

# The Heiress' Return: Six Brothers at Her Beck and Call

## Chapter 1701 The Mystery of the Farmers' Market

Wynter slipped her phone back into her pocket, her gaze shifting to Dalton. "I'm his savior. Back when he was abroad, I saved him when he nearly lost his life. Besides, he's highly capable and is the best choice for investigating this matter."

Dalton nodded thoughtfully. "His savior, huh? Mrs. Yarwood really does cover all bases. Looks like I'd better follow Grandpa's advice and marry you soon-maybe even move into your place. Otherwise, who knows how many more 'my lovely Ms. Quinnell's' will pop up in the future?"

Wynter shot him a glare but suddenly remembered something.

She immediately instructed her team pull surveillance footage from the farmers' market and look for anyone who had been visiting regularly to buy large quantities of groceries.

These tasks were originally meant for Wolf to handle. However, to expedite the search for anyone connected to the Winston family, Wynter decided to have him stick close to Logan instead. She had a lingering sense of unease that his troubles weren't over yet.

As for the farmers' market, it needed a thorough investigation. Wynter didn't believe a foreigner would casually spend their time wandering there. There had to be a reason.

She quickly issued another order. "Monitor the farmers' market closely. Report anything suspicious immediately." After giving her instructions, Wynter walked a few steps further into the market. Pretending to be a shopper, she approached a vendor and asked, "Miss, have you noticed any foreigners shopping here recently? Do you recall seeing anyone like that?"

The vendor, busy with customers, waved her off dismissively. "No, none at all."

Just then, Wynter froze-not because of the vendor she was speaking to, but because of a nearby stall. The items being sold there weren't the usual produce you'd find in other cities or on the market. These were unique to the area-all unmistakably wild animals. There were snakes, bamboo rats, otters, and civets.

The civets stood out in particular. In regions north of the Amberflow River, they were almost unheard of as food. All these animals were crammed together in cages, many of them weak and barely alive, emitting an unpleasant odor.

The snakes, at least, were spared this indignity, kept separately in buckets of water. Yet, one snake in particular caught Wynter's attention a sleek, jet-black serpent, flicking its tongue with an air of eerie resentment.

Wynter paused, her gaze lingering on the scene.

The stall owner, Oscar Noctis, noticed her interest and immediately grew wary, yanking a cloth down to cover the cages. "Don't stare if you're not buying!"

Wynter let out a light laugh. "At a farmers' market? Of course, I'm here to buy. What's the point of hiding it now? I've already seen everything."

Oscar eyed her suspiciously. She didn't seem like a government official, more like some scion. "Oh? I didn't know pretty young ladies these days are into eating this sort of thing too."

Wynter spoke only half of the truth. "It's not for me. My dad-he's the one with the taste for it."

Oscar still didn't relax entirely. "Your accent... You don't sound local," he remarked, his gaze shifting to Dalton." And him? He looks even less like one of us. Tall, in a sharp suit... He doesn't really fit in around here."

Dalton indeed didn't belong in a place like this, and for good reason-everyone knew he was a clean freak. And he couldn't stand the odor these wild animals were emanating.

Other men might keep a cat as a conversation starter. It would be the perfect excuse to say, "Why don't you come over and see my cat?"

But Dalton? Not a chance. He couldn't even stand a cat's scent.

Back in the day, even Wolf-an Ancient Beast-wasn't spared. He had grabbed him with a handkerchief and tossed him straight into the river, commanding him to properly wash his fur.

So, it wasn't hard to imagine his current mood as he stood amidst this scene. His face, while still undeniably handsome and refined, carried a trace of distaste that deepened every time he raised an eyebrow.

If not for Wynter, it was safe to say that Dalton wouldn't have set foot here in 100 lifetimes. The odors alone were unbearable to him. And there were also the caged animals...

Dalton absentmindedly twirled the bracelet with his fingers. To him, this was the result of humanity's resentful energy.

Wynter, herself a cultivator, could sense it as well. From the moment they entered the market, something had felt off to her.

Now, as her eyes swept over the wild animals' cages, she understood the source of the unease-this place reeked of resentment. It wasn't uncommon for slaughterhouses to be hotspots of such energy, but this level of intensity was unusual.

It definitely had something to do with the black serpent.

Wynter chuckled. "My boyfriend hasn't seen these before. He is just accompanying me. Again, I'm here to buy." Oscar, noticing their obvious closeness, hesitated for a moment, glancing around nervously. "Miss, I won't hide it from you, I thought your boyfriend was here for an inspection. A while ago, the authorities came by."

He sighed before continuing, "What can we do? We're from the south. We live off the mountains and rivers, and we've had this food culture for generations. It's hard to change."

Oscar's words were not entirely wrong.

Colifernia's people were accustomed to wild animals due to both history and the region's geography. The subtropical climate, abundant trees, and waterways made it a perfect habitat for numerous animals.

But this way of eating, while deeply ingrained, also carried risks of complicated diseases.

Wynter didn't mention the resentment that seemed to hang in the air. She understood the natural world had its rules. However, humans had to survive, and nature had its own logic. One couldn't ask a tiger not to eat the rabbit as it would starve to death.

But wild animals, particularly from an ecological and medical standpoint, could be very dangerous.

Many pathogens came from wild animals, including parasites. This was why doctors advised against eating raw dishes like raw crab-if not prepared correctly, parasites could easily be transmitted to humans.

Similarly, shellfish and freshwater creatures, if not cooked properly, could carry risks. It was the same logic as not drinking water from a river.

Despite these warnings, human curiosity and appetite had never been easily stopped. In fact, Wynter had long heard stories about people in Colifernia consuming monkey brains.

Wynter lifted her gaze, her eyes falling once again on the black cloth that covered the serpent.

A sudden realization struck her. It couldn't be a coincidence that Lupius had disappeared here.

In his line of work, if anything related to viruses came up, he would definitely investigate these farmers' markets. After all, it was common knowledge that many major pandemics in history had originated from animals-whether caused by natural disasters or human actions.

Take AIDS, for example it originally spread from human contact with monkeys. Syphilis also traced its roots to foreign populations...

"Sir, I'll take that black serpent. How much is it?" Wynter spoke again.

She had already made up her mind. The wild animals here needed to be thoroughly checked.

Wynter was concerned that if there were any viruses, they might be lurking within these animals. She knew that

such a large market likely wasn't the only one selling wild animals.

Even if the authorities were regulating it, the vendors would continue selling them, especially since eating snakes was a local habit.

Oscar was surprised when he heard that Wynter wanted the black serpent. "Why this one? It's quite fierce. It almost bit me last time, but luckily, it wasn't venomous."

"It looks special," Wynter replied cryptically. "Maybe it's fate."

If Wynter wasn't mistaken, this was likely a serpent that had failed in its attempt to transform into a dragon. The intense resentment it harbored toward humans clearly indicated that something had happened.

That said, Wynter had faced threats from a similar dragon-aspiring snake before and wasn't particularly impressed by such creatures. The previous one, after causing some trouble, had eventually settled down and was now dutifully guarding its river up in Sunveil.

According to Fabian, the area had seen prosperous and stable weather ever since. Likely, it feared Wolf might swallow it whole again, so it had become more diligent than anyone else, even putting in overtime occasionally. Oscar found it odd to hear Wynter mentioning fate. "Most people buy snakes for their nutritional value. You're the first to talk about buying one because of fate."

"You're not planning to eat it, are you?" he asked while working with his stuff. "But it is pretty fierce. If you don't have much experience in handling snakes, maybe you'd like to pick another one."

Wynter smiled. "No need. I'll take this one."

Oscar nodded. "Alright, then I'll lift the lid now. Be careful."

As soon as the cover was lifted, the so-called overly aggressive serpent immediately raised its head, stretching out

its body. Its forked tongue flicked menacingly, and its fangs could faintly be seen.

Yet, by sheer coincidence, the serpent locked eyes with Dalton. In an instant, it collapsed onto the ground. If

snakes could kneel, its current posture would undoubtedly count as kneeling.

Oscar was dumbfounded, rubbing his eyes in disbelief. "Am I imagining things? Is it... trembling?"

Wynter wanted to reassure him that the serpent was indeed trembling. Even she was puzzled. She thought her cultivation had skyrocketed recently and was now so powerful that this would-be dragon could sense her extraordinary presence without her doing anything.

Pondering this, she glanced over at Dalton and quietly asked, "Is it scared of me? Am I really that impressive now?"

Dalton's thin lips curved into a smile. It was obvious he was happy about something.

With a hint of mischief, he replied, "Who else could it be afraid of? Don't doubt yourself. After all, you've already subdued several malevolent spirits, and you've got an Ancient Beast by your side."

Wynter interrupted him, "I also have a Savior."

Dalton hummed in agreement. "That's why I said Dr. Genius is amazing."

Wynter was pleased. "Call me Master from now on."

Dalton was also in high spirits. "Yes, Master Quinnell."

Taking out her wallet, Wynter was ready to pay. "Sir, I'll take this serpent."

The black serpent cried out, "No! Don't sell me to these two! I'd rather stay in this shabby bucket forever!"

Unfortunately for the serpent, Oscar couldn't understand Slithernis a language spoken by snakes.

"Since you seem like a nice lady, I'll give it to you for two thousand." Then, he continued, "Make sure to disinfect

it when you get home." Wynter instinctively reached out to touch the black serpent, but Dalton stopped her hand mid-air.

"Snakes aren't clean. Let's have professionals handle it later." Lowering his voice, he added, "Besides, haven't you

already decided to have this whole place thoroughly inspected and disinfected?"

Wynter nodded. "Yes, it needs a comprehensive inspection. I'm worried this could be a starting point for the

pandemic."

Oscar didn't catch their conversation, and neither of them would be foolish enough to discuss such matters openly

in public.

Dalton's gaze lingered on the black serpent. "We'll come back for it after everything is properly sanitized."

Wynter nodded. "And we'll need to disinfect ourselves, too, especially since we're meeting with Mr. Yarwood

Senior later."

The thought of a potential pandemic made Wynter more cautious than ever. If this farmers' market really was a virus' origin, there was a chance the pathogen was already present.

While she thought it might sound exaggerated, it was better to practice caution-especially as a trained medical

student.

Wynter wasn't afraid for herself. She was more concerned about protecting those around her. For instance, Theo. In fact, he even had a restaurant less than a mile from this market.

Farmers' markets like this one saw the highest daily foot traffic and were closely tied to the food supply chain. If there was a problem here, it would ripple directly into people's meals.

She sincerely hoped that this market didn't have any issues. Yet, rationally, she couldn't shake the suspicion that

this location had been deliberately chosen by their enemies. Plus, that single strand of golden hair nagged at her

relentlessly.

They didn't linger for long.

Wynter completed the transaction but left the black serpent behind, crouching briefly to address it. "Stay put and behave. No more delusions of grandeur, understood?"

The black serpent nodded obediently. It would do anything as long as it didn't have to leave with Dalton! Wynter then turned to Dalton. "Let's go. This place is far too down-to-earth for someone like you, Mr. Yarwood." With that, she tugged him by the arm, sneaking back into the restaurant through the rear entrance.

Theo watched as Wynter tugged Dalton's hand, his eyes lighting up with excitement, though his words were a

different story.

"Can't you be a little more proactive? Why does Wynter have to be the one holding your hand? Can't you show a

bit of the charm I had in my day?"

Dalton sat down, raising his hands in mock surrender. "How can I compare to you, Grandpa? They say the older generations are always more experienced. These days, it's all about the slow and steady approach." Theo looked like he wanted to pry open Dalton's head to check what was inside. "Stop giving me excuses. From

now on, you'd better start being more proactive, or else, who knows when you'll finally get to marry Wynter?" Wynter, caught in the middle, didn't know whether to speak up or stay silent. Finally, she said, "Grandpa, don't be upset. He's just a little slow when it comes to warming up to people, so it's okay." Then, she quickly served him a portion of vegetables. "Here, eat some more before it gets cold, Grandpa."

Theo immediately switched to a cheerful demeanor. "Wynter, you're so considerate. This boy is lucky beyond

belief to have you."

As they ate, Wynter suddenly recalled the old cultivator Theo encountered. Curious, she asked for more details, specifically regarding his looks.

Theo thought for a moment. "He was dressed in shabby clothes, his face was smeared with dirt, and his beard was scruffy. Other than that, I can't remember much."

Wynter felt the description sounded a bit like Atwater. Yet, the story didn't quite match. After all, Theo had met

him once in Southdale.

It was also then that he told her that she should marry a man surrounded by purple energy. Maybe it was just a

coincidence.

After the sect incident, she had lost track of his whereabouts. If she could encounter him at the upcoming Arcane

Way Forum, it might make solving her current problems much easier.

By the time they finished eating, the sun was already setting. Theo placed his hand gently over Wynter's. "I'm entrusting this boy to you. Whatever you do to him, I won't

intervene, but please take good care of him. I've been worried ever since that old cultivator spoke to me."

Dalton wasn't aware of this conversation.

Wynter held Theo's hand firmly. "Don't worry, Grandpa. Wherever Dalton is, I will be there, too."

Hearing this, Theo looked deeply comforted. "Good. In that case, I'll leave now. You two carry on." With that, he left with his entourage, leaving Wynter and Dalton alone in the restaurant.

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## Chapter 1702 A Huge Problem

"Wherever Dalton is, I will be there, too?" Dalton repeated Wynter's words, his gaze shifting slightly. His face, already strikingly handsome, became even more so when graced with a smile.

This was a rarity among men. Years of refinement had instilled a natural presence of authority in Dalton, as if he could control everything around him. The scholarly elegance that emanated from his very being only served to make his subtle smirks even more captivating.

Wynter was, without a doubt, a sucker for people with good looks. And when the man in question was her fiancé, she saw no reason to hold back.

"Exactly. Of course, I'll be wherever you are."

Dalton's voice was calm. "And what if you were betray me?"

Wynter raised an eyebrow. "Me? Betray you?"

Dalton responded with a quiet hum.

Wynter reached out, lifting his chin slightly with her fingers, inspecting him before chuckling. "When you have a face like this? How dumb would I have to be to betray you?"

Dalton was accustomed to her teasing demeanor by now. Compared to her antics in her previous lifetime, she was already much more restrained.

But the waiter, who had just come in with their dishes, was clearly not used to it. He completely froze at that sight. Not wanting to make a scene, Wynter quickly withdrew her hand. Still, even such a small display was enough to set the rumor mill into overdrive.

When Theo heard the reports later, he was thoroughly delighted.

Dalton was a cold-hearted iceberg, after all. Someone needed to take the initiative in the relationship. And if it was Wynter doing so, that suited him just fine!

In his joy, he issued bonuses for all his staff, so the employees couldn't help but wish for Wynter to visit Colifornia more often. Not only was Theo more generous, but even Dalton seemed to ease up on his usual relentless pursuit in their projects when he was happy.

Dalton, for his part, was in an undeniably good mood. He had long known that Wynter had a certain appreciation for his looks-one thing she was never subtle about.

What puzzled him, however, was a lingering inconsistency. In their previous life, she hadn't seemed the least bit interested in his type. If anything, her preference had leaned toward what modern vernacular might call the cute and clingy type.

He glanced at Wynter, just about to broach the topic, when her phone rang suddenly. The ringtone was distinct- one reserved for her members in the Special Unit.

Wynter answered the call. "Hello. How is it?"

"There are indeed many viruses present, but nothing currently uncontrollable. All identified strains are ones we've seen before. Even if an outbreak were to occur, it would remain within manageable limits."

The voice on the other end was low, as if deliberately avoiding being overheard. "Boss, should we shut down this farmers' market?"

Wynter raised her eyebrows. "If these are all known viruses, why should we shut it down immediately?"

"There are just too many wild animals there. Even if things are fine now, there's no guarantee for the future. And there's something... strange."

Wynter lifted her gaze. "What is it?"

"I can't explain it clearly right now, but I need you to see it for yourself to understand. I can't make any

conspicuous moves here at the moment."

Wynter's fingers paused briefly. "Understood. Head back to the Disease Control Department. Remember to keep your identity concealed. Also, I'll need a comprehensive report on patient admissions from major hospitals in the area."

"Got it, Boss. I'll get it to you in two days."

The person on the line hung up quickly, clearly in a rush to return to their job. They had to avoid arousing suspicion, ensuring that their temporary absence didn't appear deliberate or avoid alerting any potential culprits. Only then would they be able to gather more information.

After ending the call, Wynter brought Dalton back to the bustling farmers' market.

There were now more people bargaining and packaging goods. However, one peculiar thing caught her attention. Earlier, there had been numerous animals at the stall, but now, only the black serpent she had purchased remained. Wynter approached Oscar, who smiled warmly and stood up. "Miss, are you here to pick up your snake?"

Wynter nodded. "Yes, I am. By the way, your business seems pretty good. I was planning to buy more, but it looks like everything else is gone now. What happened to all the stock?"

Oscar chuckled. "Oh, miss, you came too late. You wouldn't believe it-recently, monkeys have been selling like crazy. Other animals sell out quickly, too, so by this time of day, it's usually all gone."

"Really? Who came to buy them? That's a lot of stock cleared out," Wynter asked.

Oscar didn't think much of it. "There's this guy who's been coming by recently. He clears out everything we've got every time he's here. But he doesn't talk much it's always his people doing the bargaining for him. He himself is carefully covered with only his eyes showing."

Wynter paused for a moment. "Just his eyes showing?"

"Yeah, I still have no idea what the guy looks like." He added, "But he hasn't been coming personally the last few days. He just sends people to pick up the goods."

Wynter's suspicion deepened. She glanced around the stall. "Do you have any surveillance cameras here?" "Surveillance cameras? Why would I install something like that?" Oscar looked at Wynter in confusion. "In this line of work, nobody wants evidence lying around. Say, miss, what exactly are you up to?"

Wynter noticed there weren't any cameras in the market. The infrastructure was outdated-loose wires hung precariously. Without surveillance cameras, it explained why there were no leads on Lupius.

Oscar continued eyeing her warily, his guard clearly up. "Miss, right after you left earlier, someone came by saying they were conducting a hygiene inspection. You wouldn't happen to have reported us to the authorities, would you?"

He had rushed to sell off the wild animals precisely because of his fear of the inspections.

When Wynter first entered the market earlier, she had already noticed the intricate familiarity among the stall owners. If she caused them to become hostile now, would only make investigating further even harder.

She had also observed the sheer size of the farmers' market. Some people even lived there. If an overhaul were truly necessary, it wouldn't be a task completed in a single day.

What struck her as odd was that in such a modern city like Colifornia, a market like this still existed in the heart of the old district.

With the rise of supermarkets catering to urbanites' increasing demands for convenience and quality, one would expect such traditional markets to have dwindled. Logically, it should be almost impossible for such markets to survive.

Nevertheless, undoubtedly for many, places like this were essential.

Most of the vendors working here weren't locals. They came from Colifernia's outskirts or even further west. For them, staying in a developed city wasn't just about making a living but also about giving their children access to

better education and opportunities.

"Stop staring and finish your homework. Did you understand what your teacher said?" Amidst the distinct smell of fish, a female vendor called out to her daughter.

Not far from Wynter, a young girl with two braided pigtails set down her tablet and replied, "Okay!"

She then ran inside with a quick patter of footsteps, shouting, "Mommy! There's a really pretty miss and mister over there buying a snake!"

"Don't worry about others. Go wash your hands," her mother replied.

Wynter witnessed this small interaction and realized that it wasn't as simple as uprooting the entire market.

Yes, there were undeniable problems here-hygiene concerns, questionable business practices-but the consequences of shutting down entirely would be catastrophic for the three thousand families who relied on it

for their livelihoods.

She needed to find a solution that would address all issues.

Wynter pondered for a moment. Noticing the skeptical gaze from Oscar, she suddenly let out a long sigh. "To be honest, it's true that I'm not just here to buy things."

Oscar narrowed his eyes. "I knew it. You should leave. We don't welcome people like you."

However, Wynter's next words caused him to pause. "I'm here to guide you to enlightenment."

The moment Wynter casually spouted her words, Dalton couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. For someone who refused to bow to even the heavenly law, was she actually talking about guiding someone to enlightenment?

Oscar chuckled, though it was out of anger if anything.

"That's right. At this point, I have no choice but to tell you the truth." Wynter continued without even batting an eyelid, "I'm here because of that disaster in your water bucket."

Oscar's eyes flicked to the black serpent in the bucket. His mind raced back to the strange dreams he'd been having since bringing it into his shop. Every night, he would dream of a snake flicking its tongue, as if it were trying to

Speak to him.

Hence, now, faced with Wynter's words, his attitude changed drastically. He immediately moved a small stool out for Wynter and poured her a cup of tea.

The black serpent in the bucket, however, was stunned. It couldn't believe what it was hearing. Had these two come all the way here for it? It knew its own worth. After all, it had only been disgruntled and tried frightening the person who had captured it.

The black serpent was unlike Sothoth, who had foolishly asked Dalton whether it resembled a dragon. He was lucky he hadn't been turned into snake soup.

It had heard rumors that Sothoth had been tamed, always stationed by the river, tasked with guarding humans. It certainly didn't want to end up like him, smelling like fish all the time!

Hence, at this moment, it cleverly cooperated, flicking its tongue in response to Wynter.

Oscar, who hadn't thought much of the situation earlier, now began trembling slightly. His demeanor toward

Wynter shifted, and he looked at her with newfound respect.

"Please, continue, madam," he said, changing the way he addressed her. "I won't hide anything from you. I have indeed been dreaming about this black serpent lately. What should I do to resolve this?"

It was a common occurrence for long-time residents in Colifornia to be more inclined to believe in such things compared to people from other regions. The Arcane Way Forum being held here wasn't coincidental.

Wynter wasn't lying, either. While the black serpent wasn't the primary reason she'd entered the farmers' market, its presence was significant as a source of misfortune for Oscar.

Hence, she didn't hide anything from him regarding this issue. "This black serpent was originally destined to

ascend as a dragon, but it was captured by you and brought here. Naturally, it harbors resentment. "Moreover, you've caught many wild animals over the years. Creatures with a certain spiritual awareness leave behind traces their grievances. Snakes, in particular, are notorious for holding grudges. Their resentment compounds over time, and that accumulation inevitably affects you."

Wynter let out a deep sigh. "It's often said that the father's debts are repaid by the child. Even if you've escaped unscathed, the misfortune may have been passed your son. Think about it. Your son has always been weak ever since he was born, right?"

Her words struck a nerve in Oscar. "You-How do you know about my son's health?"

Wynter had already noticed this but had initially refrained from mentioning it, adhering to certain unspoken rules.

Oscar had captured too many wild animals. Of course, he could do it if it were solely for survival. However, he had crossed a line when he once captured a young monkey for a lucrative deal. Despite the mother monkey's desperate pleas, he had still chosen to take it away after some hesitation.

Wynter could see the karma on him now, something she wouldn't have been able to discern before obtaining the

Soul Commanding Badge. She saw the mother monkey's lingering hatred-the strongest grievance attached to

him.

"You've been cursed." Wynter raised her hand and pressed a lucky token against his head.

Instantly, a flash of memory came rushing back to Oscar. He looked at Wynter in shock. "I didn't do it on purpose.

My wife was about to give birth, and we needed the money.

"Her amniotic fluid was insufficient, and I couldn't let her travel back to the countryside to deliver the baby. I-I

was wrong."

Oscar stood up abruptly, clearly nervous. "I really am aware of my mistakes now."

It was clear Oscar genuinely wanted to turn over a new leaf.

If there were no demands, there wouldn't be any slaughter, but commerce-especially illicit trade-was an ever-

present challenge.

Wynter met his gaze. "The animal you wronged was also trying to protect its child. So, it's time to hang up your tools for good. Stop selling these animals."

Oscar nodded fervently and put down the fish spear in his hands. "I won't sell them anymore! I swear, I'll never

sell them again!"

The other vendors, who had been listening from the sidelines, began glancing at their own stalls with

contemplation.

There were no problems for those who sold everyday goods, but there were many here who had secretly sold these

wild animals. After all, it was hard to escape the demand.

wynter, seeing the ripple her words had caused, took the opportunity to continue, "This isn't just about karma or consequences. Many animals carry bacteria and pathogens that are harmful to humans.

"You must be careful even with ordinary seafood. Always wear gloves when handling them, and wash your hands

thoroughly afterward."

Her gaze shifted to a corner. "And especially for children-their immune systems are weaker. It's crucial to take proper precautions to protect them."

By this point, vendors had completely placed their trust in ynter. Her explanations about medical precautions and public health had firmly taken root in their minds. Typical public awareness campaigns rarely

achieved such impactful results.

Prevention before disaster was the goal, and for now, this was a necessary first step. She planned to instruct her company to draft a proposal on how to regulate and redesign the market later at night.

Oscar, eager to atone for his past, offered to help Wynter by keeping an eye out for anyone else attempting to

purchase large quantities of exotic animals.

He even provided her with an address, though when Wynter searched it, she found it was just a bustling street, too crowded to pinpoint any specific target.

As Wynter and Dalton walked toward the market's exit, Dalton spoke up. "Maybe the buyer isn't mute but chooses

not to speak for some reason."

Wynter shared the same thought. "It's possible they're a foreigner. Speaking Cascadian might give them away, so they let their subordinate handle the bargaining to avoid trouble."

She already more or less had an answer a person with golden hair, who had started purchasing large quantities of

live animals recently and refusing to speak directly.

"They're not buying all these animals for consumption," she mused. "If they're doing experiments, the lab must

be nearby. Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense to source animals from here." Pulling out her phone, Wynter instructed her Special Unit members to survey a three-mile radius around the

farmers' market, looking for any discreet locations suitable for conducting experiments.

Just as she sent the message, her phone buzzed with an incoming call.

"Boss, we've got a problem here!"

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### Chapter 1703 Emergency

Wynter's brow furrowed deeply, sensing the gravity of the situation.

Normally, members of the Special Unit would avoid direct calls unless absolutely necessary. For someone to break that rule meant the matter was very urgent.

In reality, there were only a few members in the Special Unit. They were all exceptional in their respective fields yet deliberately low profile.



With only two or three operatives assigned per city, maintaining discretion while ensuring coverage across such a vast territory was no small feat. This also meant that they would be switched out if their identities were

accidentally exposed.

Hence, for Balmond Kurtus, to risk exposing himself, the stakes had to be extraordinarily high.

"I'll head over," Wynter said without hesitation. She brought both the black serpent and Dalton with her as she hopped onto her BMW Tomahawk.

Her superbike blended seamlessly with Colifernia's aesthetic. Yet, with Dalton perched on the back, the scene turned heads for a different reason. He wasn't the type anyone would expect to see on a superbike.

The two of them were undeniably eye-catching, especially since anyone into bikes would instantly recognize this superbike's value.

The only one not enjoying the ride was the black serpent. It didn't dare move at all, as if paralyzed in the black backpack. Yes, it was indeed carried in a backpack. Its breathing was so faint it might as well have slipped into hibernation.

It was terrified that it would be turned into ashes in the bag if Dalton was in a foul mood.

Although Wynter had left the farmers' market, she hadn't truly set the matter aside. Instead, she sent someone else to handle it. Sometimes, throwing money at a problem was the fastest solution.

Having the Quinnell family take over the farmers' market wasn't unreasonable, especially considering that she came to Colifernia as a representative of the Southern Cascadia Chamber of Commerce.

Since she had already secured a piece of land in Hawford, adding a farmers' market to the portfolio wasn't a stretch. However, the news of the impending takeover didn't sit well with the existing stall owners.

Oscar wasn't too against the idea. "Think about what the medium had said before leaving. There are indeed too many bacteria in our line of work, and it's too easy to accumulate bad karma.

"Although selling to a big company might not bring in as much profit as before, think about our children. Maybe we should just agree to it."

Another vendor responded, "I don't have kids, and I'm not selling wild animals. I don't want to be bought out. We live and eat here. Who knows how that big company will handle things once they take over?"

A third voice chimed in, "It's not like we have to decide right now, but I heard it's the Quinnell Group coming in. They're reliable!"

"Yeah, I've seen the Quinnell Group on the internet, too! They've done a lot of good things, unlike those shady companies."

"That's just good PR. Who knows what they're really like?"

Wynter was well aware that the acquisition wasn't going smoothly. However, she also knew that such an environment had inherent risks that couldn't be ignored.

Originally, Wynter had planned to stay and negotiate the acquisition, but the situation was becoming urgent.

The phone calls were getting more frantic, and hearing the word "sinister" from members of the Special Unit made her push her superbike to its maximum speed.

She had driven past many factories from the highway to the city's outskirts, near the suburban area.

Her superbike finally stopped by a winding river.

Before she even got close, Wynter could already smell a strong fishy odor. It wasn't from factory wastewater but from actual fish.

At that moment, the black serpent, which had been curled up in Wynter's backpack, suddenly straightened its body. Its eyes gleamed, and it couldn't help but ask, "Master, why have you guys come here?"

## The Heiress' Return: Six Brothers at Her Beck and Call

Chapter 1704 The Dragon That Was Struck

Wynter could understand the black serpent's words.

It wasn't because she had the ability to communicate with animals, but because creatures that had begun their path toward becoming dragons naturally gained the capacity to communicate with humans as their spiritual awareness grew.

That said, most such creatures wouldn't casually choose to speak.

A snake like this, found in Colifernia, wouldn't be seen as something worthy of worship, nor would it end up as a scientific curiosity. More likely, locals would simply assume it would make an excellent, highly nutritious snake

stew.

Removing her helmet and hanging it on the superbike, Wynter leaned casually on it before shooting a glance at the black serpent. "Have you been here before?"

The black serpent dared not hide the truth. It merely slithered slightly farther from Dalton, trembling visibly. "Truth be told, I used to oversee the water over here," it confessed, even bowing its head as it spoke.

Wynter arched an eyebrow. She was well aware that in the current era of depleted spiritual energy, true dragons could only be found in vast rivers, seas, or hidden mountain depths, such as those near Drakonspire Haven.

But to pass such a responsibility to a mere serpent was still odd.

Traditionally, as recorded in ancient texts, the duty of overseeing rainmaking and water governance had always fallen to dragons. They were beings born in accordance with the heavenly law, responding to the natural order's needs. Such defiance would inevitably lead to punishment.

After all, there was a local folklore that most had heard of.

Long ago, a mighty dragon, confident in its divine powers, made a wager with a fortune teller about the weather. To win the bet, the dragon broke the heavenly laws and manipulated the winds and rains, causing violent storms that terrified the people. Unbeknownst to the dragon, the fortune teller was the heavenly law himself.

When the dragon learned that the heavenly law had ordered an executioner to take its life, it took on a human form and pleaded for mercy before the human land's ruler, hoping that the executioner would be restrained.

The ruler had indeed delayed the executioner by engaging him in a game of chess. However, in just a brief moment while he was taking a yawn during the match, the executioner had managed to strike down the dragon.

That was how this folklore got its name "Executing a Dragon in a Slumber".

Wynter's gaze returned to the black serpent. "You've been cultivating for quite a while, haven't you? Snakes naturally crave power. Since you already had your own territory, why did you leave it? These factories you should have been able to handle them."

After all, a snake's innate nature is to hold grudges. If someone infringed on its domain, it would stop at nothing to exact revenge, following them relentlessly and instilling fear. Conversely, if treated with respect, they could bring wealth and fortune in return.

The black serpent flicked its tongue nervously. "I-I used to scare the humans working in the factories. At first, they dumped sewage into the water, but eventually, they stopped."

Wynter chuckled softly. "They didn't stop because of you. It was because of policy enforcement. To protect the natural ecosystem, strict regulations were implemented. Haven't you heard the saying, 'Clear waters and lush mountains are more valuable than any gold and silver?'"

The black serpent tilted its head, releasing a confused sound, clearly not understanding.

Dalton commented drily, "No wonder you've failed to become a proper dragon. You lack even a basic sense of civic responsibility."

As for the actual dragon who had neglected its job to manage this territory, Dalton planned to deal with it

personally.

Although the black serpent didn't quite understand why it, a mere snake, needed to concern itself with civic responsibility, it dared not protest.

Instead, it promptly responded, "You're absolutely right, my lord! I'll study hard from now on learn more, see more, and focus on doing better in these areas!"

Wynter stepped forward a few paces. Since this black serpent was once in charge of the area, it must know more details. Before too many people arrived, it was better to get everything sorted now. "So, why did you leave your own territory?" Wynter went back to the main point.

## The Heiress' Return: Six Brothers at Her Beck and Call

Chapter 1705 The Odd River

"It can't just be that you were hunted. With your abilities, you could have returned anytime you wanted," Wynter stated, her voice probing.

She had already seen through the black serpent's cultivation-it had enough power to influence humans. If she and Dalton hadn't appeared when they did, it might have already hypnotized Oscar, likely leading him to commit some misdeed under its influence.

The black serpent shuddered, lowering its head. "I admit I had some bad intentions before. I won't dare to do it again. But there's a reason I targeted that man.

"It's because this river started changing since he came here last month. My lord, you saw it, too-those fish floating to the surface. At this time of year, it's not normal for so many fish to die like that."

Wynter already knew something strange was at play.

She had read Oscar's fortune earlier. Though he had wild animals' blood on his hands, he wasn't an inherently bad person. In fact, he had an honest quality and wasn't the type to orchestrate such a large-scale disturbance.

"Are you saying that the water started changing all of a sudden a month ago?" Wynter asked.

"Yes." The black serpent nodded.

Wynter continued, "What about the river water? Has it been different from before?"

It shook its head initially before raising its gaze. "Actually, there is one difference. The water... it doesn't taste as fresh anymore."

That fact made Wynter's sharp eyes narrow further.

Animals had heightened senses-far more acute and direct than humans'. While the river water appeared clean and clear to the naked eye, the black serpent's statement suggested something was wrong with its quality.

However, this area had no factories producing anything harmful, and there were no obvious sources of pollution nearby.

"Boss!"

While Wynter was observing the river, Balmond came running up to her.

He looked like an unassuming junior civil servant, complete with glasses. Around 24 or 25 years old, with fair, clean -cut features, he resembled the type of office worker who quietly typed reports, barely drawing any attention to himself.

But beneath that meek exterior was one of the Special Unit's most hot-tempered members.

Initially, he hadn't wanted to report this to Wynter. Normally, a river contamination case would follow the standard environmental procedures.

However, after receiving the directive to investigate, his worry had grown. The possibility of a pandemic weighed on him, compounded by Lupius' mysterious disappearance.

An ecological crisis on this scale, with no clear source, was more than he could handle. He was truly anxious and had finally decided to call Wynter after running out of options.

Balmond had expected her to show up alone. So, when he saw Dalton, he paused briefly before recognition dawned on him.

When Wynter's engagement was announced, the team had naturally done their research. They knew that Dalton was not only the Yarwood family's head but also a key figure in the Elite Division of the Special Unit, codenamed "Artist".

He was the one who had provided critical intel during their search for enemy agents back when Wynter had gone missing. In all these years, Dalton had been the first to be on par with Wynter in terms of logic.

Hence, Balmond quickly snapped back to work mode. "You've seen the situation. Something's not right with the river. But we've tested the water, and there weren't any issues with it."

Wynter took a glance at the test results before surveying the surrounding area. "Are there any other residents nearby apart from those in the factories?"

"No." Balmond shook his head.

## The Heiress' Return: Six Brothers at Her Beck and Call

### Chapter 1706 Rituals for the Gods

Wynter took a few steps closer to the river, intending to inspect further.

However, Dalton, who was standing beside her, grabbed her arm firmly. "There's something there."

Wynter followed his gaze. She had to admit, Dalton had incredible vision. Even from this distance, he had spotted a piece of golden parchment pinned under a stone near the water's edge.

Wynter frowned. "Has someone been burning parchment here?"

The golden parchment was commonly used in funerary rites or ancestral worship, and it certainly wasn't something one would expect to find in a place like this. And, judging by the parchment's condition, it didn't seem like it originated here.

She bent down to pick up the parchment and inspected it before turning to the others. "Balmond, did anyone check the mountains?"

The mountains?

Balmond shook his head. "This river doesn't flow down from the mountains."

Wynter smirked slightly. "Not now, maybe. But it might as well be a mountain stream during heavy rain."

She moved to another spot. "Do you see these marks? This area was clearly scoured by water. Look into the weather records was there a heavy rainstorm about a month ago?"

The black serpent in Wynter's backpack couldn't hold back and hissed, "Yes, Master! I remember it vividly. The rain that day was torrential, and the wind was howling! I couldn't control it—it wasn't my doing! That stall owner came to the river that day!"

It suddenly thought of something and quickly continued, "And now that I think about it... the river changed after that rainstorm! Could this be what humans call 'acid rain?'"

Wynter didn't reply to the black serpent. Despite its awakened intelligence, it was obvious it hadn't done much studying.

With a decisive nod, Wynter instructed, "We'll head to the mountain."

She knew they had to find the root of the river water's problem. The golden parchment didn't seem like it had been burned here but instead looked like it had been carried downstream. Wynter was almost certain that the water's issue came from the mountain.

After all, although the mountain wasn't particularly tall, its proximity to human habitation made it a critical place to investigate.

When Wynter and her group arrived, they immediately drew wary stares. It was unusual for outsiders to come to this area, especially during the day, as most visitors usually arrived at night.

The further Wynter walked, the more uneasy she felt. It was an instinctual discomfort, like something primal warning her of danger.

Before she could pinpoint the source of the feeling, a man, Martin Clove, stepped out to block their path. "This is not a tourist spot. If you're here for fun, go back to the city."

Wynter glanced at Martin. "We're not here as tourists."

"I don't care what you're here for. Outsiders aren't allowed in." Martin spoke with his chest puffed up. "This mountain may not be tall, but it's full of dry brush. You young folks don't know better. What if you throw away a cigarette butt carelessly?"

Wynter caught the way he was darting his eyes and immediately saw right through him. With a smile, she said, "I don't have cash on me. How about this? If you let us in for a look or guide us yourself, I'll pay you five thousand."

"Ten thousand!" Martin glanced over his shoulder. "I'll think about bringing you guys in then."

Wynter frowned and made a show of turning to leave.

Martin quickly called out, "Alright, eight thousand! I can't go lower than that. We have had events going on recently. The chieftain doesn't like outsiders coming in. If he finds out I brought you in, he'll chew me out!"

Wynter looked back at his words. "Events? What event?"

"It's the Ritual of Devotion. Things are lively in there right now-every household has meat on the table! You outsiders wouldn't get to see something like this, especially you northerners. You're from the north, aren't you? I can tell by your accent," Martin said with confidence.

Wynter didn't bother bargaining the price anymore. Instead, she opened her phone and transferred him the money. "Since you've made it sound so fascinating, I really want to see this ritual now.""

Whether they were offering tribute to gods or something else entirely remained to be seen.

## The Heiress' Return: Six Brothers at Her Beck and Call

### Chapter 1707 His Energy

With the payment's notification sound, Martin's demeanor shifted entirely. He broke into a wide grin and said cheerfully, "Follow me closely. The paths around here are tricky, so it's easy to get lost if you're not careful."

Wynter exchanged a glance with Dalton and nodded in agreement before trailing behind Martin.



When they reached the village entrance, they encountered two men standing guard. They looked up and completely ignored Martin when he greeted them.

Instead, their eyes were glued on Wynter and Dalton. "Who are they? Why are you bringing strangers in?"

Martin laughed. "These are my niece and nephew. We rarely get to meet, and it just so happened to be during the Ritual of Devotion, so I brought them along. How about this? Tomorrow's your day off, right? Drinks are on me!" The guards softened at Martin's tone. "Fine, but keep them in line. Don't let them wander off. And we're not talking about cheap booze-Glenfiddich will do. Nothing too expensive."

Martin's smile twitched, but he replied half-heartedly, "Sure, sure. I'll sort it out tomorrow."

But inside, he was grumbling, "Why on earth would I give you Glenfiddich?"

The guards pulled aside the thorny wooden barricade to let them pass.

Wynter couldn't help but notice how unusual the setup was. There was only one way into the village, and with people standing guard, it would be nearly impossible for outsiders to enter.

Once inside, Martin leaned in to whisper to Wynter, "Did you see that? Getting you in here already cost me two bottles of Glenfiddich. Don't you think eight thousand isn't enough? How about adding another two thousand later?"

Wynter replied, "Alright, I'll transfer you two thousand more in a bit. These are small potatoes."

Martin was beaming with joy at Wynter's reply. Not only could he enjoy meat during the Ritual of Devotion, but he also managed to earn ten thousand dollars. He seemed to be floating as he led them toward his home.

Wynter and her group continued following Martin.

While Wynter kept her keen eyes on their surroundings, observing every detail, Balmond was no slouch, either. His sharp gaze scanned the area methodically, aiming to uncover any clues that could lead to the source of the problem.

Wynter's expertise in Arcane Divination and geomancy meant she noticed the village's peculiarities as soon as they entered.

From a geomantic perspective, the village had an exceptionally favorable fortune. Moreover, despite being a strikingly secluded location, the houses' and paths' layouts didn't appear haphazard. Most likely, someone had guided and planned the design.

"Sir, is there a higher vantage point nearby? I'd like to have a view of that," Wynter asked casually.

Martin paused to think, then nodded. "There is such a spot. Outsiders aren't usually allowed there, but since you're with me, I can take you. It's a bit of a climb, though. Are you sure you're up for it?"

Wynter chuckled softly. "We're fine. We've got plenty of energy."

Dalton remained silent beside her. If there were no one beside him, climbing would be unnecessary.

However, his silence wasn't due to the climbing itself. Instead, it was the faint, lingering energy in the village that was strangely familiar to him.

Dalton narrowed his eyes slightly, combing through his memories. Despite the uncanny familiarity, he couldn't recall ever visiting this place before. However, his fingers lightly brushed over the bracelet he was wearing.

"That unruly thing... it seems like someone is acting quite bold here," he mused to himself.

Wynter noticed Dalton's detached look. Thinking it was due to his health reasons, she reached out to grab his wrist without any hesitation, leading him forward.

Her action caught Balmond off guard. He couldn't believe this was how Wynter was when she was in love. Was she the domineering CEO type?

Dalton, on the other hand, was very much enjoying holding her hand. The chill in his expression softened, and a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

More than anyone, the black serpent, who was still in the backpack, could sense the shift in his energy.

## **The Heiress' Return: Six Brothers at Her Beck and Call**

Chapter 1708 The Snake That Became a Dragon

Likewise, the black serpent was also able to sense one of its kind nearby.

However, the other's cultivation level was so profound that the black serpent felt an overwhelming pressure the moment they entered the mountain. It instinctively tried to stay as close as possible to Dalton.

No matter how advanced the entity's cultivation was, it would have no chance against someone like Dalton, who had concealed his energy so perfectly that the other party wouldn't even realize danger was nearby. By the time they did, it would likely be far too late.

The black serpent couldn't help but recall its own encounter with Dalton at the farmers' market. It was sure that this being would instinctively surrender without resistance just like it had done.

The four of them ascended the stone steps, surrounded by lush trees. The air was filled with the harmonious sounds of cicadas and birds, creating an oddly tranquil atmosphere.

Although the mountain didn't appear tall from the foot, it still took them half an hour to reach the summit.

As they reached the top, Wynter's gaze swept across the landscape, taking in the mountain's natural beauty.

The location had hidden potential—a site suitable for nurturing greatness. Between the valleys, there were even streams and waterfalls, exuding an air of grandeur and prosperity.

The village, situated here, was undeniably built on a highly auspicious site. Mist swirled through the air, and the abundant water vapor added to its vibrant energy.

Raising an eyebrow, Wynter considered the implications. The environment here made it highly conducive for a serpent to undergo its metamorphosis into a dragon.

Hence, she lowered her head slightly and tapped on the backpack. Once she was out of Martin's sight, she lowered her voice to ask, "Did you seriously not feel anything? That doesn't seem right."

The black serpent didn't dare hide the truth but was also wary of saying too much and risking Dalton's displeasure. "I felt something. If I had to guess, it seems like a serpent successfully transformed into a dragon here once." "Once?" Wynter raised an eyebrow and wasn't convinced. But instead of pressing further, she decided to observe for now. With the Ritual of Devotion approaching, there would undoubtedly be clues to follow.

Moreover... Her sharp eyes turned toward the village's water source. That would mean that the root of the problem was nearby. She would definitely be able to find a clue or two by the time they investigate. Hence, Wynter didn't say anything further.

Just as Wynter finished surveying the layout and was preparing to descend the mountain, several villagers suddenly appeared, carrying offerings such as pigs and sheep.

"What's going on here? Why are there outsiders? Don't you know this area is off-limits?" the head of the group, Hamilton Clove, said sharply. His stern demeanor and authoritative tone made it clear he was someone with significant influence.

Martin immediately paled. Bowing slightly, he offered a cigarette with a sheepish smile. "Granduncle Hamilton, I was wrong. I'll take them down the mountain right away!"

Hamilton snorted coldly but accepted the cigarette. "Hurry up. The ritual is about to start. You know what will happen if the clan leader sees strangers here. And keep that mouth of yours in check."

Martin nodded fervently.

Without another word, Hamilton led his group, along with the offerings, toward the stream. Meanwhile, Martin wasted no time bringing Wynter and her group down the mountain.

Wynter showed no curiosity toward the offerings. There was nothing to ask. After all, she could tell at a glance that the yellow talismans and red flowers were not meant for unborn souls.

The village's environment was somewhat similar to the outside, mostly consisting of tile and brick houses.

However, there were two exceptions-houses that were designed like small villas, though only two stories high. It was as if they had been deliberately built this way to prevent outsiders from realizing that there were more villas hidden inside.

When they arrived at Martin's home, Wynter casually asked, "The village has a lot of houses, but why don't I see anyone?"

Martin answered matter-of-factly, "They're all busy with preparations. The clan leader gave orders yesterday for everyone to help out today."

Then, he paused for a moment before adding, "Don't ask too much. Just wait for the ritual tonight."

## The Heiress' Return: Six Brothers at Her Beck and Call

Chapter 1709 The Girl Who Escaped

Wynter knew she was close to coaxing out more information, but she chose not to push further. It was crucial to avoid raising suspicion.

Instead, she smoothly changed the subject. "I saw two villas earlier. They looked pretty luxurious on the outside. Are they even better inside? I've never been in a villa before."

Martin replied with a sense of pride, "Those were built by the clan leader. They're really fancy inside, too. Our clan leader is great! None of us need to work regular jobs. We get paid as long as we follow his instructions!

"The ceremony tonight will be in the villas. I've only been there twice myself, but you'll get your mind blown soon!

Then, his gaze shifted to Dalton, taking in his polished suit. "That guy doesn't look like someone short on money, though. He's all dressed up and good-looking, too."

Before Dalton could respond, Wynter quickly interjected, "Don't be fooled by appearances. His whole outfit is from bargain sales-39.9 dollars with free shipping! I can get him to order one for you if you want one.

"Sure, he's good-looking, but he's just my sidekick. If I haven't seen a villa before, you can bet he hasn't, either." Dalton chuckled lightly at her quip. His refined demeanor and tailored suit, however, only made him look even more expensive.

She was, however, particularly interested in the quality of the water in the spring. Nevertheless, it was clear that the Ritual of Devotion Martin was talking about involved that specific stream, and they wouldn't be allowed near it anytime soon.

None of the three showed any sign of their true thoughts.

At this point, Balmond's personality proved useful. He excused himself with the excuse of needing to use the bathroom.

Martin didn't bother to stop him. After all, the paying guest was Wynter, and keeping her happy was all that mattered.

Wynter knew exactly what Martin was after, so she didn't hand over all the money at once, merely giving him a thousand dollars.

Martin called his wife, Carmila Deux, over to entertain them. "You can sit in my yard for a bit. We'll call you for the feast when the ritual starts!"

Martin was surprisingly hospitable, offering Wynter and Dalton some peanuts and almonds, and even brewing tea for them. In Colifernia, drinking tea was a given, and the tea set was quite complete, all made of ceramic.

Wynter wasn't concerned about the tea-after all, no poison could affect her. What she did worry about was Dalton's sensitive body.

Hence, when Martin handed them the tea, she quickly took it herself. "Thank you, sir. But my boyfriend's stomach isn't great, so he can't drink tea on an empty stomach."

"Oh, how unfortunate! This tea is made from the spring water from the mountain. You can smell it doesn't it smell wonderful?" Martin, sensing an opportunity to make more money, eagerly responded.

Wynter knew exactly what he was after and smiled lightly. "It really does smell great."

As she spoke, she tilted the cup at a slight angle while taking a sip, deliberately spilling the tea onto her black backpack.

The black serpent immediately tensed up and hissed, "Ugh, this water smells foul."

Foul water? Wynter narrowed her eyes. While she hadn't smelled anything unusual herself, it was definitely a sign to avoid drinking it.

Sitting next to her, Dalton simply rotated his cup twice, as if inspecting the water. The faint curve of his smile carried a touch of mischief.

However, Wynter wasn't aware of his reaction.

She was about to try gathering more information from Martin when suddenly, a shout could be heard from a distance. "Go find her! Where has she gone?"

"The more she grows, the more disobedient she gets! Doesn't she know the ritual requires her to be at the riverbed?"

"That girl is such a troublemaker!"

Wynter paused at the shouting. She turned her head slightly and asked Martin, "Who are they looking for?"

## The Heiress' Return: Six Brothers at Her Beck and Call

Chapter 1710 They Will Come for You Next

"The chosen child, of course," Carmila said as she placed fresh fish and chips on the table. "She's to be the River God's bride and will have to spend a night alone by the riverbed. Maybe she got scared."

Martin took a drag from his cigarette and waved her off. "Go on, go make a couple more dishes. Enough of your blabbering."

Carmina inhaled sharply but turned and left without another word.

Wynter caught the implications immediately. She signaled to Dalton to stay put while she went to dig for more information herself.

Dalton, however, had his own way of keeping Martin under control.

When Martin came over to refill his tea, Dalton made his move. Instantly, Martin froze in place, and his consciousness was locked in the present moment.

Dalton was clear-headed. "Come out."

The black serpent slithered out reluctantly. "Yes, my lord?"

Dalton sounded almost indifferent. "Explain. Why are there traces of my energy here?"

The black serpent wasted no time to answer him. "Do you remember that there was another snake like me back during the war? It aligned itself with your fate and used the country's fortune to become a dragon.

"Since founding the nation, becoming spirits like that was forbidden. That one was just... lucky."

Dalton glanced at it. "And?"

It hurriedly continued, "Then, an old cultivator came by. He set up offerings for you, and apparently, he also left behind something of yours. I don't know what it was. That person's cultivation was too high-I didn't dare look too closely.

"The rainstorm a while back-that was likely caused by the old cultivator. He must have ordered the dragon to do it."

Realizing the implications, it raised its head abruptly. "My lord, that's betrayal! It disobeyed your will by summoning the rain on its own! It's even more unworthy of taking the test!"

Dalton ignored its final comment, his gaze shifting to the side.

Meanwhile, when Wynter entered the kitchen, she immediately noticed Carmila sighing heavily, her eyes red and swollen, as if she had been crying.

Upon seeing Wynter, Carmila quickly wiped her face and asked, "Why did you come in here?"

Wynter smiled slightly. "I wanted to help out."

"The food's almost done. You should just sit and chat. I can tell that you don't cook often." It was evident that Carmila was a kind soul.

Wynter didn't waste time with pleasantries and asked directly, "I noticed you've been crying. Is it about the River God?"

Before she could finish, Carmila quickly clamped a hand over her mouth. "You can't speak ill of the River God here! The clan leader doesn't allow it."

Carmila looked around nervously before closing the door tightly. "Why do you outsiders insist on coming to a place like this? You should've gone to the city instead."

It was evident that Carmila was feeling uneasy. "Please, leave the village before it's dark. That girl is already gone, and you're a young woman, too. I'm worried that something might happen to you."

"What do you mean?" Wynter asked, feigning confusion to encourage Carmila to elaborate. "I don't understand."

"I'm not from this village. Surely, this has nothing to do with me."

Carmila gripped Wynter's hand tightly. "You don't understand how things work here. The fate of every child who is sent to the riverbed depends on the River God's mood."

"If the River God is pleased, the child might come back-but those who return are never the same. They go mad. And if the River God isn't pleased, the girl is just... gone."

"It's time for the ritual again. Families with daughters have all left if they could. But the Frouds family stayed. They're hoping to offer their daughter for two million dollars before leaving the village for good. "But now their daughter has disappeared, and you're about the right age. They'll definitely come for you!"