Justice upon returning to the capital, where a relatively comfortable cell would be prepared for him. That way, he could also explain things better to the Westhaven envoy.

But now, could he still carry out that plan?

Under Galen's guidance, Dominic entered the royal study and knelt with his head bowed.

"Greetings, Your Majesty. Long live the king!"

Before seeing Dominic, Salvador had already formulated a plan for how to handle the situation. But as he looked at the man kneeling before him, so different from the imposing, powerful figure he had once known, it felt like a mountain had suddenly collapsed. The sight of him now brought a pang of deep sorrow to the king's heart.

Back when Salvador was still the crown prince, Dominic and Hector had been his strongest supporters. He had frequently visited Northwatch Estate, where he had genuinely wanted to form a friendship with the Sinclair family's sons.

Time had passed, the world had changed, and so had the people in it.

Now that Salvador was the king, his thoughts were much more complex, and his heart, no longer as pure as before, was filled with doubts and calculations.

The old friend knelt before him, and as he looked at Dominic's face, it was clear how the harsh winds of the frontier had worn him down. The once-steely general had been turned into a weathered old man, and Salvador's heart ached more than ever in that moment.

He couldn't help but stand and personally offer his support. "General Sullivan, please rise."

Dominic's eyes welled with tears. "I'm a guilty official who has failed you, Your Majesty. There is no pardon for my crimes."

Salvador let out a heavy sigh. "Sit. Let's talk."

Salvador helped Dominic to a seat beside him. As he did, he truly noticed just how much the once-imposing, steel-hearted general had aged. His shoulders and arms, once as hard as iron, had now grown thin and frail, a pitiful sight.

Salvador returned to his throne, unable to hide his sigh. "You've lost much weight. You must take care of your health."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, for your concern. I'm deeply ashamed," Dominic said, wiping away his tears, his voice thick with regret and embarrassment.

Salvador saw the sorrow in Dominic's eyes, and it only made his heart ache more.

Trying to comfort the man, he said gently, "I know the fault is not yours. You are the marshal of Victory Pass, and now, with the Westhaven envoy coming here, you must step forward. If the matter is to be acknowledged, it must be you who does so in front of them."

Dominic nodded, his voice steady despite the sorrow, saying, "I will follow your orders, Your Majesty. Whatever you command, I will do. I only wish to atone for my mistakes."

Derek listened carefully as he stood to the side. He knew Salvador's sympathy wouldn't last once Dominic left the study. The soft heart Salvador had shown in these moments would fade quickly, and the general's fate would be sealed.

So, Derek stepped forward and spoke, "Your Majesty, now that General Sullivan has returned to the capital, shall he be sent to the Ministry of Justice's prison, or is there another arrangement? If I may be so bold, I ask for a favor for the general.

"Whether he is placed in the ministry's dungeon or elsewhere, I beg that a royal physician be summoned to tend to him. I suspect his frailty is due to his past injuries from the arrow, which have worsened over time. Combined with the hardships of this journey, I fear that he may not endure much longer without proper care.

Salvador was already considering how to handle Dominic's situation. With Derek speaking up while Salvador was amid his emotional softness, the king naturally didn't want Dominic to suffer in the Ministry of Justice's cells. He didn't hesitate to say, "Allow him to return home for now. Have the Griffinblade Unit watch over him."

The Griffinblade Unit was part of the Crown Guard, which now consisted of six separate units-the Griffinblade Unit, Shieldbearer Unit, Skystriker Unit, Vanguard Unit, Eastguard Unit, and Westguard Unit. All of them were now under Barrett's command.

The Griffinblade, Shieldbearer, and Skystriker units were tasked with external duties, while the Vanguard, Eastguard, and Westguard units were the king's personal guard, responsible for his protection.

The Crown Guard had officially been renamed the Nightsteel Guard, meaning that from now on, there would be no more Crown Guard, only the Nightsteel Guard.

In just fifteen days, Salvador and Barrett had restructured the former Crown Guard. They were officially separated from the Mystic Army, with some of its functions overlapping with the Royal Guard and the Capital Guard.

Anyone paying attention could see that this was all part of Salvador's plan to bring the Royal Guard and the Capital Guard under the control of the Nightsteel Guard.

Chapter 913

When Carissa first took up the position of commander of the Mystic Army, many officials opposed her appointment. They felt that a woman holding such an important position was inappropriate.

But now, seeing the series of actions taken by Salvador and understanding his intentions, the people began to feel that something wasn't quite right. If things went on like this, the Mystic Army might end up reduced to nothing more than a gathering place for the Garrison Unit's misfits.

The Mystic Army had once been a vital defense for the capital, a shield against external threats. Now, it was being torn apart, piece by piece. The officials felt uneasy, as if some sacred authority was being destroyed.

This feeling was also due to the fact that since Carissa had taken charge, the Mystic Army had become more formidable and had instilled a greater sense of security. Many who had previously opposed her leadership were now completely won over.

And it was this recognition of Carissa's ability that had pushed Salvador to accelerate his plans, transforming the Crown Guard into the Nightsteel Guard. It was clear that his next moves would come even faster.

Dominic was escorted back to the Sullivan family estate by the Griffinblade Unit. The estate had been abandoned for some time and had fallen into disrepair. The Griffinblade Unit members took it upon themselves to clear the overgrown weeds and clean the area. Derek also selected a few palace servants to assist with the upkeep.

Barrett didn't dare to personally escort Dominic, and instead deployed twenty members of the Griffinblade Unit. Ten of them entered the estate while the other ten kept watch outside, guarding all three entrances-four at the main gate and three each at the back and side doors.

Not long after Dominic arrived at the estate, Heather came with a group of people and requested to meet him at the main entrance. She was stopped by the Griffinblade Unit, but she didn't cause a scene and chose to wait outside instead.

There were many things she could ignore, but now that her dad had returned to the capital, she couldn't bear the thought of not visiting him. Otherwise, she feared she would face severe criticism and have her reputation tarnished.

Fortunately, Harvey wasn't in the capital at the moment, or he would have done as he always did-stopped her from coming, given her dad's current status as a disgraced man.

However, allowing Dominic to return home, though guarded by the Griffinblade Unit, was still a great act of kindness from the king.

Heather stood outside for a while, but when she saw that neither Carissa nor anyone from Edgeview Estate had arrived, and with the weather growing unbearably cold, she decided not to linger any longer.

At Hell Monarch Estate, Carissa had calmed her emotions and was now listening to Michael's report. Rafael didn't return to the Supreme Court. He stayed with her the entire day.

"Well, just as we hoped, Grandfather has made it back to Sullivan Estate, Rafael said, releasing a small breath of relief.

At least Dominic wouldn't be locked up in the Ministry of Justice.

*The Griffinblade Unit is overseeing him now. If you wish to visit General Sullivan, I can speak to Commander Warren about it," Michael offered.

Michael and Barrett had a decent relationship-at least when Michael had served as Barrett's superior, he had been well taken care of.

Carissa appreciated Michael's offer. She was definitely going to see Dominic. No, she wasn't just going to see him, she would speak with him too.

After Michael left, Rafael looked around at the group, his voice steady as he announced, "From now on, we do what we should do. We don't need to worry about anyone's opinions, and we shouldn't hesitate. We've earned this strength by surviving cautiously and carefully, day after day. Now, we've built it up, and it's time to use it. The strength we've built up can sustain us for a good year or two of freedom."

Carissa exchanged a glance with Violet. They both visibly relaxed, the tension in their shoulders melting away.

Violet let out a soft, triumphant shout and threw a fist into the air. "This frustration has been building up for too long. It's time to let it out."

"Your Highness, there's still no word from Lord Edwin," Jacob reminded them, his tone grave.

That one line spoke of potentially deadly consequences.

'Right now, His Majesty still holds General Sullivan in some regard for old times' sake and for his merits. But if those words reach His Majesty's ears, all that goodwill and merits will be wiped away. Everything will be erased."

Rafael nodded, his expression thoughtful. "I believe Lord Edwin can help. The key is, Kevin knows the king better than anyone. He won't choose this path."

"That's what we hope, but with no news yet, we don't know the situation. It's worrisome," Jacob replied, always meticulous in his approach. Any information gap made him uneasy.

"No need to worry. Lord Edwin is here!" announced someone, rushing in.

It was Travis, who had already changed back into his clothes. His throat was raspy from all the shouting earlier, a clear sign of how hard he had worked.

Chapter 914

Edwin arrived alone, without a single attendant. His plain green attire was paired with a thick black cloak. To anyone unfamiliar, he could have been mistaken for a steward from some noble house.

Rafael and Carissa were the first to rise to greet him, with everyone else following suit. They all felt a deep gratitude for Edwin's silent assistance.

After the formalities, Edwin got straight to the point, saying, "I'm ashamed to say I couldn't get that brat to agree unconditionally. He set a condition, so I had to come here first to ask Lady Carissa and Ms. Spencer's opinion."

The word "ashamed" caught everyone off guard, but when they heard the rest, they finally breathed a collective sigh of relief.

However, Violet was confused. "Why would you need my opinion? What does he want?"

"He said he wants you to be his mentor, Ms. Spencer. He wants to be one of your direct apprentices, like Commander Lewis, Deputy Commander Brown, and Commander Prince," Edwin said, finding the situation strange.

Violet blinked, momentarily thrown off. "Huh? He wants me to teach him martial arts?"

She didn't fully understand Kevin's reasoning. He was an official in court and could attend the lessons with everyone else, so why would he need to become her apprentice? She had only agreed to take on three apprentices.

"He said he wants to advance based on his strength," Edwin explained. "Military officers are judged on martial prowess and cunning. The kid's sharp, but his martial skills aren't up to par yet."

Violet understood now, nodding in thought. She glanced at Carissa, who was also watching her.

This decision would largely depend on Violet's feelings. After all, accepting an apprentice wasn't something to be taken lightly. Even with Max and the others, it had been a challenge for her.

"Fine. I'll take him on," Violet said without much hesitation.

Normally, though, with her usual temperament, something like this-which felt like a threat to her-would have been impossible for her to agree to. However, since it involved Carissa's grandfather, some principles could be set aside.

Carissa's gratitude was immediate. "Thank you, Vivi."

"Why are you thanking me? I'm just getting another apprentice to boss around," Violet teased with a smile, though her thoughts were far less friendly.

Inwardly, she was seething. How dare Kevin use Dominic as leverage? Once she took him on, she would make sure to make his life miserable!

Rafael, who had previously claimed he wasn't worried, finally let out a deep sigh of relief after hearing Edwin's report. "You've done us a great service, Lord Edwin. I am deeply grateful."

"You're too kind, Your Highness," Edwin said with a modest smile. "Even putting aside the fact that you saved my son, I wouldn't have let that brat speak out of turn. I went to see him alone today, so no one else knows about this. You don't have to worry about it, Your Highness, Your Grace.*"

Rafael nodded. "I know you handle things with great care, Lord Edwin. I wasn't worried."

It wouldn't be appropriate for Edwin to stay long, so he stood up and took his leave.

After Michael spoke with Barrett, the latter had no reason to refuse, and no courage to, either. His life had been spared thanks to Wyatt, and now, he wanted to repay that debt. The Sullivans had been good to him during the Victory Pass campaign.

Barrett told Michael that Carissa should go see her grandfather the next day instead. There were two reasons for

that. First, Dominic needed rest after the long and exhausting journey. Second, going tomorrow night would attract less attention.

Michael agreed. It made sense to wait until the next day. He would also let Barrett arrange it, so as not to put too much pressure on himself.

Carissa felt her heart ache for Dominic. The journey had been grueling. If it meant waiting so he could rest, she didn't mind it.

Meanwhile, Kevin arrived that evening, carrying gifts to formally request an apprenticeship under Violet.

Having served by Salvador's side for so long, Kevin knew better than anyone that the king feared the Hell Monarch. Yet here he was, fearlessly bringing gifts and visiting Hell Monarch Estate. What's more, he invited his parents and wife to join him.

Violet had been quite angry at first, planning to scold him when he came to ask for the apprenticeship. When she saw him accompanied by his parents and wife, however, her anger dissipated.

It was clear that Kevin's parents were kind, warm people. They treated Violet with an especially polite and grateful manner.

Kevin's father, older than Violet by many years, became visibly emotional as he bowed respectfully and said, "If he ever disobeys, gets lazy, or does anything he shouldn't, feel free to discipline him as you see fit, Ms. Spencer. If you have to beat him, I won't complain-even if it kills him."

Chapter 915

Kevin immediately knelt and hurriedly said, "Dad, don't worry. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I'll make sure to learn well from my mentor. I won't slack off or be lazy. As for anything I shouldn't do, I promise I won't do it."

He had attended Violet's large lectures twice before, but had missed the others due to his duty shifts. Violet didn't teach him one-on-one whenever he was free, which left him feeling quite despondent.

When he returned home, he had told his parents several times that if he could be personally taught by Violet, it would be a dream come true.

To his surprise, after all the bad luck he had suffered during the Victory Pass campaign, he now had such good fortune. He knew his actions weren't exactly noble, but he also understood that if he let this opportunity slip through his fingers, he would never get another.

The Crown Guard, soon to be the Nightsteel Guard, would soon separate from the Mystic Army, and Violet was only teaching the Mystic Army troops in consideration for Carissa. After the Nightsteel Guard became independent, things might remain the same way. Even if the king allowed Violet to continue training them, Kevin would probably still miss the classes like he had before.

Kevin's wife, Odette, who had been kneeling alongside him, also stood as part of the ceremony. If her husband was to be accepted as an apprentice, it was only right that she also kneel and show her respect.

After Violet drank the wine as part of the apprenticeship ritual, she gave Odette a bracelet as a gift. Odette recognized the value of the bracelet and immediately tried to refuse, saying it was far too precious to accept.

Violet smiled. "Take it. I don't give cheap gifts."

Odette hesitated for a moment, then glanced at her mother-in-law, Pauline, for guidance.

Pauline said gently, "Since it's a gift from Sage Violet, you should accept it. When you have the time, make sure to serve her well and fulfill your duties as an apprentice's wife."

"I understand," Odette said, taking the bracelet with a grateful smile. "Thank you, Sage Violet."

After the apprenticeship ceremony, Kevin urged them to leave first.

Kevin's father, Ernest, knew his son wanted to stay behind. He excused himself, bowing respectfully to both Rafael and Carissa before bidding Violet farewell.

Jacob personally saw them out.

Once they were gone, Kevin immediately knelt again. "I was wrong, Sage Violet. Please punish me."

Though Violet was still new to being a master herself, she did feel a flare of anger at Kevin's actions. She recalled how Everett would always punish Carissa every time she made a mistake.

When that happened, Everett would always ask one cold, sharp question: "What did you do wrong?"

Inspired by that memory, Violet looked at Kevin with a cold expression and asked the same question.

"You know you're wrong? What did you do wrong?"

The words were simple, yet they held a quiet but undeniable authority.

Kevin lowered his head. "I shouldn't have used General Dylan's words to threaten you and force you to take me as an apprentice."

"It's good that you're aware. Go and kneel outside for two hours!" Violet replied coldly.

She picked up her cup and set it back down with a sharp thud-an action that felt eerily reminiscent of Everett. "Yes, Sage Violet!" Kevin responded.

He stood up and headed straight to the outer courtyard, where he dropped to his knees.

Carissa watched Violet's stern expression and the way she moved-sharp, purposeful-and felt a sudden wave of unease. The sensation was all too familiar. Instinctively, she glanced at Rafael. He, too, wore the same expression.

Right now, Violet reminded them of Everett.

Rafael was unfazed, his expression neutral. Everett had once told him that he needed to be stricter with Adrian's apprentices because they didn't have a good teacher to guide them. With Rafael, Everett didn't need to be as harsh. After all, Rafael had a great mentor.

Carissa was only momentarily afraid. After all, having Kevin kneel for two hours didn't seem all that intimidating.

When Everett punished them, it wasn't so tame. If the punishment involved kneeling, there was always something else to make it unbearable-like having a jar on your head, or having to hold heavy iron ingots out at arm's length, or kneeling on a bed of iron spikes. If it wasn't like that, it didn't count as a punishment, and would be considered leniency.

Violet's four apprentices were truly fortunate to have such a good mentor. However, it was clear that her punishments weren't going to be so simple.

Two hours later, her three other apprentices arrived. Violet had summoned them, and they were curious about the new apprentice. They wanted to see who had caused their mentor to break her vow of only taking three apprentices.

To their surprise, they saw that it was Kevin, who was part of the Nightsteel Guard.

Violet waved her hand dismissively. "You three, come and test his foundation. Don't go easy on him, but don't overdo it either. He still has duty tomorrow."

Chapter 916

Violet pulled Carissa aside to watch the sparring match. She knew Carissa must be worried about her grandfather right now, so she called over her apprentices to compete. Martial arts was Carissa's favorite, and watching the match would likely help distract her.

Rafael sat beside her, also observing the fight. His main purpose, of course, was to stay with Carissa. As for how the match was going, he didn't care much.

Well, it didn't matter whether he cared or not. Kevin was up against three opponents and was getting utterly pummeled. He could barely fight back and was mostly just taking the hits.

It was almost painful to watch.

Fortunately, they were careful not to target Kevin's head or face. A few punches and kicks to his body weren't a big deal since no one would see the damage. But if this kept up, Kevin wouldn't last much longer.

Just as Rafael was about to step in and call for a stop, Carissa beat him to it. As someone who practiced martial arts, she couldn't bear to watch such a one-sided beating. Kevin's weaknesses were already clear-his foundation was solid enough, but that was about all he had. His techniques were a mess. From his stances to his punches and kicks, there was no coherence or structure.

Violet noticed that Carissa's attention had completely shifted, and she felt a sense of relief. Even the way Carissa now looked at Kevin, lying on the ground, had softened a little.

Carissa asked, "How many years have you been practicing martial arts?"

Kevin was breathing heavily and hadn't caught his breath yet, but before he could answer, Violet prompted him, 'Answer your martial aunt's question.'

Carissa stiffened. No, she didn't want to be their martial aunt. She and Violet were from different guilds.

Kevin slowly stood up, his steps unsteady, but managed to reply, "I've been practicing since I was seven, so it's been twenty years."

"Who did you study under originally?"

"I never formally apprenticed under anyone," Kevin answered. "I trained with the household instructor and practiced with my cousin. Later, I met Galen, and he taught me. After I joined the then crown prince's personal guards, it was mostly him who guided me."

After a pause, he added, "I also used to hang around the other guys and pester them, trying to learn a bit from them here and there."

Everyone laughed. It was good that Kevin was eager to learn, but picking up bits and pieces here and there could lead to confusion. The key was to focus on mastering one thing, and once that was solid, move on to other areas. Only then would things make sense.

'No wonder you're all over the place," Violet remarked, frowning. She had noticed this during the bigger classes held earlier, but hadn't paid much attention to Kevin at the time. "If you enjoy martial arts so much, why didn't you apprentice formally when you were younger?"

After all, Kevin was from the Marquis of Elderglen's family. Becoming an apprentice shouldn't have been that difficult. Why had he only trained with the household instructor? Household instructors weren't known for their exceptional skills, and their teaching lacked structure.

Kevin fell silent for a moment, then let out a long, drawn-out sigh.

What followed was the unfortunate tale of his long and difficult journey to find a mentor. It explained why he was so determined to seize this opportunity, and why he couldn't wait until tomorrow to formally become her apprentice.

He had started practicing martial arts at seven. His family had already found a mentor for him, but just an hour

before the apprenticeship ceremony, that mentor suddenly died from a heart attack.

So, he trained with the household instructor while his family searched for another mentor. Finally, when he turned eight, they found an expert from the Stormshore Guild, but there was a catch. He had to travel to the guild to be accepted, and there was a strict limit to the number of apprentices- only five spots available, and it was first- come, first-served.

Ernest immediately took Kevin on the road, determined not to stop until they got there. Along the way, they encountered another boy traveling to the Stormshore Guild. Ernest believed this boy was a competitor, so he pushed himself to outpace him. Since they would be traveling by water, Ernest rented a boat in advance and disembarked at the designated port.

However, it ended in disaster. The boat capsized, and dad and son barely managed to survive. By the time they recovered, any hope of joining the Stormshore Guild was lost.

They waited until Kevin turned ten, and this time, Edwin helped find him a mentor. A martial arts school had opened in the capital. If Kevin was accepted, he would be the eldest apprentice. Logically, everything should have gone smoothly. With his uncle's help and the school being in the capital, there was no reason for things to go wrong.

Yet, luck turned its back on Kevin once again.

A series of heavy rains in the capital caused the newly rented school building to collapse. Not only was the mentor injured and broke his leg, but it also crushed any hope of continuing the school. After that, the mentor didn't want to stay in the capital anymore and had no intention of taking in apprentices.

With his leg crippled, the mentor left the city in a carriage, claiming the capital was unlucky and not meant for him.

Chapter 917

By the time Kevin turned 13, he still wasn't formally apprenticed to a mentor. Every time he tried, something went wrong. Either he fell ill, or the mentor he found had bad luck.

In the end, Ernest gave up.

*Just keep learning what you can," he said. "Whatever you manage to learn is enough."

Violet listened to Kevin's story with mixed emotions. Was this guy some kind of bad luck magnet? His life was one misfortune after another, and it seemed like he even brought bad luck to his mentors.

She couldn't help but wonder-would that affect her too?

Based on his past experiences, it always seemed like something would go wrong before he could formally apprentice. Now that he had finally managed to find a mentor and things were going smoothly, maybe it was a sign that his luck had finally turned. Since he managed to apprentice without issues, perhaps it meant his bad streak had come to an end and everything would start going well.

Kevin had officially met his senior apprentices. Seeing his sincere and respectful attitude, none of them made things difficult for him.

However, Carissa asked him, "You're from the Nightsteel Guard. Aren't you worried that apprenticing directly to a mentor like this might make it hard for you to rise in the ranks there?"

"It doesn't matter if I can't rise to the top right now," Kevin answered respectfully. "As long as I have the ability, I'll eventually make a name for myself. But if I don't hone my martial arts skills, even if the king values me, I won't have the ability to perform. It'd be even worse if I'm removed from my position later. I'm still young. I can wait."

Carissa nodded slightly, agreeing with his perspective. His persistence was rare—he hadn't let his bad luck push him off course, and despite everything, he hadn't gone down the wrong path.

It seemed Rafael's faith in him wasn't without reason.

After they left, Travis entered and eyed the gifts. Unlike before, he didn't rush over to inspect them. Earlier in the year, he had returned to his guild. Every last bit of the money he earned had gone to his mentor, and in return, he got a beating.

The reason? He had spent the money on jewelry, lip balm, and rouge. His mentor scolded him for wasting money and gave him a good thrashing. The next day, all the senior apprentices of the guild had painted their lips and applied rouge, protesting in their own way by using the very things their mentor had punished Travis for.

Alana and Leah were among the few who had traveled and seen more of the world. They told their mentor, 'All girls today take the time to make themselves up. It's not a big deal for them to dress up once or twice. After all, it's the New Year, right?'

Though their mentor was stern, she was soft-hearted. After muttering that it was easy to fall into luxury but hard to return to frugality, she gave up on scolding them.

The night before Travis left the mountain to return to the capital, his mentor spoke with him for two hours.

"We may be poor, but we've been poor for so long that it's become part of us. Poverty should come with dignity. If someone offers you a gift, you must thank them. If they don't offer one, don't take it by force, or you'll lose your manners, and more importantly, your dignity. This year, my hope for you is that you become a person of culture, someone who can manage their emotions and remain stable. Learn to control yourself, and always keep your composure."

Travis was deeply moved by these words.

After the sentiment passed, however, he couldn't help but ask, "When I was a kid, did you purposely send me to fight Cari? And when I lost, did you go to them to ask for reduced rent? Wasn't that a sign of a lack of dignity? Didn't that embarrass you?"

That question almost got him kicked out of the guild.

So, this year, he promised to be good, to listen, and to be a person of culture-someone who could control his emotions and behave with grace.

Violet noticed Travis had been staring but hadn't approached the gifts.

'Don't you want to take a look?' she asked.

"That belongs to you. I'm not some rude person," Travis said with righteous indignation.

Carissa and Violet were both taken aback by his statement.

'Do you hear yourself? You're not rude? Then, who was it who used to mess with my gifts?' Violet questioned, almost in disbelief.

"That was in the past. Now is now. I've reformed. I'm a person of high moral standing... very high," he stammered, trying to say something nice about himself but failing, since he hadn't quite grasped the finer points of culture. 'But still, why is Carissa your apprentices' martial aunt? You two come from different guilds,' he added. "Mind your own business, Violet replied, opening several embroidered boxes.

Inside, there were two Evergreen Roots, a pair of crystal figurines, and a few other tonic herbs.

"Put these in your private stash. These are for your mentor. She's looking a little too thin and could use a good supplement," said Violet, handing everything over to Travis.

Since Violet was giving him the items, Travis didn't hesitate. With perfect politeness, he thanked her and accepted everything without a second thought.

The following evening, Rafael and Carissa arrived at Sullivan Estate.

From the outside, it was clear that the Griffinblade Unit wasn't slacking off. The plaque had been rehung, the front gate cleaned, and every copper nail on the door had been carefully polished to a shine.

During the day, common people had come to offer their respects, bringing simple gifts-fruits, vegetables, and meat. The people's affections were the purest. They couldn't do much else, but they gave what they could.

Barrett stood at the gate, looking a bit out of place. He couldn't bring himself to come during the day, so he had taken to standing guard at night. He was gathering the courage to go in and apologize. Despite trying to work up the nerve, he couldn't bring himself to open the door.

When Rafael and Carissa arrived, Barrett instinctively stepped back and hid from view.

It was a reflex, driven by the sharp insults he had been receiving from the townsfolk. He even had rotten vegetable leaves thrown at him when walking down the street. He understood now-his glory at Victory Pass was being repaid by the people's anger, and their bitterness was coming back to haunt him.

Still, he bore the abuse stoically. At least now, he didn't have to explain himself to his mom or face her wrath. He would take what he deserved, and after that, things would pass.

Rafael and Carissa came out of the carriage hand in hand. As Barrett's gaze fell on their intertwined fingers, a strange, unspoken feeling surged within him.

Carissa wore a gown of dark cloud-patterned satin, embroidered with large flowers. Her cloak was black on the outside, red on the inside, fluttering in the night wind.

The last few times Barret saw her, she had been in her official uniform and exuded authority. Now, in her female attire, she seemed even more stunning. Her delicate eyes were tinged with a reddish glow from her makeup, captivating anyone who looked at her.

Barrett quickly averted his gaze, hoping the dim light at the gate would shield him from their sight. He didn't want them to see him standing there. He didn't even dare look at Rafael, not wanting to face how perfectly matched they were, how harmonious they seemed together.

He acted as though he hadn't seen them and kept his eyes lowered. Naturally, Rafael and Carissa paid him no mind. The Griffinblade Unit guard opened the door, and the two of them entered.

Having been informed in advance that they would be coming, Dominic had waited in the main hall after finishing dinner. Finally, he heard the sound of footsteps. He looked up and saw them enter, hand in hand, their figures illuminated by the soft glow of the lanterns.

Seeing this, Dominic's heart settled at once. He didn't care if they were supposedly a match made in heaven. What mattered to him most was whether Rafael truly loved Carissa.

Back at Victory Pass, their letters had mostly concerned matters of Fawnrune City, with only passing mentions of other things, Dominic had heard that Rafael treated Carissa very well, and had witnessed this himself when he saw them together at the city gates yesterday.

Now, seeing them walk hand in hand, with that familiar, protective tenderness Rafael showed so openly, Dominic knew the prince's feelings for Carissa were genuine.

The two of them stood before Dominic and bowed deeply.

Carissa called out "Grandpa" with a catch in her voice, her words faltering as she struggled to hold back her tears. She kept her head lowered, trying to control her emotions, not wanting her grandfather to see her in such a fragile state.

At this moment, weakness would do nothing for her grandfather.

Dominic knew she was crying—he could see her shoulders trembling ever since she had bowed. Carissa had truly

grown up. She could now stand on a battlefield and no longer easily display her emotions.

But why did it hurt so much inside?

Dominic and Hector had chosen Carissa's name together. Melanie had given birth to six sons, all of them remarkable in their own right. When they were blessed with a darling daughter, they cherished her with all their hearts, and that was reflected in her name.

As their only daughter, they showered Carissa with love and affection, allowing her to grow up pampered and adored. Whatever she wanted to do, they let her-so long as she lived joyfully, freely.

After all, it wasn't difficult for both the Sinclair and Sullivan families to protect the little darling.

From the moment Carissa was born, her future seemed set. With the love and care from both families, she would grow up surrounded by affection, with a joyful and carefree childhood-like a wildflower blooming in the mountains, returning to the pure, untainted essence of life.

Yet, that happiness was so fleeting. She hadn't even fully blossomed yet, and she had already faced the harshest reality of life-the unbearable separation of life and death. She was forced to grow up too soon.

Chapter 919

Dominic stood and helped Carissa straighten up before gently rubbing her head, just like he used to when she was little. As a child, she would come to him to complain whenever she was upset.

She had been a small, delicate thing, and couldn't stand feeling wronged. Anyone who dared to scold her or speak ill of her would find themselves the subject of her complaints the moment her grandfather returned to the capital. After venting her frustrations, she would always hide in his arms, seemingly submissive and innocent on the surface. Yet, her eyes would gleam with mischievous satisfaction.

Tears streamed down Carissa's face, each drop falling in a steady cascade. With his rough fingers, Dominic wiped away her tears, swallowing the sorrow in his throat.

His voice still trembled with emotion as he said, "Who's been bullying our little Cari this time? But you don't need me to step in and teach them a lesson now, do you? You can handle it yourself and give them a taste of their own medicine."

His words, full of both pain and pride, made Carissa's heart ache even more.

She hurriedly wiped her eyes. She wasn't here to cry, let alone let her grandfather see her weakness. Through her blurred vision, she caught the familiar, doting look in his eyes. Yet, it only made her more aware of how much he had aged.

She had been through a lot these years, but Dominic had experienced even more. Besides the heartbreak over the Sinclair family, there was the loss of his third son's arm, the death of his seventh son, and his own near-fatal injuries from an arrow. Yet Dominic had endured each hardship with resilience. Even now, his back remained straight.

While this caused others to admire him, all Carissa could feel was a deep ache in her heart. Finally, after much coaxing, Rafael managed to calm the grandfather and granddaughter enough for them to sit and talk properly. Carissa didn't dare ask about her uncles or aunts, afraid that mentioning them would remind her grandfather of the painful loss of his seventh son. She was cautious with her words, careful not to bring up anything that might stir old wounds.

Sensing her hesitation, Dominic spoke first, "Your third aunt will be coming to the capital in a few days. She insisted on returning, saying she wants to see you."

He didn't say more, not wanting to reopen the deep wounds he had buried for so long.

Carissa's face softened with concern. "The journey is long, and the weather is so harsh. Why didn't you stop her, Grandpa?"

Dominic's voice was tender and loving as he replied, "She misses you. She wanted to come back sooner, but she didn't dare. Now, with everything that's happened, she's decided to come anyway. Let her come back to see you and Ryan."

"It's been hard on her," Carissa said, holding back her tears. "I had planned to bring Ryan tonight, but he's staying at the academy. I was in such a rush to come here that I didn't go to pick him up."

In truth, Carissa had purposely not brought Ryan with her. She hadn't informed Salvador of her visit tonight. It was a private matter, but she would report it to him later, of course.

In a few days, she would formally request the queen dowager's special permission in Ryan's name to allow him to meet his great-grandfather. That would give her a proper reason to come again.

Privately, she could always visit again, but it would be better with a legitimate excuse-perhaps bringing Sebastian to check on Dominic's health, delivering some tonics and everyday essentials, and sharing a meal together.

It had been so long since they had sat down to eat as a family. Carissa's father had once said that one of the most important things in life was sharing meals with family.

When Ryan came up in conversation, Dominic's heart ached too. He knew Rafael had been the one to find the boy, and that still deserved a proper thank-you.

He rose and bowed in gratitude to Rafael. "Thank you, Your Highness, for bringing Ryan back to the Sinclair family.

Rafael quickly stood and returned the gesture. "Grandfather, there's no need for thanks-we're all family."

The way Rafael said 'grandfather' was so natural, as though he had practiced it countless times.

"This time, I've troubled both of you." Dominic sighed. "I hope the two kingdoms can avoid war."

"Don't worry, Grandfather," Rafael said quietly. "We're working toward that goal as well. The Sinclair family was destroyed, and though the spy we captured later confessed that the reason was a grudge stemming from my late father-in-law's victory at Westhaven, where he and his thousand men defeated an army of a hundred thousand, it's an old grudge.

"It happened many years ago and can't be used to justify the massacre. The Sinclair family's tragedy is rooted in Fawnrun City, and soon, everyone in the capital will know the truth of it."

They had discussed this in their letters before.

Dominic added, "It's a pity. There's no concrete evidence, and even if there were, it would still be seen as us massacring the village first, with their revenge coming later."

"Revenge or not, it was still retaliation. After that, the soldiers from Westhaven went to the Southern Frontier-that was their second retaliation. Then, on the Southern Frontier battlefield, they

captured Aurora and the soldiers who took part in the massacre-that was their third retaliation," said Rafael.

Chapter 920

Dominic understood what Rafael was getting at. Westhaven's retaliation had been balanced-it was an eye for an eye. If they hadn't taken action after the massacre but instead sent an envoy like they were doing now, then Starhaven would clearly be in the wrong.

However, Westhaven had already exacted their form of revenge.

"Yes," Dominic said softly. "If it was just the massacre of villagers, they would have gotten their revenge after what they've done. But don't forget, there was the matter of a prisoner of war being killed as well."

A prisoner of war being killed was just describing the situation in a nicer way. What had truly occurred was the brutal humiliation of an heir to the throne, leading to his tragic death.

The current Westhaven king, Edmund, wasn't acting out of a sense of justice for the common people. No, he was seeking vengeance for his brother, Arthur. Even if the massacre of civilians could be swept under the rug, what of the murder of another kingdom's crown prince?

"The issue of Prince Arthur's death hasn't been openly acknowledged yet. Marshal Liam has been making concessions to maintain Prince Arthur's dignity as well as Westhaven's reputation. Grand Princess Lisandra is leading the upcoming envoy, so there's still hope," Rafael said.

"Also, when we were at the Southern Frontier, Marshal Liam said that all the spies who escaped back to Westhaven were killed. From what I've gathered through Winona's investigation, however, two managed to get away. Winona has been looking for them, and she's found them. They're on their way back to the capital now," Carissa added.

Hearing them speak, Dominic felt both troubled and relieved. Since their return from the Southern Frontier battlefield, they had clearly been working tirelessly on his behalf. By the time he was summoned to the capital for questioning, they had prepared everything-so much so that he didn't even have to visit the Ministry of Justice. No matter what happened, he was able to return to Sullivan Estate and stay for a few days. He had no regrets left in this life.

He placed his hands on the armrests and looked at the two of them, his voice heavy as he said, 'Listen to me. Just do your best in this matter. Don't expect too much else. I'm old now, and I can bear the consequences of whatever happens to me. But if it involves your future, I cannot allow that.'

"Cari, I'm going to say something harsh. If both kingdoms are at odds, even the complete destruction of the Sinclair family doesn't compare to the deliberate torture and murder of a crown prince. Once they bring up what happened to Prince Arthur, we will have lost. On top of that, we were the ones who massacred the common people first."

"Grandfather, we've gone over everything countless times, and we know you're right. We must take responsibility for what happened in Fawnrun City. The Sinclair family's massacre is something they must answer for, and if they expose what happened to Prince Arthur, we will be held accountable for that as well."

"But they also need to take responsibility for their involvement in the Southern Frontier battle, where they aided Sandoria," Rafael said, his voice laced with quiet determination.

"Exactly." Dominic nodded slowly, his tone solemn. "Everyone who needs to answer for their actions must do so, just like how it would be impossible for me to escape what I should be responsible for."

"As for their involvement in the Southern Frontier battle, yes, it violates our agreement. But don't forget, they signed that agreement in Victory Pass with Aurora. Once the Victory Pass treaty was overturned, their actions in the Southern Frontier no longer count as a breach."

Dominic wasn't trying to sound hopeless. He only wanted to make Rafael and Carissa realize that they should abandon any illusions of sacrificing everything or compromising too much to save him.

If taking his head would settle this matter and prevent war between the two kingdoms, Dominic would gladly offer it.

Carissa understood her grandfather's thoughts well, and said firmly, "No matter what, we'll give it our all before talking about anything else."

Dominic looked at her, his eyes reddening. 'Cari, what you need to focus on now is how to bring justice for the Sinclair family. They died unjustly and horribly. They were innocent-old, weak, women, and children-and they didn't deserve this tragedy. You can do everything in your power to bring them justice.'

'As for the rest... Don't waste your efforts. If you start to worry about me, then the Sinclair family massacre will become a bargaining chip. That will make it impossible for you to truly seek justice for them.'

Carissa shook her head, her expression resolute. "Justice must be served, and you must be saved as well, Grandpa. The tragedy of the Sinclair family massacre will inevitably be placed on the negotiation table. Since that's the case, why should we deliberately avoid discussing it further?"