

## War Song 1251

### Chapter 1251

Even after Carissa left, Kylie couldn't calm down from her anger.

She sat in silence, watching darkly as Gerald took his medicine. After that, the royal physician performed needle treatment on him. Gerald also took the pills Sebastian had left for him.

Within two hours, his complexion gradually improved.

The royal physician confirmed that Gerald's spirits had lifted, and there was hope for his recovery.

The Quinton family was delighted, but Kylie was utterly disappointed. Her face was as pale as it had been the day Gerald had gone to the gentlemen's retreat.

She knew she had taken a gamble, and that her actions would alienate her maternal family and anger the king. Yet, Carissa posed a monumental threat. Only when her name was fully tarnished could Kylie's title as queen be solidified.

Kylie could do everything Carissa had done-reopening the women's academy, recruiting noblewomen and officials' daughters to attend, and consolidating the power of the noble families to strengthen Connor's position.

Things she once refused to do, Kylie now considered. She had seen through her dad's indecisiveness. He had placed all his hopes on the Quinton family, but if anything went wrong, it would all collapse. Jeremiah entered to visit Gerald, patting him on the shoulder. "Old friend, take care of yourself. Watch how these young ones stir things up. As long as they're causing a ruckus, the world will stay lively." Gerald was moved. He had expected Jeremiah to look down on him, but his attitude remained unchanged, just like it had always been.

Gerald pulled through in the end, but Ruth didn't. In early February, the news of her death was officially announced, and Salvador sent word to Yuvan that he could return for the funeral.

Yuvan seemed to have been waiting for this day. He wept loudly in his estate, then began making preparations. He wasn't getting ready to return to the capital. Instead, he had prepared a storyteller in advance.

The storyteller would exaggerate the death of Yuvan's mom, portraying her as a victim of the royal family's cruelty and the king's neglectful actions.

However, he had yet to make his move when he began hearing praises from the common people for the current queen dowager. They spoke of how Victoria had posted public notices across the realm, seeking the best physicians to treat Ruth.

Not only did the royal physicians tend to her for 24 hours, but Victoria also invited Sebastian to the palace to treat Ruth using the finest medicinal herbs available.

Naturally, there were also mentions of her extraordinary generosity-granting Yuvan leave to return to the capital to care for his ailing mom for an entire year.

Yuvan was caught off guard, his plans thwarted before they even began.

But how could he accept this? In the past, he would endure everything quietly. Now, with his body disabled, he was more anxious than ever. Despite the public's praise, he still sent his people to spread

rumors.

Unfortunately for him, Victoria's reputation was already well-known among the people. His words hardly made it beyond Valken before they were swiftly rebutted.

A single drop of water falling into the ocean made only a tiny ripple before disappearing completely. When Yuvan returned to Valken, something else struck him as strange. It seemed that his control over affairs in Valken had weakened.

That was how it felt!

He could still summon the local officials, but his orders were often delayed or met with excuses. When they did come, they were overly polite and respectful.

Though he sensed something was wrong, he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

He summoned Wayne for advice. Wayne suggested that perhaps the officials had grown complacent after he had spent too much time in the capital.

"It'll pass in time," Wayne assured Yuvan.

Yet, doubts still lingered in Yuvan's

mind. Even more troubling was the news coming from the capital. It was said that spies from Sandoria had infiltrated the gentlemen's retreats in the capital, and that they had been brought in by Eleanor all those years ago.

Eleanor had never mentioned anything of the sort. Had she had dealings with Sandoria? Why hadn't he been told?

Eleanor was far too sharp to be

unaware of something like this. Back then, the Southern Frontier was still under Sandoria's control. If it was just for profit, bringing Sandoria's spies into the capital and taking such a huge risk wasn't something she would've done.

Unless, of course, she had an agenda of her own, or had made some kind of alliance. Maybe she was working for someone else.

"Yuvan, are you planning to return to the capital for the funeral?" Harvey asked him.

Yuvan was torn.

Going back to the capital meant danger. Not going meant failing to observe his duty to his mom.

After weighing it all, he found that his reputation mattered less and less. Safety was now his priority. "I am disabled and need treatment. The journey is too much for me. I will take this as my failure as a son, and hope that my mom's spirit will forgive me."

Harvey nodded. "I believe you've made the right choice. You shouldn't return. Word has come from the capital that Rafael left before the new year. He may have come to Valken. We should stay here for now."

## Chapter 1252

Harvey had left the capital with his belongings, but he soon realized that the gold and silver he carried had been swapped out for fakes. Furious, he raged at the loss, but it was too late to turn back.

He didn't dare return to the capital now. With no connections or resources to rely on, and only the title of prince to his name, he found himself isolated and powerless. His position was growing increasingly awkward.

But he had found an alternative, though it might not be the best path for his third brother.

Yet, survival meant looking out for oneself. Harvey's plans weren't just about securing a promising territory in the future.

The one he was aligning himself with was deeply hidden, never suspected, and adept at infiltrating others' territories for his gain. That was the true strategist.

Of course, this individual was even more formidable than Yuvan. If things succeeded, taking credit for their achievements wouldn't be an easy task.

But compared to Yuvan, this person had better odds of success. Naturally, Harvey would choose to follow the one with the higher chance of victory.

With his current position, he had no leverage-no wealth, no connections, nothing.

But with this other person, Yuvan himself became the leverage. If this individual wanted to strip everything from Yuvan, Harvey would be the key.

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In fact, Yuvan was deeply affected by Ruth's death and was grief-stricken. Losing a mother was painful,

but what angered him more was that her death had been entirely without purpose. Instead, it had only served to further glorify the queen dowager.

Victoria's virtuous reputation spread far and wide, even making Salvador seem more admirable by association.

They had used Ruth's death to their advantage-how despicable!

Back in the capital, the scandal surrounding Gerald and the gentlemen's retreat had been suppressed. Now, the talk of the town was Victoria's virtuous reputation.

Victoria had once been a wise and beloved queen, and she had been deeply devoted to Sigmund. After his death, she had withdrawn into herself from sorrow, and the people rarely heard news of her.

Now, hearing about her once more stirred memories in many, and her past deeds were brought up again and sung in praise.

The storm of admiration for Victoria swept through the capital like thunder, drowning out all the scandals about gentlemen's retreat.

Even Carissa and Jacob were taken aback by Victoria's power. When she chose to act, she overwhelmed everything in her path.

Of course, this wave of public

opinion had been carefully

orchestrated. However, Jacob noted that while anyone could steer the crowd, Victoria's genuine

accomplishments were what made

her praise so well-founded

everyone had that kind of legacy to draw from.

Once Ruth's funeral was over, the palace ladies went to the palace to offer their greetings. However, they found that the affairs of the harem were being handled by Salvador's concubines, Sylvia and Grace. Kylie had fallen ill and was being confined in Everspring Palace, and wasn't meeting anyone.

A few keen observers took note and remarked that the women of the Quinton family had not visited Kylie

in the palace, claiming it was to avoid disturbing her while she recovered.

However, wouldn't a daughter expect their mom to visit them, especially when she was unwell?

The common people had their praises, while the noble families whispered their suspicions.

After Gerald's scandal, the Quinton family lost much of its support. Malcolm, having been punished with a reduction in his salary, refused visitors as well.

Even the palace concubines were uncertain about Kylie's condition. No one was allowed to visit her, and only rumors spread. The word was that Salvador had been furious, and the next day, Kylie had fallen ill.

No one knew exactly what had happened, but it seemed clear that the king and the queen were growing apart.

In the palace, rumors ran rampant. Many speculated that Salvador had taken out his anger over Gerald's affair on Kylie. But this theory didn't quite hold up. After all, Salvador was so angry that he didn't even want to see Connor anymore.

As Salvador's eldest son, Connor had always been his favorite. But now, he was completely shut out. This caused many to wonder about the situation.

In the past, other princes had little chance of becoming Crown Prince because Connor was in the picture. But now, it seemed as though both the

queen and the eldest prince had fallen out of favor with

Salvador—everything was up in the air.

Of course, these were just thoughts, and no one dared to take action.

Connor was still too young, and Salvador wasn't old yet. Moreover, every couple had their disputes. Once

Salvador's anger subsided, things would likely return to normal as if nothing had happened.

So, why stir the pot and let Salvador notice any suspicious thoughts?

Chapter 1253

Though Malcolm had refused all visitors, he personally took Marjorie to call on Carissa.

As usual, Carissa welcomed them, but there was little to say between her and Malcolm. Jacob filled the silence with conversation, while Carissa led Marjorie to the side garden for tea.

Marjorie had rarely ventured out in the past year and had grown noticeably thinner, though there was a quiet calm about her now.

She no longer seemed so tightly wound.

In the past, Marjorie had always reminded herself that, as the matriarch of the Quinton family, she needed to uphold the proper demeanor. Even if she disliked something, she wouldn't let it show on her face.

She had always been hard on herself, but now, it seemed as though she had let go of some of that burden. She had come to realize that some things just had to be taken as they came. As long as she didn't cross any lines, it was enough. Perfection wasn't required.

Marjorie apologized to Carissa for not raising her daughter better. She had always thought she did everything perfectly, but in reality, there were few things she truly excelled at.

But she had come to accept that it didn't matter. If a person could do even one thing really well in their lifetime and feel truly satisfied, that would be enough.

Carissa smiled and said, "Who among us doesn't have regrets? Just be kind to yourself from now on." Marjorie's gaze grew distant. "Yes, being kind to oneself makes life a little more free, doesn't it?" Carissa felt that breaking down your old self and rebuilding a new one was an incredibly difficult thing to do.

But Marjorie had done it, and that was remarkable.

"Oh, and please pass a message to Lord Gerald for me. I've already begun searching for the person he asked me to find. I'll let him know as soon as I have news."

Marjorie admired Carissa's determination to follow through on her words and her unwavering commitment to her promises. She stood up, bowed, and said, "Thank you, Your Grace."

The person Gerald was looking for wasn't hard for Carissa to track down. Claire and her team had already sent out inquiries-name, address, background. No matter how hidden the person was, they would likely find them. Perhaps Gerald hadn't really looked, or maybe he hadn't dared.

Jacob and Malcolm hadn't had much to talk about. One was a strategist for the Hell Monarch's household, the other was the current head of the Civil Department. Their interests didn't align, and even their coffee preferences were different.

The awkwardness stretched until Marjorie reappeared. Jacob eagerly ushered them out.

After they left, Jacob turned to Carissa and said, "The Quinton family's been lying low for the last few years. They can't afford to stand out, not with all that's happened. Lord Malcolm looks completely drained.

Carissa nodded. "Yes. In the past,



they would walk with their heads held high, but now, they seem hunched It's clear that a large family isn't always an advantage. The more

there is to manage, the

more

mistakes slip through. Everywhere

you look, there are cracks

"His Highness' decision to avoid expansion makes sense," Jacob remarked, genuinely admiring Rafael's wisdom.

Since Rafael had been brought up, Carissa couldn't help but ask again, "Still no word?"

"Not yet," Jacob replied, his worry evident.

It had been a month since the last letter, and there was still no news.

Jacob tried to comfort her. "Perhaps it's difficult for them to send word, given that they're deep in those mountains. But with His Highness and Mr. Spencer's skills, there's no need to worry. Plus, Mr. Ziegler and Mr. Mullen are with them."

Carissa nodded. "Yes, you're right."

Still, despite the reassurances, a month without news had turned her initial longing into deep concern. As the days wore on, Carissa's anxiety grew, making her restless and uneasy. At times, she would take a break at midday and visit Gracewood Women's Academy or Skye Embroidery. There, she found a sense of calm, if only for a while.

The students were mostly children between seven and ten years old, and most of them didn't know how to read. Teaching had to start from scratch, which took a lot of effort.

Still, both Catherine and Rosalind said the atmosphere at the academy was excellent. The students were eager to learn, and every task assigned was completed without complaint.

The schedule had originally included

a half-day break for the girls to help at home. But after some time, the girls themselves suggested that they should study the whole day instead, returning only in the evening to assist with household chores and needlework.

Courtney and the other noble girls had become much more focused than before. The academy's influence had molded them, and there were no longer any cliques or petty arguments. If there was ever a disagreement, it was settled with just a few words. The moment a teacher arrived, everyone lowered their heads and admitted fault.

They all understood how rare the opportunity to study was. Without Gracewood Women's Academy, most

of them would never have known how to write their names.

#### Chapter 1254

As the headmistress of Gracewood Women's Academy, Carissa couldn't teach much else, but she could teach martial arts. So, she asked the students if anyone would be interested in learning some basic self-defense techniques-something to both strengthen their bodies and help protect themselves. When she proposed the idea, more than half of the students were eager to give it a try.

However, martial arts required a certain level of aptitude. Even if they were all willing to learn, not everyone would be suited for it.

Seeing the interest, Carissa thought it might be a good idea for an additional class, one focused on building strength and agility-both for defense and for physical health.

For those who truly wanted to learn the martial arts, she would need to carefully select the most capable students. Coincidentally, Cynthia had heard that Violet had been teaching the Mystic Army, so she insisted on coming to the women's academy to teach as well. Cynthia was insistent on having an official title as the female instructor, and Carissa relented, agreeing to give her the role.

The two of them took turns teaching. As for the regular lessons, Cynthia could handle those too since they weren't very difficult.

Ten students were selected to begin their martial arts training. Most of them came from farming families and had no ambitions beyond learning a skill that could help them support themselves. Some thought that if things didn't work out at home, they could become guards for noblewomen. That way, they wouldn't have to sell themselves and could still earn a decent monthly wage.

One of these students, Tiny Malone, came from a long line of farmers. Her family couldn't read, and she had only learned to write her name, which was given to her based on her position in the family. With seventeen cousins, she was the youngest, so they called her Tiny.

Her family hadn't planned on sending her to school. However, her mom had started selling goods in the market but had trouble with calculations and often got tricked. After it happened several times, she realized the importance of learning. When the opportunity came, she immediately sent Tiny to the academy.

Tiny was eleven years old, bright and eager to learn. She was also unusually strong-she claimed that since the age of four, she had helped her dad carry grain. Her brothers couldn't carry as much as she could.

She eagerly joined the martial arts class and told Carissa that when she returned home, she would teach her older siblings to read and practice martial arts as well. Even at a young age, she was already determined to break free from poverty. She believed that to succeed, one had to be skilled, and that the family had to stick together.

Tiny was a particularly bright and sunny girl, always wearing a smile on her face. No matter how bad one's day was, her cheerfulness lifted the spirits of everyone around her.

The teachers adored her, and Catherine even gave her a new name-Roxana. It was a beautiful name, and when Roxana first heard it, she loved it immediately. However, when she tried to write it, she was stumped it was a difficult name to spell compared to her previous name!

But Roxana was determined. She practiced tirelessly, and by the third day, she was able to write her name beautifully.

Catherine remarked that not only did Roxana have a natural talent for martial arts, but she was also gifted in her studies.

However, after only a few days of training, Roxana was absent for two days in a row, and no one from her family came to explain why. Cynthia, who had grown quite fond of the girl, was deeply concerned. She confided in Carissa, who instructed her to go to the academy, ask for the girl's address, and pay a visit to find out what had happened.

Cynthia and Bun went to the girl's home and returned with Roxana in tow, bringing her straight back to Hell Monarch Estate.

The little girl carried a small bundle, looking anxious and uneasy. Her usual bright smile was gone, replaced with a nervous frown and tears in her eyes.

Cynthia had the kitchen prepare something for her. Then, without waiting around any longer, she rushed off to find Carissa at the Capital Guard headquarters.

"I brought Roxana back with me,"

Cynthia said. "I don't know what the proper procedure is, but do we need some kind of contract? Should I ask Jacob to take care of it? Her brother was going

going to sell her, you know for

only five silver coins! He Know-for

was

planning to marry her off as a child bride, so I took action first. I didn't bring any money with me, but I

couldn't leave her in that situation!"

Cynthia was panicking, her words coming out in a jumbled mess, without clearly explaining the situation.

Carissa tried to calm her. She asked Cynthia to take a breath and explain the details.

"What exactly happened? Her brother was going to sell her? What about her parents? I thought they doted on her."

"Her parents were both injured in an accident, and they might not be able to work anymore," Cynthia replied, her voice full of anger. "Her older brother already has a marriage lined up, but since the family was out of money, he thought he could sell Roxana as a child bride for five silver coins. Can you believe it? He wants to sell his sister to get money for his wedding! What kind of logic is that? If he wants to get married so badly, why doesn't he sell himself instead?!"

Chapter 1255

Carissa asked a few more questions to piece the whole situation together.

Roxana's parents, Anna and George, wanted to provide money for their third son's wedding. Thus, they decided to venture into the old forest while the wild beasts were hibernating for the winter. Most of the best medicinal herbs grew on the steepest mountainsides, and that was where they had gone.

However, after several days of trekking up the mountain, both of them were cold, hungry, and exhausted. In a tragic turn of events, Anna slipped on the icy ground, and George reached out to grab her. As a result, the two of them tumbled down the slope together.

If it hadn't been for some herb collectors passing by, they would have surely perished on that mountain. Though they had been lucky enough to survive, their injuries were severe. Anna had injured her back, and George had broken his leg. Neither would ever be able to work again, and they would require constant care. With their injuries still needing treatment, they would also need money for further medical expenses. Meanwhile, their third son's marriage was fast approaching, and the girl who had once spoken about unity now found herself a victim of circumstance.

"Do her parents know?" Carissa asked.

"They don't," Cynthia replied. "Her parents weren't even living in a brick house-they've been carried back to their old, dilapidated home to recover."

"And does everyone else agree to sell her?" Carissa pressed.

"I don't know, but her eldest brother already made the arrangements. Five silver coins. The man who wanted to buy her was already at their door. Luckily, I got there first and took her away by force."

Carissa nodded. "Leave this to Lily. Follow her and let her handle it, but don't confront them directly or openly cause harm."

Cynthia was well aware of the delicate way things should be handled. She recalled what Violet had told them during their time in Hell Monarch Estate.

"Even if you want to hit someone, don't do it in broad daylight where everyone can see. It's better to do it quietly, and never let them know who did it. It's safer that way."

The advice was to be cautious so that no one could make a fuss about it later.

"I held it in and didn't hit anyone today," Cynthia continued. "I just brought her back. I'll go find Lily now. Let's have dinner together later."

With that, she hurried out the door.

When Carissa returned to the estate in the evening, Lily had already finished handling the situation. The two of them entered together, talking as they went.

"We've already sent for Ms. Ivy to treat Roxana's parents. The Hell Monarch's household will cover the cost of the medical treatment. As for the rest, it was her eldest brother and sister-in-law's idea. Since they were the eldest in the family, they were afraid the burden would fall entirely on their shoulders.

"They decided to find a way to get money quickly, and the fastest way was to sell someone. Roxana's age was right for this, so someone had already taken an interest in her. It would've been settled right then, but thankfully, Ms. Perez got there in time. Otherwise, they'd have sold her off already."

After a pause, Lily continued, "Ms. Perez is still there, and Ms. Ivy hasn't left yet. The family is deeply grateful now, but I'm worried. Her eldest brother and sister-in-law aren't good people, and I fear they may try to sell her again in the future. That's why I gave them the money to settle it. For now, I haven't told her parents about any of this-I'm afraid it would only make their condition worse if they knew.

"As for what to do with the girl, whether she stays in the estate as a maid or returns to the academy-that's for you to decide, Your Grace."

Lily's explanation was clear and concise.

Carissa nodded thoughtfully. "She cannot stay as a maid. She will return to the academy. It's better this way-no distractions. If she focuses on her studies, she'll have a bright future."

Carissa had made a bet with Gerald,

claiming she would train female generals and officials. Even so, it

wasn't really a bet-it was a genuine desire of hers to see women take charge. Training female officials was challenging, but with

Starhaven's current circumstances, there were already women on the battlefield-one was Aurora, and another was herself. If Roxana had the courage and determination, she could follow this path too.

Before dinner, Carissa took a moment to speak with Roxana privately. The young girl was still anxious and couldn't help but worry about her parents.

"I know you're concerned about your parents," Carissa began gently. "You want to protect them, but when you don't have the strength to do so, it's just empty words. The only way to protect those you love is to become strong yourself. And from this, I hope you learn one more thing: first, take care of yourself. Once you've learned to love and protect yourself, you'll be able to do the same for others."

Roxana's eyes welled with tears, but she forced herself to hold them back. She fought to keep her voice

steady, and with a shaky breath, she whispered, "I understand. Thank you, Your Grace."

Chapter 1256

Carissa held Roxana's hand and spoke to her for a long time, but never once did she speak ill of Roxana's family.

Violet and Cynthia were listening outside. When the conversation ended, Carissa had Lulu take Roxana downstairs to settle her in.

Once they were alone, Violet asked, "Why tell her to protect her family? She should know how cruel her family has been to her, or she'll be bound by them for the rest of her life."

Carissa took a sip of water, her eyes clouded with sadness. "Vivi, this is a common story. Many common families find themselves in such situations. When faced with hardship, the first thing they think of is selling their daughters or sisters. They don't see it as cruelty. To them, selling a girl as a child bride or a maid in a wealthy household is just a way out."

She paused, then continued, "It's not uncommon for some families to trade their daughters in marriage to secure a wife for their sons, but at least Roxana's parents aren't like that. They tried everything to earn money her mom sold goods in the market, and her dad did odd jobs. They even risked their lives climbing the mountains to gather herbs. I truly believe they never considered selling her. If they had, they wouldn't have sent her to the academy in the first place."

Violet frowned. "But her eldest brother and sister-in-law didn't want to take responsibility. Her third brother wanted to sell her to marry, all for his own selfish gain. Shouldn't she resent them?"

Carissa sighed softly. "It's hard to sever ties with family, especially when you're so young. Roxana has a lot to learn, and she's still worried about her parents' injuries. She's only eleven. That's too much for her to carry right now. We don't need to plant hatred in her heart. As she grows older, she'll understand, and she'll see who deserves her anger. Whether she chooses to stay close to her brothers or distance herself, that will be her decision."

Violet thought for a moment, always willing to weigh the words Carissa said.

"You're right. We shouldn't get too involved in her family matters. After all, not everyone in her family is bad. Her parents have sheltered her despite their poverty, and they didn't make her work. They even sent her to the academy. That shows how much they care for her. She's always smiling, which shows how much they dote on her."

Carissa linked arms with Violet and Cynthia, the three of them walking out together. "Exactly. So we'll let her handle it when she's older. What we can do for her now is teach her with all our hearts."

"And take care of her," Cynthia added with a smile.



Cynthia had just returned from Meadow Ridge, with a heart full of righteousness and a strong sense of justice. She was always eager to protect the weak.

And so, Roxana settled into Hell Monarch Estate. Carissa was originally in charge of teaching martial arts, so technically, Roxana should have been her apprentice. However, the Pathfinders Guild accepted apprentices based on the preferences of the mentors, and there were no formal criteria.

Since Cynthia had expressed her desire for a pupil of her own, she took Roxana under her wing. Whether a child would succeed in the future could often be seen from their mental resilience.

Despite Roxana's worries and sadness, it didn't affect her diligence. Instead, she displayed remarkable determination and persistence, working even harder than before.

She woke up before dawn to study, practiced martial stances for half an hour, and then returned to the academy. Roxana's dedication even made Cynthia feel guilty-she hadn't been nearly as diligent herself back in the day.

On the tenth day of February, Jacob received a message by carrier pigeon.

It was from Kyle, reporting that Rafael and Dylan had entered the mountains two weeks ago and hadn't returned. They had searched the area but found no trace of them. The place they had entered was surrounded on three sides by mountains, with endless, rotting hills. Kyle was worried they had

encountered danger, and in the end, sent the pigeon back to the capital to request reinforcements.

Carissa had been worried about them from the start, anxiously waiting for any news. When the pigeon arrived, a deep, heavy dread settled over her. The worst possibilities flashed in her mind, one after another, until she stopped at the most horrible of all-the thought that she might never see Rafael again.

Her entire being seemed to have fallen into an ice-cold pit, fear seeping into her very bones. It was as though an invisible hand had seized her throat, leaving her gasping for breath and trembling uncontrollably.

Having endured the loss of her dad and brothers and the annihilation of her entire family, she knew all too well the suffocating terror of losing loved ones-it was like drowning in a flood of despair.

## Chapter 1257

It took Carissa an hour to pull herself out of the paralyzing grip of fear. Afterward, she mounted her horse and rode straight to the palace. She needed a reason to leave the capital.

Salvador had received two letters from Rafael. The first letter reported an unusual village they had come across, and they suspected that the villagers were the private army they were looking for. Salvador had sent a secret order for Rafael to investigate the area.

The second letter described their initial foray into the mountains, where the defenses were tight, confirming the presence of a private army. However, they had not yet found the weapons or supplies. Salvador had sent another order to continue the investigation, with a directive to destroy any weapons and supplies found.

Since then, there had been no word from Rafael.

Salvador was, admittedly, a little worried. Sending just a few people to scout several mountain ranges, without knowing the size of the enemy force or whether they had martial arts experts among them, was undeniably risky.

At the same time, he also saw it as an excellent opportunity. If they could locate and destroy the weapons, they could immediately mobilize troops under the guise of quelling bandits. This approach would avoid unnecessary fanfare and potentially reduce casualties.

Hearing from Carissa that there had been no news for half a month only deepened his concern. But without information, it was impossible to take action-he couldn't dispatch troops until he had verified the situation.

He issued an edict, instructing Carissa to lead a group to Jasford City to oversee the delivery of a shipment of luxurious brocade. This particular shipment was intended as a gift to Westhaven and couldn't be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.

It was well-known that the area surrounding Jasford City was rife with mountain bandits. The surrounding hills offered ideal vantage points for the bandits, who would then descend to rob passing merchants. Therefore, sending Carissa with the Mystic Army to escort the brocade was the perfect cover. However, there was no need for a large force. He assigned 50 men to accompany her, and the rest-whatever extra help she required-she would have to arrange on her own.

Violet, Cynthia, Bun, Alana, and Leah, along with Isaac and Claire, were all packed and ready to go. Meanwhile, Mabel, Iris, and others remained in the capital to manage the affairs there.

The Mystic Army had previously escorted tax money shipments, so their departure did not raise any suspicions. After all, the team wasn't particularly large.

Jacob had initially wanted to accompany her, but Carissa told him that Kyle had already sent word back to Meadow Ridge. Éverett would surely send reinforcements, so it was better for Jacob to stay in the capital to maintain order. If anything urgent came up, he could quickly mobilize more men.

As she set out, Carissa wore the bracelet her seventh uncle had sent her, with a red whip coiled around her waist. Holding the Rose Spear firmly, she mounted her horse with ease. Her attire was a simple green tunic over soft armor, her hair tied up in a high ponytail that gave her a sharp and commanding look.

Jasford City was nearly a hundred miles from Lunvale—a distance that wasn't too far, yet not too close either. For the Mystic Army, it was manageable. They planned to rest in Jasford City for a day, allowing their horses to recover. That way Carissa and her group could at least reach Lunvale in one day's ride.

Lunvale was a relatively prosperous inland city. It wasn't near the sea, but a river flowed through the city.

There was a village in Lunvale called Stone Village. It was a very remote place, still without proper roads, with only winding, narrow paths climbing up and down the mountains. Along the way, there were several other villages, but the nearest one to Stone Village was nearly 15 miles away. Those 15 miles were mostly steep, mountainous paths that required climbing cliffs and

traversing treacherous terrain to

reach the heart of the area.

The road from the north was the only somewhat passable route. Any attempt to enter from another direction would be nearly impossible.

The mountains around the village

were tall and treacherous, with some areas rarely touched by human feet. The old forest, shrouded in perpetual mist, made it even more dangerous. The air was thick with miasma, and most people avoided entering, despite rumors of rare herbs and strange beasts hidden within. No one dared risk their lives to make money from such ventures.

Once, Stone Village had been a relatively normal village. It was sparsely populated, with the young and able-bodied men heading down the mountains in search of work, leaving behind the elderly and the sick. However, a devastating plague had killed many of the villagers. The exact cause of the village's transformation was unclear, but rumors said that outsiders, homeless and without proper identification or records, had ended up there and settled in the unlucky Stone Village.

Over time, the population grew.

The local government had taken notice, but since the people didn't cause trouble and only made a living by farming the land, the authorities chose to turn a blind eye.

Chapter 1258

Carissa and her group arrived in Lunvale, posing as traveling merchants. After gathering information about Stone Village, their first priority was to contact Kyle and Travis.

She marked the inn where they were staying with an orchid drawn in a conspicuous spot, leaving a secret signal. Anyone familiar with the code would be able to find them.

That evening, Kyle and Travis arrived, both looking exhausted. They were covered in dust, their clothes wrinkled, their hair hastily combed with their hands, their shoes caked with dirt. It was clear they had just come down from the mountains.

Carissa had been on edge the entire journey, her heart heavy with worry. Upon seeing them, she quickly asked about their situation.

Kyle first tried to ease her tension. "When we sent the pigeon post, we had lost all contact and there was no trace of them. But just a couple of days ago, we found something. In the old forest south of Stone Village, we discovered a mark left by Rafael. It proves they had been there, and it should have been just a few days ago."

That news allowed Carissa to breathe a little easier. But then Kyle explained the reason for their temporary disappearance.

"We received a secret directive from the king to investigate where the grain and weapons were hidden in the mountains," Kyle continued. "So, when we got the message, we set off to search for it."

Rafael had originally disagreed with such an extensive search, believing it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. He thought it better to monitor their movements closely, to see who they interacted with, who brought in supplies, and how much was sent. He felt that would be more efficient and safer than heading into the mountains right away.

He also believed the food wouldn't be stored in large quantities in the mountains. They would only need enough to last through the winter, as more supplies would have to be brought in come spring. After all, they were looking at provisions for thousands of people.

However, Salvador's letter insisted that only by uncovering weapons and armor could they confirm the conspiracy and label it as rebellion. Once confirmed, they could destroy the weapons and use nearby forces to eliminate them.

Rafael had brought fewer than

twenty people, just the four of them, along with some guards. After receiving the secret directive, they split into groups and entered the mountains, agreeing beforehand that no matter what they found, they would meet back up in five days.

Five days later, only Rafael and Dylan had not returned. Everyone else had regrouped at their designated meeting point.

by

They waited for another day, but with growing concern over their safety, they decided to venture back into the mountains to search for them. It wasn't until a few days ago that they discovered a sign left Rafael, high up on the southern mountain. The mark was carved into a tree—an orchid with all its petals intact. This was a good sign—it meant they hadn't encountered any immediate danger or injury when they left it.

The orchid mark was a special symbol used by the Pathfinders Guild members. If injured, a petal would

be missing. If they were in danger, one of the corners would be gone. If their lives were at risk, only half a petal would remain.

Seeing the full blossom confirmed that they had been unharmed when they left the signal.

"But it's been 20 days without any word. I'm still worried," Carissa said, her brow furrowed. "Is there any news from Tiberius? Could he have discovered our arrival?"

"We've had one person specifically tailing him these past few days," Kyle said. "He's been frequenting the local brothels and coffeehouses, or hosting his friends for lavish meals at his estate. It seems the Realm Defender has been living quite comfortably."

Carissa's eyes narrowed. "And his relationship with the local authorities-is it still as we originally investigated?"

"The local officials are openly

disgusted by him, but they're too intimidated to act," Travis answered. "He's been maintaining a household army-just about 50 or 60 men, some of whom are decent fighters. He treats them well and keeps them well fed. In return, they help him lord over the area. It's a combination of his title and the loyalty of these lackeys that lets him run wild."

Carissa paused for a moment, then pressed on. "Has there been any evidence linking him to Stone Village?"

Travis shook his head. "We've been here for a while now, and while it's neither a short nor long time, we haven't found any sign of his people having been to Stone Village. So, it's hard to say."

Chapter 1259

Carissa felt that no matter what, she had to go into the mountains to search. Everett should arrive within a day or two, but until they came, she could only use the most straightforward method to find them.

The weather in mid-February was still very cold. It wasn't as dry and harsh as the northern winds, but there was a damp chill that felt even worse. The cold seeped into everything, making her already anxious and restless heart feel even more uneasy and heavy.

That night, she tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep. Her thoughts kept circling back to the fact that the mark Rafael had left was several days old, and she wondered whether they had encountered other dangers in the mountains.

What if the people from Stone Village had discovered them and ambushed them?

In those deep mountains, a massacre could occur and no one would know.

Even though she knew the climb ahead would take a lot of energy and she should be getting some rest, sleep eluded her. She finally gave up and rose before dawn.

As the early morning market stalls were opening, Carissa hurried to buy the provisions they would need for the journey into the mountains. By the time she returned, everyone else had begun to stir.

For this expedition, they would split into three teams.

Carissa would lead one group consisting of those from Meadow Ridge. The second group would be 30 members of the Mystic Army, led by Michael. The third group would consist of 20 members of the Mystic Army, led by Kyle.

The Meadow Ridge team was a small group-just Violet, Cynthia, Bun, Travis, Claire, Alana, and Leah. Aside from Bun and Travis, all of them were women.

The night before, Bun and Travis had talked for a long time. Bun felt that Travis had been carrying a heavy burden and could no longer tease him with the nickname "Shit Stick".

Travis, too, noticed how much calmer Bun had become, and he had also grown thinner. The nickname "Chubby Bun" no longer seemed fitting.

The members of the Meadow Ridge team had all grown up together, so they were especially in sync with one another. This was why Kyle had been confident enough to let them go as a separate group.

Once they entered the mountains, Carissa quickly realized just how bad the situation was it was far worse than she had imagined.

The mountains rose in three massive, sweeping ridgelines. As Kyle had said, finding someone here was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

The three teams split to search the three sides of the mountains, and the only entrance was the single northern pass. They had to avoid the guards and climb over the mountains, going around the village along the way.

Carissa searched from dawn until dusk, covering very little ground. If the mountain were like a target with ten rings, then in one day, they had only circled the outermost ring.

That first night, they camped in the mountains. To avoid drawing attention from Stone Village, they

found a small cave and scattered

powder around to ward off snakes

and insects. The cold was biting and they needed a fire to stay warm, or else they would freeze in the mountains.

Given the need for fire, someone had to keep watch. Fortunately, they had enough people to take turns. Carissa volunteered to take the first shift. She climbed a nearby hill, about 200 feet from the cave, and found tallest tree to sit in. The view was obstructed, so she couldn't see Stone Village, but at least she could sense any movement in the surrounding area.

The others took turns standing guard, trying to get what rest they could.

By morning, they put out the fire, buried the ashes in the dirt, and covered it with grass and a few broken branches to make it look as though no one had been there.

On the second day, they found nothing.

On the third day, they were forced to turn back, as their provisions were running low.



Around noon, everyone was exhausted and took a break in a relatively flat spot. They had been searching

for two days without finding any leads, and Carissa felt a sense of numbness creeping over her.

Violet, noticing her distracted demeanor, sighed and said, "I hear a stream. Let's go wash our faces."

There were streams and springs in these mountains, and they had passed a few during their search. Carissa didn't feel like going but was coaxed by Violet.

"Come on, you look like you're about to lose it. Let's just wash our faces."

Carissa knew everyone was concerned about her, so she forced a smile and stood up. "I'm just tired, but alright, let's go."

They walked toward the sound of

running water, less than a mile from

their resting spot, and soon came upon a crystal-clear stream. The mountain water was icy, but refreshing. They cupped their hands and splashed their faces, and Carissa felt much more awake.

Sitting by the stream, Carissa could feel the cold seep deeper into her bones. She needed to steady herself here. If she didn't, the rest of the group would start feeding off her negativity.

"Don't worry too much," Violet said, trying to comfort her. "His Highness has faced far worse this mountain can't keep him. If he hasn't come down yet, it means he must have found something."

Carissa covered her face with her hands, holding back the wave of emotion threatening to overwhelm her. After a moment, she said softly, "I'm telling myself the same thing."

Chapter 1260

Violet saw how much weight Carissa had lost-she couldn't eat, couldn't sleep.

Heart aching, she pulled Carissa into an embrace, pressing Carissa's head onto her shoulder. "Lean on me. If crying makes you feel better, then let it out."

But Carissa suddenly shoved her away, scrambling to her feet and jumping over the stream. She ran a few steps forward, stopping at a tree.

Carved into the trunk of the tree was a clear and detailed orchid.

Carissa ran her fingers over the smooth lines of the flower, but her heart didn't lift. While the blossom was complete, the condition of the tree and the carving itself suggested that this was the mark Travis and Kyle had found.

It was a discovery, but it was also like finding nothing at all.

After a moment of quiet contemplation, she spoke. "Vivi, why don't you all head back down the mountain first? I'll stay here and keep looking. Since there's a mark here, there must be more further ahead."

Violet gave her a light tap on the head. "What are you thinking? We're in this together. If we leave, we leave together. If we stay, we stay together."

"But our provisions are running out," Carissa said.

"Well, we'll catch fish and forage for wild fruit," Violet reassured her. "I'm sure His Highness and Dylan have been getting by the same way."

One of Carissa's biggest worries was that, after so long in the mountains, they would run out of provisions. But there weren't many wild fruits around, so survival now meant hunting rabbits and mountain chickens. And along the way, they had already seen quite a few animals.

On the western slope of the mountain, two men with scruffy beards sat in a small cave, gnawing on freshly roasted wild rabbit. Their clothes were covered in dirt and grease, and their hair was disheveled. They had just washed their beards in a nearby mountain spring, making them look a little less wild. They hadn't done it for their appearance. With their beards so long, the constant consumption of meat would cause bits of food to get caught in the hair. At night, when they took turns sleeping, ants would crawl onto their faces, nibbling at the scraps. Generally, the ants weren't

too bad, but when they came across a nest of poisonous ones, their faces would swell up with red, painful welts.

Right now, their faces and bodies were dotted with those red, swollen bumps. Luckily, they had brought along some of Sebastian's antidote pills. Otherwise, those two men would have been killed by the ants. Dylan scratched his face again while chewing, unable to hold back a curse. "Once we catch the next supply delivery, we'll set this mountain on fire and burn every last ant."

Rafael kicked him lightly. "Stop scratching. You'll break the skin, and you don't want scars. You haven't even found a wife yet."

"Your Highness, aren't you itchy?" Dylan glanced at Rafael, who was still eating gracefully. His face was clearly dotted with more red bumps than Dylan's, yet he wasn't scratching.

"It does itch," Rafael said, taking a deep breath, his face growing even more red and swollen. "But scratching just makes it worse. Between pain and itch, I choose itch. This is also a good time to exercise my perseverance and endurance."

After he finished speaking, he rubbed his whole face on his arm, feeling much better.

They had been waiting here for ten days. Before that, they had been wandering around the mountains without much progress. Going down the mountain was too much trouble, so they simply kept searching. It was ten days ago when they discovered the small cave. Below it, hidden by a tangle of dry grass, was a larger cave. It was artificially dug, and it was deep and vast. Inside, they found provisions and some weapons.

They had found it by chance as someone had been bringing food down the mountain to the village. So, they snuck in at night to investigate and noted that the grain was running low.

They overheard a conversation that revealed the supply delivery was expected again in the next 10 to 15 days, at which point the hidden entrance to a tunnel would be opened. It was then they realized that the grain wasn't being transported through the village road, but through a tunnel.

There was actually a tunnel in the mountains?

At that moment, Rafael remembered during the chaos of the previous era, Lunvale had been occupied by a rebel army for over ten years. He had heard that they dug tunnels all over the mountains in Lunvale, planning to use them to launch surprise attacks.

Since it happened over two hundred years ago, Rafael had only read about it in historical records. It was such a big event, yet it was only mentioned briefly in the history books, so he didn't remember much about it. He only recalled it when he heard the people mention the tunnels.

He didn't know if the tunnel was extensive. If it was, it would definitely lead to more than just Stone Village.

Years ago, the rebel army had occupied the area for over a decade and stayed in the mountains. The region had a series of rolling mountains, with many villages of different sizes.

Rafael wanted to explore the tunnel where the food was being sent, to find out where it entered, and then investigate how many tunnels there were.