

War Song 1231

Chapter 1231

In the study of the Quinton family's main residence, the flickering light from two lamps cast a cold glow over Malcolm's face, making his expression one of deep gloom and fury.

"Who knows about this?" Malcolm asked, his voice tight with barely contained anger.

Though his control was still sufficient to keep him from losing his temper on the spot, his frustration was evident.

The Marquis of Glandale hesitated. He couldn't admit that his sister had already learned of the matter. Only now did he realize why she had insisted on not coming along. This situation, it seemed, was best kept as quiet as possible.

"No one knows. I heard Lord Gerald was covered with a tablecloth when he was brought out. It's likely only Lady Carissa saw his face," said Fabian.

Malcolm ground his teeth together. "She should never have seen it. If it were Deputy Commander Brown or Chief Lewis, it would be manageable. But her how are we supposed to move forward now? She will make it her mission to let everyone know about this."

Fabian hesitated, then said, "Perhaps not. If that were the case, she wouldn't have let Lord Gerald cover his face. No matter how angry she is with the Quinton family, she still has to consider King Sigmund's reputation."

Malcolm scoffed coldly. "King Sigmund had more than one teacher. If the royal tutor's title were to be stripped, who could stop us? Never underestimate the pettiness and vindictiveness of women. A woman's revenge is far more ruthless than a man's."

Fabian didn't argue. He didn't know Carissa well enough, and given his involvement in this, even if he didn't believe she was the type to act out of malice, he wasn't willing to take any chances on her behalf. He still hoped Malcolm could help him.

After a moment's thought, Fabian spoke again, "Lord Malcolm, perhaps the first priority should be to rescue Lord Gerald. Your third brother's son, Lord Logan, has already become a prince consort,

hasn't he? Princess Kiera is the younger sister of the Hell Monarch. If she could speak in our favor, this matter would be much more likely to be resolved."

Malcolm was silent for a long time. His third brother was a simpleton, and Logan had lived at Inkwood Hall since he married. He often wandered off with Kiera on excursions, only returning occasionally to check on his parents.

This situation was something Malcolm didn't want the younger generation to get involved in, but asking Kiera for help would undoubtedly be more effective than any of them trying to intervene.

Noticing Malcolm's silence, Fabian paused before nervously adding, "There is one more thing. The gentlemen's retreats have always been a venture I started with Eleanor, and this can be traced back. I'm not sure how the king will view it, especially since Lord Gerald frequented the place."

Malcolm's face darkened in fury. He suddenly leaped to his feet, pointing a finger accusingly at Fabian.

"You... you had the gall to keep that place running? Eleanor opened the gentlemen's retreats, and you still dared to operate it? And you didn't think to inform me that my dad went there Countless times? Now that something has gone wrong, you want to drag the Quinton family into this? I'll tell you, don't even think about it!"

Seeing Malcolm's anger, Fabian found himself strangely relieved. While he didn't know how others would react, he had dealt with Malcolm for many years.

If Malcolm didn't express his anger, he might have been able to distance himself from the matter. But now that he was furious, it meant that he understood the situation couldn't be swept under the rug. Gerald's frequent visits to the gentlemen's retreat were undeniable. If anyone claimed there was no connection between the Quinton family, the retreat, and Eleanor, no one would believe it.

Attempting to maintain composure, Fabian forced a smile. "Lord Malcolm, anger is of no use now. The important thing is to resolve this issue. As for what happens next, I'll follow your lead entirely. How does that sound?"

Seeing Fabian's shameless

demeanor, Malcolm almost had the urge to strangle him. Though the marquis was from a prestigious family, his descendants had long abandoned honorable paths in favor of underhanded schemes. It was bad enough that he had suffied his own household, but now he had dragged Gerald into this mess.

Still, despite his fury, Malcolm knew Fabian was right about one thing-rescuing Gerald was the priority.

He took a deep breath and replied

coldly, "You will leave now. Go to the

palace tomorrow and offer your apology. Since Carissa had the gentlemen's retreats shut down, must have been by a royal order. The king has yet to deal with you, so it's clear he's still showing favor due to your ancestors' merits. If you go on your own to plead for mercy, you might receive a lighter punishment."

Upon hearing this, Fabian understood that Malcolm would have his officials intercede on his behalf.

He felt some relief and nodded. "Very well, I won't get in your way any longer. You should hurry and get Lord Gerald out."

Chapter 1232

Malcolm sat in the study, pondering for a moment before sending someone to Inkwood Hall to bring Logan back. However, his efforts were in vain as Logan had gone to Ebonflow with Kiera after the New Year and wouldn't be back until March.

Furious, Malcolm threw the inkpot on his table. "All he does is play! If it weren't for the Quinton family's influence and his marriage to a princess, would he be living such a carefree life?"

The Quinton family's steward, Mark, suggested, "Lord Malcolm, why not send the third lord and his wife instead?"

Malcolm furrowed his brow. "A fool and a simpleton. If I send them, they won't be able to say a word without making matters worse."

If only Rafael were still in the capital. Two men could manage a conversation better, but now he would have to go and speak to a woman. How could he possibly maintain his dignity?

This matter couldn't wait until tomorrow-it had to be dealt with tonight. Gerald's health wasn't good, and he was locked up in the cold, drafty cells of the Capital Guard headquarters. Who knew how long he could survive there?

It wasn't that Malcolm had no one to turn to. He simply couldn't afford to let anyone find out.

He never would have imagined, in all his years, that his dad would have such a secret. There had never been any sign of it before. Gerald had married, had children, and surrounded himself with servants, guards, and attendants. He had always been strict and composed.

When Carissa established her workshop, Gerald had even criticized her for it. The Quinton family was known for its rigid rules, and it was often he who ordered the younger generation to be disciplined on multiple occasions.

Who would have thought that, while the younger generations were staying out of trouble, it was Gerald who had fallen into scandal?

Reluctantly, Malcolm ordered a small carriage to be prepared, intending to make a quiet trip to the Capital Guard headquarters. After tonight's raid on the gentlemen's retreat and the capture of so many people, it was likely that Carissa was still at the headquarters.

Malcolm tried to remain discreet, but once he arrived, there would be no need to hide his presence. After all, anyone still there at this hour would be involved in tonight's operations.

Upon arriving at the Capital Guard headquarters, Malcolm stepped out of the carriage, his head covered with a veil as he entered. He first encountered Michael, who was yawning in the courtyard as he gave instructions to the guards on how to monitor the prisoners.

Malcolm considered himself fortunate to have met him. He approached him quietly and said, "Deputy Commander Brown, I wish to see Commander Sinclair."

Malcolm didn't introduce himself, but Michael recognized his voice immediately.

Since Michael had been assigned to another gentlemen's retreat, he was unaware that Gerald had been captured. Hearing that Malcolm wanted to see Carissa, Michael assumed it was likely to help secure the release of some officials.

He nodded and replied, "Commander Sinclair is in the side hall. I'll take you there."

The Capital Guard headquarters had not been renovated for a long time. The building was in a state of disrepair, and the biting wind howled through the cracks, chilling the bones.

Wrapped in a cloak, Carissa had just entered the side hall. It was a makeshift space separated from the main hall, where she usually worked and took short rests. A small coffee table was set up, and she had just taken a sip of hot coffee when Michael arrived with Malcolm.

That was quick.

Could they have known about Gerald's visit to the gentlemen's retreat already? Then again, maybe not-it

was possible that the Marquis of Glandale went to plead for help.

"Commander Sinclair!" Malcolm greeted, bowing with respect.

Carissa stood to return the bow. "Lord Quinton, please sit."

Her face showed no surprise, as if she had expected him to arrive. Clearly, she had already deduced Gerald's involvement.

Undeterred, Malcolm sat down

across from her, the two facing each other in an obvious standoff. He had prepared himself for a difficult negotiation. On his way here, he had already been bracing himself for the outrageous demands she was bound to make.

Determined to take control of the negotiation, he spoke first as soon as he sat down, saying, "Commander Sinclair, my niece acted recklessly at Gracewood Women's Academy and failed to live up to your teachings. I apologize on her behalf."

He began with a minor apology as a way to test the waters, curious to see what she might demand. If her request was excessive, he was prepared to negotiate further.

"It's all in the past now. The

academy has already resumed admissions, and Ms. Quinton has apologized as well." Carissa poured him a cup of coffee. "Lord Quinton, you must be anxious, coming all the way here so late. Have some coffee first."

Chapter 1233

Staring at the steaming coffee, Malcolm had no desire to drink it. It didn't matter that his throat was dry and his mouth felt like it was on fire.

Noticing that Carissa didn't respond to his mention of Gracewood Women's Academy, his eyes shifted. "I've heard that His Highness has a few capable men around him. Perhaps I could recommend someone..."

Carissa raised her hand to stop him. "Lord Malcolm, let's not stray from the topic. Rest assured, Lord Gerald's identity hasn't been revealed to anyone. When he left the gentlemen's retreat, I covered his head with a cloth. Even now in prison, he is still covered."

Her directness caught Malcolm off guard, making his face flush with heat. He didn't know how to respond. If he looked at it objectively, the matter was deeply embarrassing.

If it had been anyone else from the family-any cousin or nephew-he would have ordered them beaten within an inch of their life and tossed to a remote estate to fend for themselves.

Once the truth was laid bare, he had no leverage left. He lowered his voice and quietly asked,

"Commander Sinclair, is there any way you could release my dad? He's old and in poor health. He cannot endure this punishment."

Carissa replied, "Lord Malcolm, to be frank, this operation was carried out under His Majesty's orders. The Capital Guard and the Garrison Unit were sent to raid the gentlemen's retreats. Those detained will only be held for two days, as the focus isn't on them, but rather on the Sandorian spies hidden in the retreats. You may not know this, but there were over a dozen Sandorian spies concealed in the retreats, all brought here by Eleanor. Your dad himself has spent time with them."

The blood drained from Malcolm's face, and he sat frozen in shock.

If that was the case, this was far more serious than a mere breach of propriety.

How could his dad have been so reckless?

Carissa's straightforward approach had thrown him completely off balance. He took a sip of coffee to steady himself, his hand trembling slightly as he placed the cup down.

"Commander Sinclair, does this mean His Majesty knows my dad visited a gentlemen's retreat?" he asked, his voice low.

Carissa shook her head. "No, he doesn't know. His Majesty didn't want to know the names of those involved. He only issued the order to imprison everyone present at the scene for two days."

A glimmer of hope appeared in Malcolm's eyes. "Then, is it possible to have him imprisoned separately?"

"There's no place to hold prisoners

separately at the Capital Guard headquarters, Lord Malcolm. The real issue now is that His Majesty didn't want to know the names initially, but I will be reporting to him tomorrow. Whether he chooses to know then, I cannot say.

Carissa glanced at Malcolm's pale face. He really did resemble Gerald.

She continued, "Also, after two days, everyone except the spies will be released. Before the raid on the gentlemen's retreats, no one knew anything. But now that we've sealed all the retreats and uncovered Sandorian spies, this matter has become huge.

"There will be many rumors. Lord Gerald didn't visit once or twice-he's been going every few days for years. Over time, someone was bound to recognize him. I think the damage to your reputation is the real crisis for the Quinton family."

At least, it was a bigger crisis than Malcolm keeping a mistress.

Malcolm knew this all too well. Even if Gerald had taken a few concubines, it could easily be spun as him surrounding himself with learned women to assist and inspire him while he worked on his writings.

But now, how could he explain any of this? No matter what he said, it would be impossible to spin this story in a way that would save their family's dignity.

"Your Grace, I beg you to show me a way forward."

Malcolm's voice faltered, his face drawn with desperation. He no longer addressed her as Commander Sinclair, but with the proper respect, lowering himself in a way that signaled he was truly pleading. Carissa shook her head again. "I have no specific advice for you, Lord Malcolm. But if I were you, I'd first find out how many people at the gentlemen's retreat know about Lord Gerald's identity. The more who know, the more likely rumors will spread.

"It would be wise to go to the palace early tomorrow and beg for His Majesty's forgiveness. No one can control this situation better than His Majesty, and no one values King Sigmund's reputation more than he does.

"As for Lord Gerald's time here, I won't allow anyone to lift the cloth from his head. No one will see him." Looking at her, Malcolm could tell that she was genuinely offering a solution.

His mind was a whirl of confusion. Until now, all he had focused on was how to negotiate with Carissa to free Gerald from the prison.

He fell silent for a moment before

asking in a strained voice, "Your Grace, you've advised me and protected my dad. What do you wish to gain in return? Please speak frankly. As long as it doesn't go against my conscience or the law, I Will do everything in my power."

Chapter 1234

Carissa cradled the cup in her hands, savoring the warmth. "Lord Malcolm, do you think you can offer me something that I can't achieve on my own?"

Malcolm was momentarily stunned, unsure of what she meant.

Carissa gave a faint smile. "You should return now. I'll be staying here tonight."

The cold had begun to fog Malcolm's thoughts, and he struggled to make sense of her words.

"Then, why not be direct and tell me what it is that you want?" he said.

"Nothing at all. I'm doing this for the sake of King Sigmund's reputation, nothing more. Not every situation requires a trade of interests. Oh, and by the way, the Capital Guard headquarters doesn't provide meals to those detained here. You can have someone bring food for Lord Gerald, or leave some money and we'll arrange for it ourselves," she replied, her tone sharpening slightly.

Malcolm stood, still confused by her actions.

Why was she doing this for the Quinton family? Though they weren't bitter enemies, there had always been tension between them. He couldn't understand why she would offer help so selflessly.

As for Sigmund's reputation, Malcolm didn't think it was something a woman like her would concern herself with.

"Commander Sinclair, if you have any suitable candidates for promotion to the court, perhaps below the sixth rank..."

"Lord Malcolm, I won't walk you out," Carissa cut him off sharply.

Malcolm fell silent for a moment, genuinely unsure of what she meant. He searched his pockets, only to realize he hadn't brought any money. With a sigh, he muttered something about going back to prepare food and then made his exit.

As soon as he was gone, Violet came rushing over, her face lit with excitement. "I'm heading back now. Someone from Hell Monarch Estate just sent word that Thia and Bun will be here by this evening. Since you'll be staying here tonight, I'll go ahead."

Her eyes brightening and her face glowing with joy, Carissa stood up abruptly. "Really? Then, I'll... Oh, never mind. Go on ahead. After I report to His Majesty tomorrow, I'll return to the estate. Make sure to take care of them in the meantime."

Carissa hadn't seen her friends since returning to the capital after the battle, and she missed them dearly. Violet dashed off like the wind, her excited voice echoing through the cold halls of the Capital Guard headquarters.

With the biting cold night air, Carissa had arranged for some coal to be delivered to the prison. It wasn't the finest coal, and it smoked a bit when lit, but it was better than nothing.

Carissa personally inspected the area and found Gerald and Cody huddled in a corner. Cody was fiercely guarding Gerald, making sure no one approached. His eyes were sharp, but when they met Carissa's gaze, he instinctively lowered his head, using his body to shield his master.

Gerald still had his face covered, so it was impossible to read his expression. However, his rigid posture betrayed his nervousness.

The entire prison fell silent when Carissa entered. Before her arrival, some had been asking when the Capital Guard would release them. But now, with the one in charge present, they dared not speak a word. Carissa glanced around and said, "The Capital Guard cannot provide meals for you. You may have your families send food. Also, if anyone needs to relieve themselves, raise your hand and someone will take you outside. Do not make a mess here."

After she finished speaking, a

member of the Garrison Unit stepped forward and asked, "Which of you wants your family to send food? Come here and tell me which family you're from, and we'll send someone to inform your household. If you prefer not to notify your family, you can pay us the money and we'll buy food for you. The cost is for two meals a day, for four meals total."

"I-how much do I need to pay?" A young noble stepped forward, holding a silver ingot. His face was obscured, but his eyes, still visible, carried an air of arrogance. "Is this enough? If not, I have more."

He probably thought the Capital

Guard headquarters was extorting

money, as the ingot he held

amounted to ten silver coins. He figured the Capital Guard would make a huge profit from buying just four meals with the money he was giving them. After saying he had more, the young noble pulled out a banknote which was worth one

hundred silver coins.

Carissa gave him a brief glance. He was unrecognizable to her, but she made a mental note to have Michael look into him. This kind of reckless young man would eventually run his family's wealth into the ground.

"Four meals, simple fare, twenty-five copper coins per meal. That's one hundred copper coins for four meals.'

The Garrison Unit member shoved the silver ingot and banknote back toward the young noble, his expression one of distaste.

Upon hearing this, the prisoners looked around in confusion. One hundred copper coins? Who even had copper coins on them?

Chapter 1235

Carissa motioned for a member of the Garrison Unit to take the silver ingot worth ten silver coins and said, "Buy meals for everyone tomorrow. Once they're released, they can pay back the money they owe him."

What she said was meant to reassure those being held-nothing would be done to them beyond this brief detention. She wanted to keep the peace, urging them not to cause a ruckus and to get through the next two days without any trouble.

At the same time, it was meant as a subtle reminder for Gerald to calm down.

In the dead of night, Carissa made another round of the prison. This time, she found Gerald trembling

even more.

Cody approached her, speaking softly, "Might it be possible to get him a blanket? My lord is weak and can't stand the cold. His health is frail."

Carissa noticed that Gerald had curled himself into a strange, almost rigid position, huddling into the corner. There was a small draft coming through a hole in the wall, which explained why he seemed so cold.

She sighed inwardly, realizing it was impossible to treat everyone the same. This was only the first night. If Gerald froze to death in here, she would have a lot of explaining to do.

"Take him out and place him in solitary confinement. Give him a cotton quilt so he doesn't freeze to death here," Carissa ordered one of the guards.

Cody immediately knelt, deeply grateful, "Thank you, Commander Sinclair. Thank you so much."

Gerald could no longer stand and had to rely on Cody to carry him out.

The other men watched silently, feeling a sense of injustice but too fearful to speak up. From behind, it was clear that the man being taken out was an elderly figure. If he were left here to die, they would be forced to share a cell with a corpse, and that was bad luck they didn't want to invite.

The Capital Guard headquarters was expansive, with a kitchen connected to the mess hall. Ahead of it was the training yard, and in the center stood the building where they held discussions. The front courtyard housed the main hall, along with a separate side hall.

The side hall was used by Carissa for her personal matters. It was smaller and cozier, and could easily be heated with a single charcoal brazier. It made the most sense to place Gerald there.

Carissa led him inside and pointed to the chairs. "You can sit anywhere. The chaise lounge is off-limits. That's where I take my afternoon rest."

Desperate, Cody pleaded, "Commander Sinclair, my lord is in poor health. Sitting through the night will be too much for him. Could we borrow the chaise lounge just for tonight? We'll buy a new one in two days and replace it. Is that alright?"

"No," Carissa responded firmly. "I'm already making an exception by allowing him to stay here."

Not willing to give up, Cody pressed, "My lord is elderly. Would you consider this an act of respect for the elderly?"

Carissa glanced at Gerald, his face

still hidden under the cloth, and spoke flatly, "At his age, he shouldn't have been in a place like that. Since he was, I believe he's still capable. now. I'll

He'll have to make do for

have someone bring in some

charcoal for you."

Seeing that she wasn't going to agree, Cody had no choice but to arrange a few chairs together for Gerald to lie on.

Gerald was accustomed to a life of luxury and could hardly bear the cold, hard chairs. But he couldn't bring himself to complain. Instead, he clung to a quiet delusion, as if staying silent and out of sight would somehow keep his identity hidden from everyone.

Cody desperately pleaded for two blankets, explaining that his master was frail and couldn't sleep on such cold chairs.

At that point, Carissa had enough and decided to be blunt. She turned to the nearest guard and said, "Go

to the Quinton family's residence and have them send two blankets here."

As soon as the words left her mouth, Gerald trembled uncontrollably.

Even though his face and head were still covered, it felt as if all his hidden shame had been exposed to the world. For a moment, he didn't feel the cold. Instead, he felt his blood rushing to his head, burning his old face with embarrassment. He almost wished the ground would swallow him up.

Soon enough, Malcolm made another personal visit. This time, he brought food, blankets, and clothing.

He had gone back to find that

Gerald's wardrobe was locked. After

forcing it open, he discovered the clothes inside were brightly colored, garish, and covered in pinks, yellows, and floral patterns. He surmised that these must be the clothes his dad had worn to the gentlemen's retreat.

So, he brought some clothes along to change Gerald into something more presentable. Carissa saw him carrying the clothes and blankets and turned her head away, pretending she didn't see it.

Malcolm had never been so humiliated in his life. Even when his affair with his mistress was exposed, as long as he maintained his stern demeanor, he could push through it. But this time, he wished the earth would open up and swallow both him and his dad whole.

Chapter 1236

Carissa left the room first and Cody followed, quietly closing the door behind him.

Inside the small side hall, only Gerald and Malcolm remained. The father and son pair sat in silence for a long while, neither of them speaking. Finally, it was Malcolm who stepped forward, intending to remove the cloth covering Gerald. But the old man held tightly to it with both hands, refusing to let him.

With a heavy heart, Malcolm set the blankets and clothing aside, turning his back. "Please change your clothes. I'll turn around."

The sound of rustling fabric came after a long pause.

A sharp, uncomfortable feeling welled up inside Malcolm. His chest tightened, his throat burned, and his nose became clogged as tears welled up in his eyes. He couldn't tell if it was from frustration, anger, or the weight of everything he couldn't quite accept.

All his life, his father had been a figure of stern authority, someone whose presence commanded respect. His words could shake the literary world, and his cold, unapproachable demeanor was feared by many. But now, this disgrace.

If word of it got out, it wouldn't just cause a ripple. It would send shockwaves through the entire kingdom. After a long while, Malcolm's voice broke the silence, "Are you done?"

There was no answer, but there was also no sound of fabric rustling anymore.

Turning slowly, he saw Gerald lying on the makeshift bed of chairs, completely wrapped in the thick quilt, his face and head hidden beneath it. The clothes he had worn earlier were carefully folded, resting neatly on the table beside him.

The neatness of it struck Malcolm deeply.

In the past, there had always been servants to help Gerald change. Yet here, his father had done it himself, managing not only to change but to fold his clothes with such precision and care.

The sight of those colors-the bright, garish hues-burned Malcolm's eyes. The tears he had been holding back finally spilled over.

Lost and completely confused, his voice trembled as he asked, "Why?"

Under the blanket, Gerald's hands were clenched tightly, his nails digging into his palms.

From the moment Malcolm entered the room, he hadn't called Gerald "Dad".

How could Gerald not understand what was on his son's mind? He was embarrassed by him.

Malcolm sat down, not looking like he had the intention to leave. If he left now, he would have to face Carissa. Right now, he couldn't face anyone-and he didn't want to.

He had already sent Mark to inquire with the Marquis of Glandale, asking how many people knew about Gerald's visit to the gentlemen's retreat. He wouldn't move until he had an answer.

Wherever he went-even if he hid alone in the study-he felt the weight of a thousand eyes upon him.

After what seemed like an eternity, his voice cracked as he asked again, "Why?"

His words were thick with the remnants of tears, his nose still congested.

Under the blanket, Gerald remained motionless, as if he had stopped breathing altogether.

"If you can't even face me, how can you face anyone else?" Malcolm's voice wavered with desperation.

"At least let me understand why. When this gets out, I need to be able to explain."

But an explanation was impossible now. What was left was to come up with some reasonable excuse, something that could mitigate the damage.

Time passed in silence. After a full 15 minutes, Gerald finally lifted the blankets, likely because he felt suffocated underneath all the layers. His face was pale and ashen.

Malcolm was caught off guard, nearly toppling from his chair in shock. He clutched his chest, gasping for breath until the tightness in his chest subsided.

Gerald lay still, speaking in a dull,

detached tone, "You think little of me now, don't you? I don't blame you. I can't forgive myself either. But I've never indulged myself in my life. Now, with half a foot in the grave and our family flourishing, let myself have a few moments of freedom. I don't owe anyone anything."

It was as though he was speaking more to himself than to Malcolm. Perhaps Gerald had always been justifying his actions to himself this way. How else could he bring himself to wear such a disguise and go to a gentlemen's retreat?

Once the shock had passed,

Malcolm oddly, felt some relief. In

this state, plus with the clothes neatly folded on the table, there

were few who would recognize his father Carissa had recognized him, but that was only because of her sharp eyes-and, as Gerald had said, he had personally reprimanded her during New Year's Eve.

"So many things are beyond our control. I don't think I've done anything wrong," Gerald said with his eyes

closed, his expression unreadable. "If I am wrong, then it is fate's doing.

"I don't know how to judge right from wrong," Malcolm said, his voice thick with emotion. "I understand your struggles-holding up our family all those years wasn't easy.

"But what I can't understand is... the Quinton family leads the civil ranks now, and our every word and action should reflect that. Well, I don't have the right to criticize you. I've made my own mistakes, but this doesn't feel the same."

Gerald let out a mocking laugh. "You don't understand. Just go back."

Chapter 1237

In the end, Malcolm left the room. As he passed through the main hall, he saw Carissa sitting by the fire. He didn't want to face her, but for some reason, his feet moved of their own accord, carrying him inside. A thought struck him-if Carissa weren't here watching over the situation, he would have forcibly taken Gerald away. Even if it meant angering Salvador, he couldn't allow his father to endure this kind of humiliation.

"It's late. Why haven't you returned to your residence, Lord Malcolm?" Carissa asked, her voice steady. Malcolm looked utterly deflated, like a wilted flower after the first frost. All the strength had drained from him. He had never felt such fear before, the dread of stepping out into the unknown, of facing what awaited him once he left these walls.

He remembered his arrival tonight, thinking he had prepared for a negotiation, only to find that Carissa hadn't intended to profit from it at all.

As the Civil Minister, Malcolm was in charge of many officials' careers. Over the years, he had seen countless people scheme and grovel for power, often to the point of utter disgrace.

But Carissa didn't seem the least bit interested in taking advantage of the situation to promote a few of her own people. She couldn't be so naive as to ignore the king's wariness of the Hell Monarch. Having allies in court was crucial. If trouble arose, at least someone would be there to speak on their behalf.

But despite Malcolm's whirlwind of thoughts, Gerald's pale, makeup-streaked face and neatly folded floral clothes kept appearing in his mind. It tormented him, nearly driving him mad.

"Commander Sinclair, will you be staying here tonight?" he asked, making conversation to avoid the silence.

"Yes. I won't be leaving," Carissa replied, her voice calm.

"But you could return to your estate," Malcolm said, his gaze briefly shifting away from her, unable to meet her eyes.

Carissa glanced at him. "If I leave and someone takes advantage of their power to drag someone away, the guards in the Capital Guard won't be able to stop them," she said flatly.

A higher-ranking official could easily crush anyone beneath them-especially one with much higher

authority.

Malcolm's shoulders slumped. He had indeed considered such an option.

"But it's not just you, Lord Malcolm. There are others watching from the outside as well," Carissa said, her smile sharp with irony. "No one wants their family name dragged through the mud, so they're all eager to pull people out of the Capital Guard headquarters.

"However, I'm following His Majesty's orders. Unless His Majesty himself gives a command, no one will be leaving. As for Lord Gerald, I'm only allowing him to stay in the side hall because of his age and frailty, and because the prison is cold and drafty."

Her insight into his thoughts left Malcolm momentarily embarrassed, making him falter.

After a long pause, he quietly said. "Thank you, Commander Sinclair. If you think it's dirty, I'll have the furniture replaced once my father leaves in a few days."

Dirty?

Carissa's eyes flickered with a hint of surprise. "There's no need for that. It's not a problem. But perhaps, Lord Malcolm, you should be asking how many people know Lord Gerald's identity."

Her meaning was clear. She was subtly hinting at her wish for him to leave. Staying up through the night wasn't something she was inclined to do, especially not to discuss topics best left untouched.

Besides, after seeing Gerald's state, Malcolm might feel compelled to try and take him away. She was too drained to navigate that kind of back-and-forth.

Naturally, Malcolm could hear the unspoken dismissal in her words. However, he was determined not to leave. His feet felt rooted to the ground, and he couldn't bring himself to move.

He gave up pretending and spoke plainly, "Commander Sinclair, if I take him away, I'll take full responsibility for any punishments. I'll personally answer to His Majesty. I won't let you bear the

consequences."

"If you take him, everyone else will want to take their own people. If that happens, my entire mission will

be a failure," Carissa replied firmly, not even bothering to lift her gaze.

Her refusal was absolute.

"I've already said I'll take full responsibility," he pressed.

"You think you can just take

responsibility by saying so?" Carissa shot back. "It's not about what you say, it's about what His Majesty says. Surely, you haven't forgotten what it means to act under a royal edict, Lord Malcolm."

With a heavy sigh, Malcolm sank back in his chair. Uninterested, Carissa calmly sipped her coffee, leaving him to sit in silence.

Minutes stretched into an hour, and he still didn't leave. The audacity of it made Carissa chuckle in disbelief.

Finally, with a perplexed expression on his face, he spoke again, "There's one thing I need to ask you, Commander Sinclair."

"Speak," she replied, stifling a yawn with the sleeve of her clothes.

"Is it possible that someone who isn't inclined toward male affection would go to a gentlemen's retreat?" he asked hesitantly.

It seemed Malcolm couldn't accept the idea of his father's preferences, let alone the fact that he had gone to a gentlemen's retreat.

"Yes," Carissa said without hesitation. "Many go for the thrill of it."

"Before you acted, surely you must have investigated? My dad, he..." Malcolm trailed off, clearly struggling to ask the question.

"I don't know. You'll have to ask him." She gave him a sidelong glance. "But I think you already know the answer. I need some rest now, Lord Malcolm. Please leave."

She paused, then added out of consideration, "Oh, and you should leave through the back gate. There are too many people outside."

Chapter 1238

In the end, Malcolm left.

Watching his retreating figure, Carissa couldn't help but think how far he had fallen from the confident, imposing official he used to be. He hadn't seemed this defeated even after the scandal about his mistress. Now, it was as if the weight of the world had struck him down, leaving him utterly broken.

Though she stepped outside for a brief walk, exhaustion did not settle over her. Instead, she called for Michael to come speak with her.

"Your Grace, you can return home now. I can manage things here," Michael said.

"It's fine. It's already three in the morning," Carissa replied. "Better to avoid any complications. There are several prominent families outside, and some of them can cause trouble without a second thought. You won't be able to handle it. Plus, His Majesty never intended for them to make a public spectacle. If things get too out of hand and those detained get dragged out one by one, it'll be hard to explain to His Majesty." "That's true," Michael agreed, nodding in understanding.

The next day, neither Malcolm nor Carissa could move fast enough-the Marquis of Glandale was ahead of them.

Fabian entered the room carrying thorn branches on his back as a sign of his submission, then began to weep. He claimed that the gentlemen's retreats were originally Eleanor's. After her downfall, he had planned to shut them down, but had continued to operate them at Gerald's suggestion.

Essentially, Fabian had turned around and cast Gerald to the wolves.

He chose the path that would offend the Quinton family the most because he knew about the spies from Sandoria. He understood that someone had to take the fall for this, and it was clearly going to be him. The only way to save himself and his family was to drag Gerald down with him.

However, the cost was high-he had effectively ruined any chance of repairing relations with the Quinton family.

But now, with Fabian's confession, Gerald was no longer just a guest at the gentlemen's retreat-he was also the reason the establishments had continued to function. This new spin on the story would change things.

As Salvador was mindful of Sigmund's reputation, he would likely try to downplay this incident.

When Malcolm entered the palace, he was met with Salvador's fury. A heavy inkpot flew toward him, landing with a thud against his thick clothing. It wasn't painful, but the impact was enough to make his legs buckle, and he fell to his knees with a thud.

"Your Majesty, please forgive me!" he cried out.

He still didn't know exactly what Fabian had said. But seeing the man kneeling outside with his thorn branches, Malcolm could guess that the truth about Gerald's visits to the gentlemen's retreat had come out.

"My dad was momentarily confused, Your Majesty. Please forgive him," he pleaded.

"This is utterly ridiculous! Outrageous!" Salvador seethed, barely able to contain his anger. "The Quinton family isn't just confused, you've gone too far! I've been lenient with you time and time again, turning a blind eye to many things, yet you dare to take on Eleanor's business? The gentlemen's retreats housed Sandorian spies, whom you've been sheltering for years!"

Terrified and shaken, Malcolm didn't fully grasp Salvador's words. He could do nothing but continue to kneel in apology.

Derek entered, delivering the news that Carissa was waiting outside for orders.

Salvador's anger simmered down slightly as he snapped at Malcolm, "Go outside and kneel. Don't dirty my eyes any further."

The word "dirty" struck Malcolm like a physical blow. Humiliated and furious, he crawled and stumbled out, joining Fabian on the floor outside.

Carissa entered the hall and knelt on one knee. "Greetings, Your Majesty."

"Rise," Salvador said, his voice still cold.

The purpose behind his order to sweep the gentlemen's retreats had been to find the Sandorian spies and to serve as a warning to the officials and noble families. He hadn't expected that in the process, he would uncover that a royal tutor was involved.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Carissa stood after her brief acknowledgement and remained silent, hands clasped behind her back. "You knew about Lord Gerald's visits to the gentlemen's retreat, didn't you?" Salvador asked, his sharp gaze bearing into her, as though accusing her of withholding the truth.

Carissa met his gaze calmly and admitted, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then, why didn't you report it?" Salvador demanded.

"Your Majesty, I believed he wouldn't

go last night, as he had already visited a few days ago. If he hadn't gone, neither you nor anyone else would have found out about his visits. With that, the gentlemen's retreats would never be connected to him. Also, I believed that you would prefer not to know, Your Majesty," Carissa answered steadily.

Salvador paused. He certainly hadn't wanted to know, and it would have been far easier to simply ignore the situation. He would have gladly washed his ears clean, pretending he had never heard of it.

But then, Salvador recalled Fabian's words and snapped, "How could you not know? Lord Fabian says it was Lord Gerald who told him to keep the gentlemen's retreats running. Didn't you investigate that?" Carissa looked up in surprise, meeting Salvador's cold, angry gaze. She couldn't help but think that Fabian was either clever or foolish.

"That's.... I don't know, and I didn't investigate," she said.

"You couldn't have investigated? It seems your abilities are lacking after all," Salvador snapped, lashing out at seemingly anyone in his path as his temper flared.

Carissa lowered her head in a

vels

posture of feigned humility. But inside, she couldn't help but wonder hadn't Salvador considered that Fabian might have lied, intentionally dragging Gerald into this mess?

Chapter 1239

The next moment, Malcolm and Fabian were summoned back into the hall to receive their scolding. The other two knelt and acknowledged their faults, but Carissa remained silent.

Salvador's anger flared again. "Don't think you're innocent, or that you've been unjustly accused. You knew Lord Gerald went to the gentlemen's retreat, yet you didn't report it in advance."

Carissa had endured a long night, and she was now being forced to be scolded alongside Malcolm and Fabian. Naturally, she felt a little disgruntled.

So, she lifted her head slightly and asked, "If I had reported it, would you have refrained from raiding the gentlemen's retreats, Your Majesty?"

Angry and embarrassed, Salvador shot back, "They would still have been raided, but..."

He trailed off, caught in his own thoughts. He knew he couldn't go back on what he had ordered, and he certainly couldn't say that having prior knowledge would have made him send someone to warn Gerald. Moreover, it was uncertain if he would actually visit the gentlemen's retreat last night.

If Carissa had informed the king that she had seen Gerald there earlier, he wouldn't have believed her.

The truth was, before catching him, who could have believed it?

Gerald was a royal tutor-a revered figure with an unparalleled status, admired by the people and seen as a model by scholars across the kingdom. It seemed inconceivable that he would go to such a place. If Carissa had reported it in advance, Salvador would have denounced it as a baseless accusation. Carissa's voice rose as she continued, "And the Quinton family is such a large family. With servants all around, how could no one know that Lord Gerald went to the gentlemen's retreat? I am only in charge of investigating. I cannot predict who goes, when they go, or why. And Lord Gerald wasn't the only one present, there were many sons of noble families and officials as well.

"And about those loyal ministers you care so much about the ones you specifically asked me about? They've all been arrested as well, just as you instructed."

Salvador was blinded by anger and refused to acknowledge any fault.

He continued to berate her, "In the end, it's your failure to handle things properly. There's nothing to argue here.""

"Yes, Your Majesty, I accept my fault," Carissa replied, lowering her head. "Once I return to the Capital Guard headquarters, I will release Lord Gerald."

Salvador's expression darkened.

Release Gerald? Could he do that? If he was going to let anyone go, it should have been everyone. He had said before that whoever was caught would be locked up for two days. As king, how could he change orders so easily without losing any authority?

He glanced at Carissa, who had snapped back at him. For a moment, his rationality returned. He couldn't really blame her for this situation.

At this point, Malcolm was now aware of Fabian's false accusations, but he couldn't be sure if they were truly false. After all, his father hadn't said anything to him about it the night before.

But releasing Gerald now? That wasn't possible. There were too many eyes watching from outside.

If anyone was going to be let go, it should've been done quietly through the back door last night. But now that everything was out in the open, there were probably countless people waiting outside the Capital Guard headquarters, eager for the spectacle. Whether it was the front, the back, or the side entrance, there were no doubt a dozen eyes watching. There was no way to release him now.

That was not all.

Not only could Gerald not be released yet, he would have to wait until all the other people were freed. Only then, in the dead of night, would Malcolm be able to sneak in and get him without drawing any attention.

He nervously spoke up, "Your Majesty, he can't be released for now."

Did Salvador really need Malcolm to remind him of that?

With a cold glare, the king snapped, "Commander Sinclair is right. Did none of you in the Quinton family know that Lord Gerald went to the gentlemen's retreat? You're all such devoted sons and grandsons. Truly admirable."

Carissa lowered her eyes demurely at the remark. So now, she was "Commander Sinclair," was she? Malcolm inwardly groaned.

Not only had he lost his reputation for being a devoted son, but now he was being blamed for something he never even considered. How could anyone have known Gerald was going there? It wasn't even something Malcolm had thought about.

Besides, Gerald had always lived in a more remote part of the estate, saying he preferred solitude. And when he left, he hadn't used the main gate.

But ultimately, it was the Quinton

family's own failure to notice. Gerald always traveled by carriage. Even if Cody was with him, someone would have noticed him sneaking out at night. Yet, no one ever reported it to Malcolm. To

be frank, it was possible someone in the household knew about the late-night trips but didn't dare speak up.

For Fabian's part, he only sobbed and admitted his fault, begging Salvador to reduce his punishment. He didn't say a word more.

Salvador was growing weary of the marquis' tears. His headache deepened, and irritably, he waved his hand.

"Silence! Enough of this." He then turned back to Carissa. "You've worked hard. You may leave now. They will stay locked up for now."

It was normal for a woman to have a bit of a temper. Carissa had never been one to let others walk all over her.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I will take my leave now," she said, eager to leave.

She had been waiting to return to her estate. Cynthia and Bun were on her mind.

As for how Salvador decided to deal with things now, that was his problem. The Capital Guard and the Garrison Unit had already done their part-the gentlemen's retreats had been raided and the spies had been

sent to the Supreme Court

Chapter 1240

Carissa rode swiftly toward Hell Monarch Estate, her horse's hooves echoing against the cobblestones. As she reached the gates, she dismounted and handed the reins to the stableman, not even slowing her pace as she hurried inside.

"Her Grace has returned!" someone called out.

Violet had probably stationed someone at the gate, ready to report as soon as Carissa arrived.

As she rounded the white partition screen, a flash of red came into view. Just before reaching her, the figure leaped a few steps ahead. Carissa quickly reached out to catch her, and they spun around several times in place as Cynthia's delighted voice rang in her ears.

"You're finally back, my great noble lord, Commander Sinclair!"

Carissa set her down, her hands immediately reaching up to squeeze Cynthia's round, soft cheeks in pure joy. "Thia, you've gained weight!"

Cynthia pushed her away with a playful pout, her lips curving upward. "Couldn't you say something nicer? You see me for the first time in ages, and you go straight for the jugular."

Carissa grinned. "You're not fat, just a bit more... rounded. You're still as beautiful as ever."

"The truly fat one hasn't appeared yet," Cynthia teased, looping her arm through Carissa's as they strolled forward.

Just then, Violet and Bun appeared, leisurely walking toward them. Bun was no longer as plump as

before, but he was definitely more solid, giving him a more steady presence. When he saw Carissa, his face lit up with a big smile.

"Cari, what took you so long to get back? Is work really that busy?"

"Bun!" Carissa dragged Cynthia forward and playfully punched him in the chest. She felt the firm muscles under his tunic. "Good lad, are you close to joining the ranks of first-rate martial artists?"

Bun beamed proudly. "I don't know about first- or second-rate, but I've improved a lot. If I spar with you now, I might not lose."

"Oh?" Carissa raised an eyebrow. "We should definitely have a match, then."

Cynthia scoffed, giving Bun a playful shove. "Are you serious? A couple hundred moves, and you'd be crawling on the floor, looking for your teeth. Do you think two years of

training makes you invincible? Don't embarrass yourself."

Carissa chuckled softly, knowing the playful rivalry between them had always been a part of their friendship. Cynthia especially liked to tease Bun.

Violet let out a snort. "Bun, remember, we fought last night. You were no match for me."

Bun pouted, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. "I was holding back. If I had gone all out, I wouldn't have lost."

The group laughed as they

continued walking inside. Jacob had already arranged a meal for them, and Lily Kad personally prepared a nourishing soup. After a night of working, how could they not feel concerned for Carissa's wellbeing?

Lulu emerged with a warm towel, gently wiping Carissa's face and hands before leading everyone to the dining room to catch up over food and drink.

"Jasper wanted to come see you too, but he didn't want to face your husband, so he decided not to come," Bun said in a deep voice.

Carissa shot him a glare. "Stop making things up. Jasper only sees me as his martial sister."

Carissa once had admirers at Meadow Ridge, with one of them being Jasper from the Crystal Bloom Guild. This was widely known, even to Adrian.

Back then, Jasper had come every day for a month, carrying flowers and waiting for Carissa outside the Pathfinders Guild. His persistence eventually pushed Adrian, who was usually indifferent to such matters, to explode in fury.

Pointing at Jasper, he shouted, "You're an 18-year-old man. How dare you fancy a 14-year-old girl? You're a disgrace!"

His outburst became legendary. In the Crystal Bloom Guild, everyone knew the fiercest person wasn't Everett, but Adrian.

Utterly crushed by Adrian's words, Jasper had considered hanging himself. For weeks, he suffered from the pain of unrequited love, but it was Adrian's scornful words that shamed him the most.

Back then, Carissa had been too

innocent to understand matters of the heart. She had even tried to defend Jasper, thinking it was kind of him to bring flowers every day. She had felt Adrian was too harsh, cruel even, for shaming him so thoroughly.

Adrian practically knocked some sense into her, making her too afraid to speak up for Jasper again.