

## War Song 991

### Chapter 991

When Leona arrived at Hell Monarch Estate, she saw Dominic and Cindy. Unable to hold back her tears, she immediately rushed forward to greet them.

Upon seeing her, Dominic and Cindy instinctively glanced outside. But after a moment of seeing no one, a flicker of disappointment crossed their eyes, quickly replaced by their usual calm. Cindy smiled as she held Leona's hands. "Why are you crying, silly girl? Aren't you happy to see your grandfather safe and sound?"

"I am happy... I'm just too happy," Leona said through her tears.

Dominic looked at his granddaughter, knowing the hardships she had endured. His heart ached with pity.

"Leona, come sit down and let me have a good look at you."

Hearing the concern in his voice and remembering her mom's indifference, Leona felt a pang in her chest. Tears rolled down her cheeks again.

"Grandpa, I'm fine. I have my cousin to help me. Everything's good."

Dominic glanced at Carissa, his heart filled with sorrow. She had suffered so much, yet she still thought of looking after her cousin.

"I'm glad you can take care of each other. Make sure you keep it up," he said.

"Yes, we'll do as you say, Grandpa," Carissa and Leona both responded.

The two cousins exchanged a look, suppressing the sadness of their impending separation, and tried their best to force smiles.

As they chatted, Dominic had something on his mind that he wanted to say, but he couldn't find the right moment.

Noticing this, Cindy asked, "Leona, where is your mom? Why didn't she come with you?"

Just as Leona was about to reply, Rafael entered, accompanied by Jeremiah and Trevor.

"Mr. Murray, Mr. Young, it's been a long time. How have you both been?" said Dominic, standing to greet them.

Trevor had just returned the greeting when he saw Jeremiah turn, pause momentarily, then walk out the door. Everyone froze for a moment. Rafael was about to follow him when he saw Jeremiah slowly return with his hands behind his back.

He smiled and spoke in a raspy voice, with a touch of nasal sound, "General Sullivan, I apologize for my rudeness." Carissa stood up along with Cindy and Leona and excused themselves, leaving the room to give the men some privacy. Jeremiah's eyes were red, tears just barely held back. At that moment, it seemed best that the women leave the room. An hour later, Rafael emerged.

Carissa saw him pass through the side hall and stepped out to ask, "Why aren't you with them?"

Rafael's brow furrowed slightly, his eyes shadowed with a weight. "They were talking about the past. I didn't have much to add, so I decided to step out and have someone bring them some snacks." "Then, why do you look upset?" Carissa questioned, noticing his mood had darkened.

"It's not that I'm upset," Rafael said softly, shaking his head. "It's just... It's hard to hear them talk about old times. After all these years, whether it's Mr. Young or Mr. Murray, their lives have been fulfilling in their own way, despite having regrets. Only Grandfather sees nothing but a road paved with coffins when he looks back..."

His voice trailed off, heavy with the weight of unspoken grief.

As a fellow warrior, he understood the difficulty all too well. Whether it was the Sullivan family, the Sinclair family, or any other military family, they carried glory, but also countless wounds that would never fully heal.

"I shouldn't have said all that," Rafael added, realizing his mistake as he saw his wife's face. "I didn't mean to make you feel upset."

Carissa leaned against Rafael, lost in

thought. She recalled the fierce determination she had felt on the battlefield. Her only goal had been to protect the land beneath her feet and the people of the kingdom. Anything else had simply faded away.

"Everyone dies eventually. I think they had no regrets," she said.

Rafael fell silent for a moment, then looked up, his gaze steady. "You're right. Once you step onto the battlefield, you've already made a choice about your life. They had no regrets, and neither do we."

The couple's hands clasped tightly as they looked at each other, their eyes filled with resolve. No matter how difficult the road ahead was, facing it together made them fearless.

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Trevor and Jeremiah stayed at Hell Monarch Estate for dinner. The spread was lavish, with fine wine served alongside it.

Dominic was in high spirits and was drinking freely. The three of them chatted and laughed throughout the meal, mostly reminiscing about old times. They spoke of those who had already passed, even mentioning Matthias Warren.

Jeremiah sighed deeply. "Back then, I used my connections to arrange a marriage between Barrett and Viola, all out of respect for Matthias. I wanted to make sure their family didn't fall into decline. Who would've thought those two would end up as a mismatched pair? As a matchmaker, I've truly failed. I regret it."

"Everyone has their own fate," Trevor remarked. He then turned to Dominic, adding, "At our age, we can't be too concerned with the affairs of the younger generation. Let's focus on taking care of ourselves and enjoying a few more years surrounded by our grandchildren. Trevor's words carried deeper meaning. With Salvador still young and finding his footing, it was only natural for him to strategize and shift loyalties-elevating new ministers while quietly sidelining the old. After all, each king needed to build his own court. Now that Dominic was no longer in command of Victory Pass, living out his days as a retired official didn't seem so bad.

Dominic smiled. "You're right, Trevor. It should be as you say."

It was the only choice, after all. And, frankly, he was getting old. He could no longer support Victory Pass the way he once did. Fortunately, Wyatt was now in charge. For the time being, the chance of a change in leadership was slim. The Sullivan family's army would still protect Victory Pass for now.

They drank, laughed, and enjoyed themselves. When night fell and they were about to leave, Jeremiah pulled Dominic aside with a heavy sigh.

"This might be our last parting, old friend. Take care of yourself," he said.

"Take care of yourself too," Dominic replied with a respectful nod. Though he had drunk a fair amount, he was not too intoxicated and stood firm like a mountain.

Rafael accompanied Dominic to see the guests off, thanking them as they left. When he turned back, he saw Cindy holding Leona's hand, reluctant to let go. Leona also bid farewell to her grandfather and aunt before leaving with Alana.

After a few more drinks, Cindy was overcome with emotion. A wave of sorrow and longing washed over her, making it hard to bear. Carissa gently linked her arm with her aunt's and helped her back to the courtyard.

"I know you haven't looked at the

gifts yet, Car. If you don't want to, you don't have to. Just leave them aside. When you feel like looking at them, you can. It doesn't matter. The most important thing is your happiness."

"I understand," Carissa replied, her voice thick with sorrow.

The lantern light in the corridor illuminated the white strands of hair at Cindy's temple. In the blink of an eye, the once lively, resolute woman had grown old.

The next morning, Rafael and Carissa saw them off at the city gates.

When Cindy arrived, she had brought several cartloads of gifts. Now, as she left, it was still the same-cart after cart of gifts, all carefully prepared by Carissa in advance.

Carissa held back her tears as they

parted, maintaining a smile the whole time. When they began to disappear from sight, she rushed to the city tower. When the convoy came into view, she finally let out a breath of relief. But soon, even that faded from view, and the dust rising from the road quickly dissipated.

Hot tears streamed down her face.

Rafael gently wiped them away, speaking softly, "Don't be sad. We can take Ryan to visit them."

Carissa knew that with both of them now in official positions, it wouldn't be easy to take time off and visit. Still, she nodded slightly, finding some comfort in his words.

"Let's head back," Rafael said,

stretching his arms and looking

toward the rising sun. Its rays were already bright and harsh. "By the way, Skye Embroidery has opened, so the women's academy should be put on the agenda."

Carissa took a deep breath, the weariness in her eyes fading as determination took its place. "Yes, you're right."

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Skye Embroidery had been fully completed and was ready to take in women at any time.

Davis' wife, Hannah, had even hosted a garden party to spread the word, and soon, the local people were buzzing with conversation about it. Yet, despite all the chatter, no woman who had been cast out of her home dared to step into the workshop.

Violet was puzzled. According to her investigation with Claire, many of the women who had been cast out lived in poor, secluded nunneries, doing the hardest, dirtiest work. Sometimes, they even

went without food for days. For those fortunate enough to return to their family's home, they still endured harsh treatment from their brothers and sisters-in-law, and their lives were unbearable.

On the 10th of March, the body of a woman was discovered in a river. After the Royal Citadel investigated, they confirmed she had worked as an embroiderer after being cast out for not being able to bear a child.

When Violet learned of the incident, she could no longer stay still. She immediately rushed to the Capital Guard headquarters to find Carissa.

Seeing the anxious look on her friend's face, Carissa tried to comfort her, saying, "This matter was always going to be difficult. Our workshop hasn't taken in anyone yet, and no one wants to be the first. Because once they step inside, it's like telling the whole world that they've been abandoned. They just can't get past that mental block."

Violet's heart ached. "But just because they don't go to the workshop doesn't mean people won't know they were abandoned."

She was deeply frustrated. She had put so much effort into Skye Embroidery, hoping to give these women a chance, a place where they could rebuild their lives. Yet, to her surprise, they would rather die than step into the workshop.

"Patience, Vivi," Carissa replied. "We knew from the start that this wouldn't be easy. It's just the beginning. The woman who jumped into the river was likely heartbroken. She must have been desperate, which is why she took her own life."

"But living is what matters most!" Violet said, feeling disheartened. "Why are they so foolish?"

Carissa rubbed her back and continued to soothe her, explaining, "We can't judge their choices as foolish or as an escape unless we've walked in their shoes. We know that living is the most important thing, but their experiences and perspectives are different from ours. We can be disappointed or regretful, but we must not lose hope. The workshop needs to continue, no matter how hard it gets."

"Our path is the path to survival," Violet commented, her tone softening. She had always listened to Carissa.

"But why should they believe us? We're strangers to them," Carissa said.

Violet sighed. "I know you're right. It's just that it's such a shame. She was an embroiderer by trade. If she had just stepped into the workshop, it would have been the best thing for her. Once that first step is taken, others will follow."

Carissa thought for a moment, then spoke, "Here's an idea. There has to be a first step. Have Claire keep an eye out. If she hears about any women who've been cast out, have her let us know. We'll go talk to them and try to guide them."

"Good plan." Violet nodded eagerly. "Once the first one steps in, it'll be easier."

"There's one more thing," Carissa said, her expression turning serious. "It's something we've overlooked. The emotional wounds of these women, they're not easy to heal. Even if they're willing to enter the workshop, they'll likely go through a period of sadness and despair. They'll need someone to comfort and guide them. Only once their hearts are healed can they truly begin to live again."

"I'm not good at comforting people, but Mrs. Lloyd should be able to," Violet said.

"Zoey seems to care quite a bit about the workshop, right?" Carissa asked. "Yeah, she even came by during the repairs to check on things," Violet confirmed.

Carissa nodded thoughtfully. She felt that while Zoey and Luna seemed to have different personalities, they would be perfect for the task. One was strong-willed and good at guiding others, while the other was gentle and adept at soothing. If they were willing to help, they could do a lot of good.

It seemed like she would need to visit them personally.

Violet sighed again. "Cari, there's a huge stigma surrounding women who've been cast out. People refuse to associate with them, as if even speaking to them would taint their own reputation. I have another worry—once the workshop takes in these women, who's going to buy the embroidery they make?"

"It's not like I haven't thought about that too, but we're not there yet. So, let's not worry about it for now. If things don't work out, we can always sell the embroidery in other regions. It's not a huge problem. The real issue is that we haven't even taken the first step yet," said

Carissa.

"True. I didn't expect it to be this difficult. Do you think the women's academy will be just as hard?" Violet asked.

"No, the demand for spots at the women's academy will exceed the supply," Carissa replied.

Violet rested her chin in her hand. "Well, alright then. I'm in a bad mood now, so tonight, I'll have my four apprentices train harder."

Carissa laughed. "Sage Violet, go ahead and send out the notice. Your apprentices are all eager to learn martial arts."

Violet chuckled. "Kevin's the most diligent. That kid is relentless and his progress is fast. He's a great candidate for martial arts. If he had a mentor when he was younger, his skills would be impressive by now. As it is, he's a bit behind. But still, he's making progress." Later that evening, Carissa visited Silverstone Estate while Violet, with a small whip in hand, had her four apprentices train even harder.

After hearing Carissa's request, Zoey agreed to help and was happy to do so.

Carissa sighed in relief, her face lighting up with a smile. "With your help, I can finally rest easy."

"Life is hard for women. If we can help, we should. It's a way of doing good deeds," Zoey replied.

There was a deep sadness in her eyes, one that Carissa hadn't seen before. When they had last met, Zoey had been helping with an investigation at Valor Estate, and her expression had been far less troubled.

Carissa couldn't help but ask, "Madam Zoey, has something happened? If you're comfortable sharing, perhaps I can help."



She genuinely wanted to return the favor and repay Zoey for all her previous help.

Zoey smiled bitterly and shook her head. "It's just a couple of minor things, nothing that needs your help, Your Grace."

Seeing that Zoey didn't want to discuss it further, Carissa didn't press the matter. She stood to take her leave but was interrupted when a servant rushed in, announcing that Viola had caused Evelyn to faint in anger. Zoey gritted her teeth, her face flushed with anger, but she still forced a smile. "Please don't mind it, Your Grace."

Carissa wasn't keen to get involved with matters concerning Viola, so she decided it was best to take her leave.

As she made her way to the door, Zoey suddenly spoke again, "Your Grace, may I ask you something?"

Carissa stopped and turned. "Of course, Madam Zoey. What is it?"

Obviously feeling uncomfortable, she hesitated for a while before finally asking, "Do you know why the Ministry of Justice is holding Barrett?"

Carissa was confused. "He's being held? That's impossible. He should have been released a while ago."

The case had already been concluded. Aurora had been taken away, and Barrett wasn't significantly implicated-just demoted with a salary reduction. By all accounts, he should have already left the Ministry of Justice long ago.

Zoey smiled wryly. "He's still there."

We sent someone to ask and they said he was refusing to leave. But something feels off about it. Who would willingly stay locked up? There must be something more to it, which is why I'm asking you, Your Grace."

Carissa honestly hadn't known about this. After thinking it over for a moment, she shared what she knew, saying, "His Majesty showed mercy, only demoting him and docking his salary. He's still the deputy commander of the Nightsteel Guard." Zoey's face darkened at this. She was relieved she hadn't yet used her connections and spent money trying to get him out, or it would've been an embarrassing mistake.

Zoey seemed a bit embarrassed as she explained, "Viola has been pushing my mother-in-law to find someone to get him released. I'm afraid she's so upset right now that she's fainted."

"I see," Carissa said with a nod. "Then, I'll take my leave. You should go check on your mother-in-law."

Carissa didn't want to press further, nor did she want to take up more of Zoey's time, so she turned and left.

Back at Hell Monarch Estate, Rafael had just returned. The backlog of cases at the Supreme Court had been growing due to the ongoing negotiations, with many cases waiting for approval.

Carissa stayed with him for a

late-night snack, then casually

asked, "Is Barrett still being held by

the Ministry of Justice, or is there t

another reason? I went to

Silverstone Estate today and heard he hasn't been released. Could His Majesty be planning something else for him?"

Since Barrett was now essentially in the same boat as her third uncle, his punishment could affect Victory Pass as well, so Carissa felt she had to ask.

"It's because he doesn't want to

leave. The Ministry of Justice can't do much. After all, they haven't removed him from his post, so they can't forcibly kick him out. He's just staying there, and I expect Mr Lloyd will report to the king tomorrow," Rafael answered with mild indifference.

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So, Barrett really was sticking around the Ministry of Justice of his own volition? That was a rare thing indeed. Who would receive mercy and not leave immediately? Most people would want to get away from there and avoid any bad luck, yet he was still hanging on to the

place.

What was going on?

"Why's he still there?" Carissa asked, genuinely curious now.

"I don't know. Mr. Lloyd brought the case files today and mentioned that Barrett hasn't said a word since he's been in the confinement room. He only eats one meal a day and just stays there. He originally said he'd only stay for one day, but now... he doesn't want to leave at all," Rafael replied.

"That's strange. Does he not care about his official position anymore?" Carissa mused, but when she heard it wasn't Salvador's decision, she shifted the topic, asking, "What about what happened during the negotiations? After you reported to His Majesty, didn't he investigate?"

Icarus' assassination attempt might have been swept under the rug, but the poisonous worm that Penny used on Lisandra was the same as the one in the Brightmoor District case. The king was sure to make the connection.

"He'll definitely investigate. I'm sure he's assigned Mr. Walker to handle it," Rafael said.

While the Supreme Court was tasked with investigating the treason case, Salvador wouldn't want them to handle the more covert matters.

When Lulu entered the room with the servants to clear away the leftovers, Sydney spoke up, "Your Highness, Your Grace, it's time to prepare for your bath. It's best to get settled in early."

The past days had been filled with the stress of the negotiations, and Rafael had been running around nonstop. He had lost weight from all the exhaustion. Sydney could see it, and now that the negotiations were over, it was time for him to properly rest and recover. Rafael blinked and placed his large hand over Carissa's, his pinky gently tracing her wrist.

"Yes, it's definitely time to prepare," he said, his voice laden with meaning.

That gesture...

Carissa's face flushed crimson, with even her ears turning bright red. She quickly pulled her hand away. How could he act so casually when Sydney and Lulu were both here?

Sydney noticed everything and secretly smiled before turning to leave the room. On the other hand, Lulu blinked, not quite understanding why Carissa had suddenly blushed so deeply.

She glanced at Sydney's retreating back. "Why was Sydney laughing?"

Carissa quickly got to her feet. "It's nothing. I'm going to bathe."

"Oh, then let me fetch your bathrobe, Your Grace."

Carissa had been married twice, and Lulu had accompanied her both times.

Her first marriage had never been consummated.

In her second marriage, Rafael wasn't fond of anyone waiting outside to serve them after their private moments, nor did he like having anyone keep watch at night. Because of that, Lulu was a little slow to catch on in this regard.

While Rafael was working away in bed, Carissa's mind wandered.

Lulu wasn't getting any younger-maybe it was time to talk to her about finding a match.

Seeing that Carissa was lost in thought, Rafael playfully bit her shoulder.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked, his voice low and hoarse, his breathing slightly ragged.

Carissa's pale arms slid up to his neck, lifting her head to give him a quick kiss on the lips. Her eyes sparkled with mischief. In the next moment, she flipped him over, switching their positions. Rafael's eyes widened in surprise, but he put on an act as if he were frightened. "Commander Sinclair, what are you doing?"

As the old saying went, when a couple was deeply in love, there was no shortage of playful moments.

After an evening of tangled sheets and shared passion, both of them left the bed with dark circles under their eyes.

At the Capital Guard headquarters,

Carissa summoned Michael and the

others to report the latest

happenings, including the new

roster Once the reports were

finished, Carissa kept Max behind to

discuss the situation with the

Garrison Unit.

The Garrison Unit was a collection of spoiled, entitled young men who lived off royal stipends. They used their family backgrounds to command the real guards, taking credit for victories and pushing the dirty work onto others. The Garrison Unit's reputation was already in tatters, and if major reforms weren't made soon, the corruption would spread until it consumed the entire unit.

Looking guilty Max explained,

"Commander Sinclair, it's not that I don't want to clean house, but many of these men were placed here when His Majesty ascended the throne. If we remove them, it might not sit well with the king and we could make enemies."

Carissa understood the situation well. When Salvador first took the throne, he had to win over the powerful families by offering positions to their idle, unworthy sons. Many of them had ended up in the Garrison Unit. "It's a different time now," Carissa said. "His Majesty doesn't have to tolerate them anymore. Give me a list of the troublemakers, we'll deal with them first. You don't need to worry about the rest. Just hand me the list." Max took a moment to consider her words and finally understood the deeper meaning.

Indeed, it was a different time. When Salvador first ascended, he needed the support of those influential families. Now that his power was solidified, it was only a matter of time before the Garrison Unit was reformed.

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Max's thoughts were somewhat misguided by Carissa. In truth, Salvador wasn't interested in cleaning up the Garrison Unit just yet.

As long as things didn't get out of hand, Salvador was content to leave these small matters be. Balance was key, especially now, when the treason case investigation was ongoing. Though Yuvan and Harvey had both come into his line of sight, the evidence against them wasn't solid yet. If these men were purged too early, it could push Yuvan into taking matters into his own hands.

It wasn't uncommon for one person's betrayal to drag down an entire family.

Besides, Salvador had deeper ambitions. If he couldn't control the Mystic Army, he would let it rot from the inside. That way, it would be logical for the Nightsteel Guard to take its place, something that would naturally occur once the Mystic Army fell apart. Carissa wouldn't stand by and let these useless men cause chaos in the Garrison Unit. People who held even a modicum of power often abused it, trampling over the common folk.

Either the Garrison Unit needed to be disbanded completely, or it had to be thoroughly reformed. If not, the Garrison Unit would remain a group of thugs living off the court's salary.

Salvador didn't want to intervene because the problems had been kept under wraps, never making it to his doorstep. However, digging too deep could expose everything. Once those things were unearthed, they would be sent straight to the Oversight Department and brought up in the next court meeting. At that point, Salvador wouldn't be able to ignore it, no matter how much he tried.

Carissa didn't want to oppose the king, but as the commander of the Mystic Army, she couldn't let her subordinates exploit the people. If the reputation of the Mystic Army was tarnished, it would no longer be seen as a protector of the people, but as a gang of thugs preying on them.

Max quickly handed over the list, and Carissa went over it. That evening, she gathered Violet and Claire.

"Look into these people."

When Winona left, she left behind a few people and even opened a branch of Skywing Spire in the capital, located in Glimmering Tower.

With no other duties to attend to, Violet had taken charge of the Skywing Spire branch. Now, the people there all followed her lead.

Two days later, Barrett was thrown out of the Ministry of Justice. To be more precise, he wasn't just escorted out—he was practically tossed out.

Michael happened to witness the scene and was left dumbfounded.

Ultimately, Michael had once been Barrett's superior. Though Michael had little respect for the man, seeing him now, disheveled and covered in filth, looking nothing like the dignified official he used to be, Michael couldn't just leave him there in disgrace. With a reluctant sigh, he stepped forward to help Barrett up.

The smell hit him immediately, sharp and unpleasant. Michael recoiled, lifting his sleeve to cover his nose.

"How did you end up like this?" he asked, his voice strained.

Barrett seemed dazed, barely registering Michael's presence. When he finally did, he gave a weak, rueful smile. "I must be a joke to you, Deputy Commander Brown."

"I'm not laughing," Michael replied, shaking his head. "What are you still doing here at the Ministry of Justice? I thought you would've left by now."

Michael had heard the rumors that

Barrett was staying on at the Ministry of Justice, though he had no idea why. He figured it was just temporary, maybe a few days at most, but he never expected that Barrett would be physically thrown out only now.

Barrett's gaze was empty, as if he didn't quite understand what had happened either. "They said His Majesty gave an order... that I'm not allowed to stay at the Ministry of Justice anymore."

"Then, you should go home. Why are you still here?" Michael asked, already turning to leave.

Barrett suddenly grabbed his sleeve. "Deputy Commander Brown... Would it be possible for me to stay at your house for a few days?"

Michael stopped short, stunned. "Stay at my house? Are you out of your mind? Don't you have a place of your own?"

"I don't want to go back..." Barrett's voice was barely a whisper, the desperation in his eyes plain to see. "Please, Deputy Commander Brown."

Michael jerked his sleeve out of Barrett's grasp and stepped back. "What's the matter with you? You have a home, yet you want to stay with me? What kind of sense does that make?"

Barrett let his hands fall to his sides, and Michael couldn't help but notice the childlike sadness in his posture, like someone who had been beaten down by life. Michael's brow furrowed. How could the king still want this man in his service?

Barrett lifted his head again. "Deputy Commander Brown, would you mind having a drink with me?"



Michael's gaze swept over Barrett. His clothes were wrinkled and unkempt, his hair a mess. His face was gaunt, and his eyes were lifeless and full of sorrow. For a moment, Michael was overcome with frustration and the urge to kick Barrett out, but then something else stopped him—a flicker of sympathy.

Michael knew he shouldn't feel sorry for him, but in that moment, he did. With a heavy sigh, he gave in.

"You look like you'd be thrown out of a tavern the moment you stepped inside. Fine, let's go to my house."

Michael was honestly

curious—Barrett had always been the ambitious type, so why had he defied orders and stayed in the Ministry of Justice? Had he given up on his future completely?

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Michael's wife, Lucille, had no love for Barrett at all. She had someone bring out just a couple of snacks to go with the drinks before quickly retreating, taking the servants with her. The room still reeked, and she wasn't about to stay and serve him. Barrett drank in silence, barely touching the food. He could see the contempt Lucille had for him, and it only soured his mood. The more he thought about it, the worse he felt.

"You should eat something," Michael said, breaking the silence. "Stop just drinking. What's going on with you?"

Barrett drained his glass in one go, then suddenly collapsed onto the table, his body shaking with quiet sobs. The sound was muffled, like someone pressing a pillow over his face. The sobs were low and strained, barely escaping his chest. Michael fell silent, focusing on his drink and food. Maybe Barrett just needed a place to let it out, though Michael couldn't tell what exactly he was crying about.

After a long while, when it seemed no one would offer any comfort, Barrett wiped his tears and looked up. His eyes, red and raw from the tears, were now streaked clean, revealing their dark depths beneath, giving him a strangely comical appearance. The sight made Michael laugh quietly without meaning to.

"You think I'm a joke, don't you, Deputy Commander Brown?" Barrett's smile was hollow, sad. "I'm nothing but a joke. A complete and utter joke." Michael nodded, acknowledging the truth of it, but then shook his head. He couldn't allow himself to lose all empathy. "Why won't you go home?"

Barrett drained two more glasses. "Go home? Why would I? All I'd get is more scolding, more mockery."

Michael pursed his lips. "Are you really giving up on even your official position? If you anger His Majesty, you'll have no future left."

"Does it matter?" Barrett's voice was flat, defeated. "It was always going to end like this. I never had a future to begin with. Demoted, salary docked for three years... Why go back and waste my time? I'd rather be out here, out of the king's sight." Michael frowned deeply. "You don't have to waste your time. You could still do your job-do it well, show His Majesty what you're capable of."

"What can I do? What am I good for?" Barrett laughed bitterly, his voice cracking. "My only talent is disappointing one woman after another. I even gave up my military merits, thinking Aurora and I had something real. In the end, it was all a joke. I even betrayed her."

"I can't even sleep at the Ministry of Justice," Barrett murmured, his voice thick with despair. "Every time I close my eyes, I have nightmares. dream about her being torn apart by the Westhaven people, her bone's shattered, covered in blood, begging me to save her. Sometimes, I dream she's shouting at me, cursing me, asking why I betrayed her."

He paused, then continued, "I used to have hope for the future. Back then, I thought I was favored by fate. So many noble families in the capital came to Northwatch Estate to ask for her hand in marriage. Yet, it was me whom Madam Sinclair chose..." "Stop. Enough," Michael interjected sharply, quickly cutting Barrett off when he started talking about Carissa. "Talk about Aurora instead. She's the love of your life. The reason you're so lost right now is because of her."

"Love?" Barrett chuckled bitterly, emptying his glass. The alcohol only deepened the sorrow in his chest. "What do I know about love? Back then, I just thought she was different. Different from all the other women I'd known. When she spoke, her eyes would light up. They'd shine."

Michael scoffed, his tone dripping with disdain. "Oh, do you want to see my eyes? My eyes glow even when I'm silent. If they don't, then maybe I'm dead."

Barrett fell silent immediately.

Michael felt no patience for this pity party. The truth was, Barrett couldn't face reality and couldn't bear to admit his weaknesses.

"Stop whining about nothing. Don't

you have a wife? Aurora was just a concubine, even though you called her a rightful wife. Men shouldn't even have one of those. Now that she's gone, you're talking about betrayal and selling her out? What's the matter? Are you still protecting her?

"You've got enough to answer for already. Also, how do you know who she was working with? If it was a traitor, that's a crime that wipes out entire families. Stop making excuses. Go back, clean yourself up, and go to the palace to beg forgiveness from His Majesty. Since you're a man, you should act like one."

After saying that, Michael ordered Barrett to leave and reached out to take away the leftover wine. But before he could, Barrett grabbed the bottle out of his hand and started drinking it down loudly.

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By the time Michael realized what had happened and tried to take the wine bottle back from Barrett, most of the contents were already gone. Barrett ended up so drunk that he collapsed, unconscious. Michael couldn't get rid of him-not at all.

He cursed himself. What had possessed him to drag such a good-for-nothing back? Drinking this much-Barrett couldn't have drunk himself to death, could he?

Frustrated, Michael stormed out and brought in a bucket of cold water, ready to douse him. But when he looked at Barrett-lying there as still as a corpse, his face pale and green-he couldn't bring himself to do it.

He shook his head, calling for his servants to prepare a carriage. He would personally take Barrett back to Valor Estate.

The ride was rough. Inside the carriage, Barrett vomited wildly. Michael could smell the stench of it from outside as he drove the horses. It was like the foul water of a ditch that hadn't been cleaned in years, mixed with the scent of decay. Fuming, Michael shouted into the carriage, "Barrett, you'll pay for this damn carriage!"

It was the only carriage he had the one his wife used when she went out. He never needed it himself, and now this mess was going to get him into so much trouble with her. He cursed under his breath.

One should really avoid being too nice, and never be too curious.

When the carriage finally arrived at Valor Estate, Michael jumped out, red-faced and fuming. He called for the Warren family servants.

"Get your precious master inside. I can't deal with him."

Benjamin rushed out with several servants. As soon as the carriage door was opened, the stench hit him like a brick. It was so overwhelming that he almost gagged.

He forced himself to breathe through his mouth and glanced inside. His younger brother was curled up in the carriage, lying in a mess of vomit and spilled wine. The stench was unbearable, the mixture of smells almost making his eyes sting with pain. Benjamin was furious. He quickly ordered the servants to carry Barrett inside and back to his room. After that, he turned to Michael, thanked him, and then asked, "Mr. Brown, what on earth happened to make him drink like this?"

"I don't know. You can ask him yourself. I'm going back to clean the damn carriage," Michael replied impatiently.

Benjamin nodded awkwardly. "Take care, Mr. Brown. I'm sorry about all this."

When Michael returned home, he couldn't avoid the long lecture from his wife.

"It's not that I mind you bringing someone over for a drink, but look at the kind of person you brought home. When you see someone like him, you should just stay away! How could you let him come here?

"And look at how filthy the carriage

is! You've ruined it! How am I supposed to go visit Sage Violet tomorrow with the carriage in this state? Why did you have to get involved with someone like him? Of all the people, you had to choose that heartless man, someone who forgets favors and repays kindness with hatred! Ptooeey!"

Lucille wasn't normally a harsh person, but when it came to Barrett, she spared no criticism. The truth was, some people just deserved it.

Michael didn't say a word the entire

time. He just worked with the

servant to clean the carriage, hauling bucket after bucket of water. The spring air was already damp and the sun barely shone, making it impossible to know when the

carriage would dry. Even when it did,

the smell would linger.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere was no better at Valor Estate.

When Barrett woke up, Viola screamed in frustration, "I thought you were locked up in the Ministry of Justice and was trying to pull strings to get you out. But no! I found out you chose to stay there. If you don't want to come back and see me, just give me a divorce letter and I'll leave!

"Now look at you. The king issued an

order to throw you out. You've

angered him, and now you think you still have a future? You've been

demoted and your salary has been docked for three years. How are we going to survive that? I was blind to marry you. I'm warning you don't even think about touching my dowry!"

After dropping him off in his room, Benjamin had already left by the time Barrett regained full awareness. After Amelia's death, Benjamin stopped caring about things at home. Without a job, he relied entirely on the family for food and expenses. Barrett sat there with a blank stare, letting Viola yell and scold him without saying a word in response.

It wasn't until she finally sat down angrily, out of breath, that he slowly lifted his head and said calmly, "Tomorrow, I'll go to the palace to confess my mistakes and resign."

Viola shot to her feet, her voice shrill with disbelief. "What did you say? Resign? Are you insane?"

Chapter 999

In the royal study, Salvador's brows twitched with barely contained fury as he glared at Barrett, who was kneeling before him. His voice was icily cold. "Resign? Have you really thought this through?"

Barrett lowered his head, his voice trembling. "Your Majesty, I am guilty. I have failed your expectations and the Sullivan family's. I am ashamed before both."

Salvador's anger flared, a headache pounding behind his eyes. "If you know how much I've placed my hopes in you, then you should focus on doing your job well, not throwing a tantrum and resigning!"

Barrett bowed his head lower. "Your Majesty, I am not throwing a tantrum. I have come to realize my incompetence and inability to live up to the role of deputy commander of the Nightsteel Guard. I ask for your mercy and understanding." Even Derek couldn't watch any longer.

To speak so much about guilt was to question the king's judgment. Was that what Barrett was implying?

Salvador's voice grew even colder, "Go reflect on your actions. Come back after a few days. Leave now."

Left with no choice, Barrett stood and replied, "Yes, Your Majesty."

As Barrett exited, Salvador's face darkened, his expression like storm clouds. "Derek, go speak to him. If he feels guilty toward General Sullivan, he should not be resigning at this critical moment."

Derek had wanted to speak up long before but had held back, knowing it wasn't his place unless the king said something. Now that Salvador had spoken, Derek could no longer stay silent. He quickly followed Barrett out of the study, catching up to him. "Deputy Commander Warren, wait!"

Barrett's shoulders were hunched in exhaustion. He paused and turned to face Derek. "What is it, Mr. Walker?"

Seeing the vacant expression on his face, Derek straightened his back and said firmly, "Deputy Commander Warren, have you lost your mind? If you resign now, how does that reflect on the Sullivan family and the other officers? You're a court official-if word gets out, people will think you were dismissed in disgrace. If you must resign, at least wait until this storm blows over. Otherwise, you'll only bring more shame upon the Sullivan family."

Barrett froze. "My resignation has nothing to do with the Sullivan family."

Derek's eyes narrowed, his words sharp. "Think about it. If you resign in shame, what are the Sullivan family's generals supposed to do? Should they also submit letters of apology and resign? Whose command were you following when you went to Fawnrun City?" Barrett's eyelids fluttered, a deep pang of realization hitting him. "I... I hadn't thought of that."

"Then, start thinking," Derek snapped. "If not for yourself, then for others. Stop living like a burden and dragging everyone else down with you."

Derek rarely spoke so harshly, but dealing with someone so frustrating had pushed him to his limit. Some people weren't evil, but their constant weakness and indecision made them unbearable.

Barrett stared blankly at Derek for a long moment before finally saying, "Thank you for your advice, Mr. Walker."

Derek studied his expression, unsure if his words had sunk in. "His Majesty told you to reflect, so go home and do just that. Return in a few days and resume your duties."

Barrett nodded and turned to leave,

his steps slow and heavy. The March sunlight bathed his pale, haggard face, and his hand clenched around an Eternal Knot. The pain in his chest tightened as he thought back to the day he had left for Victory Pass just after marrying Carissa.

The knot had been with him for years-since the night he married Carissa. He had been ordered to the front lines at Victory Pass immediately after the ceremony. Before leaving, he had untied one of the Eternal Knots and carried it with him.

Back then, the knot in his hand felt warm, almost burning. Her heartfelt gaze as she bid him farewell was like a guiding light, warming his heart and waiting for his safe return. If only he could go back to that moment.

"I truly regret it."

Barrett's steps were slow and heavy, as if he had a huge weight on his feet, and tears rolled down his face.

"I really do. If I had another chance, I would cherish you. I would keep my promises, and I would never take another woman."

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Meanwhile, Michael accompanied Lucille to deliver some honey cakes to Violet. He had also brought a portion for Rafael and Carissa.

Lucille was skilled in the kitchen, and her delicately crafted pastries were truly impressive. Although Violet typically avoided overly sweet treats, she found herself enjoying them.

In public and private, Violet often

praised Lucille for her

thoughtfulness. But tonight, noticing her frosty demeanor and the way she kept giving Michael the cold shoulder, Violet couldn't help but ask "Michael, did you do something to upset your wife?"

Michael quickly shook his head. "I wouldn't dare, Sage Violet! It's just that I foolishly invited Deputy Commander Warren back to my house for drinks, and Lucille wasn't happy about it." "You had drinks with Barrett?" Violet raised her eyebrow. "I didn't know you two were such close friends."



Michael, knowing Violet disliked Barrett, hastily added, "I heard from the men at the palace today. Deputy Commander Warren went to the king to resign, and was scolded by His Majesty." Carissa froze, a flash of anger crossing her face. "He resigned? At a time like this?"

"Don't worry, Commander Sinclair. His Majesty didn't approve," Michael quickly assured her.

Carissa clenched her fists, frustration brimming in her tone. "What is wrong with his brain? Has it been chewed up by a dog or something?"

Chapter 1000

Violet had a way of thinking that was a little different from most people. After a moment of silence, she turned to Carissa and asked, "Is it because he's upset the king demoted him and cut his salary? Is that why he's throwing a tantrum and resigning?"

She wasn't sure if Barrett was really like that, but she knew she was.

Whenever her family or her mentor offered her less than expected, she would dig in her heels and quit, using retreat as a strategy to gain leverage.

Seeing the displeasure on Carissa's face, she quickly added, "Let's not talk about him anymore. He's a nuisance. Since the king won't let him resign, there's nothing more to be done. He can't make a fuss."

The others nodded in agreement, shifting the conversation to lighter topics. They ate their honey cakes, and when Rafael didn't return, Lulu suggested saving some for him.

After everyone left, Violet turned to Carissa and said, "Actually, it might be a good thing if he resigns. A man like him doesn't deserve to be the deputy commander of the Nightsteel Guard."

Carissa sighed. "At this time, anyone even remotely connected to Victory Pass should keep their heads down. We don't need any more gossip or attention. Whether he resigns on his own or the king dismisses him, it'll draw people's eyes to my grandpa and uncle. It's the perfect opportunity for someone with ulterior motives to twist the narrative and stir up trouble."

Violet nodded. "Right, but what kind of trouble could it cause?"

Carissa calmed down after her anger subsided and explained, "Yuvan has been trying to get the Sullivan family to withdraw from Victory Pass. The situation in Fawnrune City has caused a huge stir in both Westhaven and Victory Pass.

"It's clear that Yuvan and Westhaven are working together behind this. Now, Aurora has been sent to Westhaven for her crimes. My grandpa, as the commander in charge of Victory Pass, will be blamed for not supervising the troops properly.

"Barrett is partially responsible for leading his men to Fawnrune City. This whole affair doesn't implicate my uncles, so on the surface, it seems fair enough. But if Barrett resigns in shame, Yuvan could use that to spread rumors, claiming that the Sullivan family was aware of the guilt but clung to their military power. That would tarnish the Sullivan family's reputation among the people."

Violet stared at Carissa for a long time, her thoughts swirling. She couldn't quite explain why, but there was a complicated feeling inside her, mixed with a subtle ache.

This feeling had been with her ever since she first met Carissa on the battlefield.

Back at Meadow Ridge, Violet had thought of Carissa as just a bit more skilled in martial arts than she was. But when it came to experience, knowledge, and understanding of the world, Violet had always believed

she was the wiser one.

People and relationships were something she knew how to navigate, while Carissa seemed naive and just lacking in those areas.

At least, that was how Violet had seen it before.

But now, Carissa had learned

everything. From even the smallest details, she could see the bigger picture. She calculated every move so precisely that no small change or shift could escape her analysis. And her emotions were completely stable-everything was always approached with calm, rational thought.

How much would someone have to endure for their personality to change so drastically?

At that thought, Violet almost couldn't hold back the tears.

Carissa noticed Violet's sudden, teary expression and quickly asked, "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Violet replied, always keeping her emotions close to her chest. "I just find Barrett so infuriating."

Carissa smiled gently. "It's alright, I'm not upset anymore. I know what kind of person he is, so it's no surprise that he would act like this. The feeling will pass."

"Yeah!" Violet hugged her, sniffing. "No matter what happens from now on, we'll always be together."

"Of course." Carissa patted her back, smiling once more. She was surprised by Violet's sudden wave of sentimentality. Why was Violet feeling so emotional all of a sudden?

Lulu poked her head in and saw the two of them hugging, but she wasn't shocked. Back in Meadow Ridge, they had always been inseparable. Their heads were always together, and they were affectionately close.

"Prince Rafael should be back soon," Lulu said. "Also, Lady Helen wants you to join her for dinner."

Carissa nodded. "Alright, we'll head over soon. Oh, and make sure to send some of the honey cakes that Mrs. Brown brought over to Mother."