

War Song 1261

Chapter 1261

Rafael estimated that the supply delivery should arrive within the next two days. Though there were only two of them, it was easier to slip out unnoticed at night. Having too many people would complicate things. Once they found an exit, they could capture one or two people for questioning. If they were tight-lipped, a bit of force might persuade them to talk.

"Hang in there a little longer. Just three more days, and it'll be over," Rafael said.

"I could really go for some bread," Dylan grumbled, letting out a loud belch. "I swear, without any bread or pasta, a person might just die. Roasting meat endlessly to eat is so greasy..."

"Just grab some grass and chew on it to get rid of the greasy taste," Rafael suggested, reaching down to pull up a handful of wild grass. It was edible, and this time of year, it was tender. "Eat it. Quickly."

"It's bitter. I'm not eating it," Dylan refused, declining Rafael's offer.

Rafael didn't mind and ate it himself. Even the roots were edible, and the tender leaves, though slightly bitter, were just what he needed to cut the grease. It was surprisingly tasty.

"Do you think Mr. Spencer will write to Lady Carissa, telling her we've gone missing?" Dylan asked.

"Probably not. I left a mark, something he will understand," Rafael replied, using his dagger to dig a small hole, where he buried the bones he had finished gnawing on.

Mentioning Carissa stirred up a wave of longing within him. "Once this is over, we'll ride straight back to the capital without stopping.

"Of course!" Dylan replied.

Rafael leaned against the wall, his thoughts drifting to Carissa.

What was she doing now? Was she thinking of him?

He had no way of knowing that Carissa was also in Lunvale and up on the mountain. However, distance-wise, they were quite far apart.

The mountain didn't have many paths, and often, they moved with their Lightfoot Skill, leaving little trace on the ground. It would be hard for anyone to find Rafael and Dylan.

Carissa and the others had spent an extra day on the mountain, but in the end, they found nothing and had to descend.

Descending was much easier. With their Lightfoot Skill, they could fly to wherever they wanted from high up. However, it consumed their inner force. By the time they returned to the inn, they were all exhausted. The other two teams were already back, and none of them had made any significant discoveries. That evening, Everett arrived with a group of apprentices from Meadow Ridge.

Seeing her senior guild members travel so far to reach her, Carissa was deeply moved. Before she could even express her gratitude, Everett said coldly, "I ordered them to come. They had no choice but to obey." Everyone's smiles faltered for a moment. If Everett didn't know how to speak kindly, it would've been better for him to say nothing at all. But they didn't dwell on his words. Instead, they quickly gathered around their youngest guild member with warmth and concern.

Seeing how haggard Carissa had become, their hearts ached. Her once delicate features were now shadowed by exhaustion, the dark circles under her eyes standing out starkly against her pale skin. Gone was the once refined and lively appearance, and they couldn't help but feel sorry for her.

Carissa was completely lost, and her thoughts were scattered. It was up to Everett to lead the way in all things.

Everett cast a cold glance at everyone. "You've been here this long and all you've done is head into the mountains to search? You're clumsy. Did you ask the locals about the mountain's situation?"

"We've asked," Kyle replied quickly.

Everett raised an eyebrow, "And the local authorities?"

"We didn't want to alarm them just yet," Kyle answered. "We feared they might have people in the government."

Everett frowned slightly. "Why haven't you set up your people in Lunvale?"

There was a clear reproach in his words.

Kyle replied, "Rafael said Lunvale wasn't on our radar before. We only learned of the situation through Yuvan's eldest son. We didn't have time to make any preparations before coming."

Kyle had brought out the appropriate leverage to use in this situation-Rafael. Naturally, Everett didn't continue berating him.

Although Everett didn't succeed in reprimanding them, it didn't matter. He still had other tricks up his sleeves to continue teaching them a lesson.

"Some things should've been investigated before you arrived. The mountains around Lunvale-they've dug tunnels. I suspect Rafael is waiting by one of the tunnel entrances, watching for the food supplies to come through. He might capture a few people to interrogate. Conveniently, I know where all the tunnel entrances are."

Chapter 1262

Carissa blinked in surprise, for the first time noticing how remarkably handsome and reassuring her martial uncle seemed.

A map was spread out before them, and one by one, the heads leaned in to get a closer look. The map showed a network of tunnels, crisscrossing like a spider's web, but there were only four points of entry. Two on the east, one to the west, and another to the south. The northern entrance, near Stone Village, had no tunnel at all.

Which meant the only way in was through the northern path, where there were no tunnels.

However, saying there were only four entrances wasn't entirely accurate. While the mountain had many entrances, the tunnels themselves only had four exits. No matter where they entered the mountain, they would eventually have to exit through one of these four points.

Before anyone could fully take in the map, Everett laid down a second one, sliding his hand across it until his finger came to rest on a marked symbol.

"These villages all have tunnels. There are 13 villages in total. Take a good look and memorize them quickly. We'll split into teams to guard the four exits while we wait for them. As for the villages, we'll send others to investigate.

Carissa felt the weariness lift from her shoulders. She gave her uncle a thumbs-up, her eyes brimming with flattery. "Sage Everett, you're amazing! You came here and immediately broke the deadlock. I want to be on your team."

Everett glanced at her with a raised brow. "I won't be going."

Was he supposed to go when they were only escorting two people out? What did he bring the apprentices for, then?

Carissa quickly adjusted, still smiling brightly. "Right, of course. You don't need to go, but... can you really be sure he's just waiting to explore the tunnels? Aren't you worried he might be in danger?"

Everett turned the question back on her. "In all the days you've been running through the mountains, have you seen an orchid with missing petals?"

Everyone who had been searching the mountains shook their heads. They had only found two orchid carvings, both intact.

"Not finding a broken blossom means there's been no injury and no danger," Everett continued. "If there's been no injury and he hasn't come down, then there's only one explanation: he's found something. It's something worth watching for, and that something requires waiting. The only thing to do is wait for food supplies to be delivered."

Once he was done analyzing the situation, Everett scolded Kyle and Carissa. "What's the use of these brains of yours? How could you not figure something so simple out?"

"We did think of it," Kyle replied. "We just couldn't be sure. Plus, we're still unfamiliar with this area. We were worried something unexpected might happen, and we wouldn't know about it..."

"Something unexpected?" Everett rolled his eyes. "Are ghosts going to pop up from the mountain and kidnap them?"

Kyle awkwardly wanted to push Carissa forward to handle this, but she was already hugging Winona and had escaped the situation.

The four tunnel entrances were all extremely well-hidden.

One of them, to the south, was located right by Tiberius's villa outside the city-Fernbrook Villa.

So, the key task was to keep an eye on that area. If they were smuggling supplies through the tunnels, many people would have to enter Fernbrook Villa. Even if the food supplies had been sent in early, they would need enough people to manage the transport.

If the food supplies were being sent from Fernbrook Villa, they could arrest Tiberius when returning to the capital.

After Everett laid down the two maps, everyone's minds settled.

The plan was quickly rearranged. The apprentices from Meadow Ridge who had arrived with Everett would take turns guarding Fernbrook Villa.

Sure enough, in the past couple of days, people had started entering the villa, but none had come out. Since they began watching, over 50 to 60 people had entered.

From their looks, they seemed like ordinary laborers-thick arms and robust, muscular bodies.

Carissa suspected they were long-term workers responsible for transporting the food supplies. Once they reached their destination, someone else would take over. In the end, they would never know where the food supplies were being sent.

Chapter 1263

That day, Tiberius himself arrived at Fernbrook Villa, bringing a few men along. It wasn't long before a cart arrived carrying supplies-flour, salt, and sugar.

This shipment seemed to be a new batch. The grain had already been delivered to the villa some time ago.

The guards here weren't overly strict, allowing Winona to sneak onto the rooftops in broad daylight, where she could eavesdrop on the villa's activity and listen in on their conversations.

Tiberius gave orders for work to begin that very night.

It wasn't just Fernbrook Villa where things were stirring. At the other tunnel exits, there was also frequent movement.

Everett had initially thought it would be enough to simply keep watch from the outside, but now that they were splitting into teams, he decided to send some inside the tunnels as well. That way, they could check if the map's information was accurate.

Ideally, they would also be able to confirm whether Lunvale had only 5,000 soldiers. If that were the case, he had a bold plan in mind. Another group was coming from Meadow Ridge into the city, and the people were disguised under various identities.

This time, Everett was truly rattled. Rafael was his only direct apprentice. If anything were to happen, how would he handle it?

In his panic, he sent a letter to the major guilds of Meadow Ridge, asking them to send help to Lunvale. His unease stemmed from knowing how reliable Rafael was-his prolonged silence was deeply unsettling, and that was when his worry began.

Just before heading out, Everett reviewed all the available information on Lunvale. After some searching, he suspected Rafael might have been monitoring the tunnels, investigating Lunvale's military structure and the actual number of private soldiers.

To be safe, he still brought along a sizable force. He prepared for the worst, hoping that if his apprentice had indeed met his end in Lunvale, at least he could recover the body and take vengeance.

When he arrived in Lunvale and spoke with Kyle, he learned that Rafael had left the complete orchid mark. This confirmed his earlier suspicions.

As for Everett's bold plan, since he was here now, he figured he might as well try. If it failed, at least he would escape unharmed and, perhaps, expose the private army in the process.

The operation began.

Though Everett had said he wouldn't follow, he found himself outside Fernbrook Villa alongside Carissa when the time came.

The night was heavy with darkness, and the damp cold of the air seemed to press in, making the atmosphere even more oppressive.

The group slipped into the villa in complete silence, their movements barely a whisper in the night. Violet was assigned to capture Tiberius first.

Tiberius had invited two beautiful women to stay with him at the villa. He planned to remain there for several days, overseeing the shipment until the task was complete. For him, this kind of thing was second nature. No one had ever caught on, and over time, he had grown accustomed to not bringing many men with him.

As he sat drinking wine with his two companions, the door was suddenly kicked open with a loud crash. Enraged, he jumped to his feet, but his anger quickly shifted to confusion as his eyes fell upon the woman who entered. For a moment, he thought she might be some jealous lover-perhaps someone who had come to cause a scene.

Tiberius had known so many women in his life that he couldn't immediately place her. Before he could even ask, the woman stormed forward, striking him across the face with swift, decisive slaps. Dazed, he stumbled in a circle, then his hair was yanked as she roughly pulled him toward the door.

"Who are you?" he shouted, his voice full of fury. "How dare you lay a hand on me? Do you want to die?!" The two women in the room finally snapped out of their shock and were about to scream, but Violet spun on her heel, her eyes cold with menace.

"Keep quiet, or I'll make sure you lose your heads," she hissed.

Terrified, the two women paled and immediately fell silent.

Cynthia hurried in from outside, swiftly binding the women's hands and sealing their mouths with a pressure point to keep them quiet. Once the door was closed, she followed Violet as they made their way

out.

Meanwhile, Carissa and Travis had already taken care of the guards outside. Alana and Leah remained to oversee the area. The rest of the group entered the tunnels.

As Tiberius was pushed into the tunnels, he began to realize the gravity of the situation. Panic set in.

"I don't know anything!" he pleaded, trying to justify himself. "I've only been taking money to do the work for others!"

Violet wasn't in the mood for his excuses. She gave him several more sharp slaps, knocking him dizzy before signaling to Bun to carry him away.

Chapter 1264

Rafael's dinner had improved tonight. Dylan had caught a few small fish, grilling them until they were charred black on the outside. By the time they were finished, Rafael's mouth was full of the unpleasant combination of fishy and smoky flavors.

However, the improvement was relative. At least the meal wasn't nauseating-it was simply revolting. Tonight, it was clear that more people had gathered in the deep cave. Black-clad figures, their faces concealed, were making their way up the mountain. It seemed they were about to make a move. Rafael finished the grilled fish and swiftly climbed a nearby tree, his eyes scanning the area below. Dylan had already crawled close to the deep cave, near enough to hear everything. It was a place they'd been watching for quite some time. This was where the men would relieve themselves, and the stench was overwhelming enough to make one gag.

But this was also the ideal spot for an ambush. Most of the time, only two or three men would come here at once. A sudden ambush would be enough to grab them and drag them off to change clothes.

After crawling for nearly an hour, Dylan finally saw his chance. Two masked men in black appeared, heading toward the same spot. Without hesitation, Dylan moved in, striking swiftly and silently. Within moments, both men were incapacitated.

He quickly lifted one over his shoulder, then the other, and hurried back up the mountain to the small cave.

Rafael dropped from the tree just as Dylan returned. Together, they stripped the men of their clothes, swapping their outfits for the black garb. Then, they freed the men's pressure points. Before they could cry out, they each grabbed a throat, cutting off their shouts with a sharp slap. The men slumped down to the ground.

Rafael donned the black attire with a quiet sense of satisfaction. It was warm enough, and the man's body was slightly heavier than his, so the clothes fit well enough over his own.

Dylan flashed a knife in front of the men's faces, and the sight alone was enough to make them speak. They revealed that they were indeed headed to collect grain. Their role was to assist with the transport, an operation that occurred once every three months. The village didn't produce enough to feed itself, so they had to rely on outside supplies.

When asked why they wore black clothing and masks, they explained that it was a precaution to keep their identities hidden. They were told by their higher-ups that it was essential to maintain an air of

mystery.

When questioned further about who they served, the men didn't know. They explained that they had come to the mountains when there was no food to be had. Their work involved carrying grain and doing the heavy labor of farming. But unlike the villagers, they were only allowed to stay by the mountain's edge and were forbidden from approaching the village itself.

When asked if they had weapons or anything like that, they said they did-stored in another cave. This cave only held a small amount, but they couldn't go near the other one unless they were called to move the weapons. After moving them, they had to leave right away.

It seemed the soldiers here were divided into distinct ranks. The men who did the laborious work of transporting and farming had no privilege of approaching the important figures within the village.

Dylan tied them up with vines, securing their hands and gagging their mouths.

"Once this is all over," he said quietly, "someone will come to rescue you. Stay still and keep close to one another to stay warm."

Rafael and Dylan blended in with the group sent to collect the grain. No one questioned their presence. Dressed in identical black garments with their faces covered, they were indistinguishable from the others. The leader of the group carried a whip, and strict silence was expected of them.

The black outfits reeked of mold and decay. It was clear they only wore them when going to pick up supplies.

Rafael wrinkled his nose at the stench, though he had no right to complain. After all, he had spent countless days climbing the mountain, drenched in sweat, his clothes soaked through and then dried with the accumulation of days. The smell now was nothing compared to the heavy scent of his work-worn garments from earlier days.

Now, Rafael was free to move about the deep cave without suspicion. The space was vast, divided into several storage rooms. The grain had once been stored in three separate sections, but now only one remained, and it was not much to speak of.

The team collecting the grain numbered around a hundred people, and from the looks of it, they had quite a large amount to move. But Rafael, a seasoned commander of men, was irritated by the lack of discipline. The workers lacked proper posture, their backs slouched, and they did not stand with the firm bearing he expected of soldiers.

This, in turn, confirmed what the two men had said earlier—they were not truly private soldiers. They were just laborers hired to do the hard work, brought in from outside the village.

The real private soldiers, however, were the leader and his men. The hardness in the leader's eyes was unmistakable, and the others avoided him, keeping their distance in fear.

The entrance to the secret passageway was located within this very cave. When a torch was lit, the stone gate slid open, revealing a narrow path wide enough for three to walk side by side.

Under the leader's guidance, they entered the passage. The sound of their footsteps echoed loudly within the confined space, the noise amplifying in the narrow tunnel.

As Rafael and Dylan walked, their eyes swept over every corner, searching for any hidden passages that might connect to other areas.

Suddenly, the sound of a whip cracking echoed from ahead, followed by a muffled grunt.

Then the leader's voice rang out, sharp and angry. "Have you forgotten the rules? Keep your eyes forward. No looking around!"

The man who had been struck with the whip was the one carrying the torch in front of the leader. A deep gash appeared on his back, the mark of a brutal strike.

The man winced but didn't dare cry out. He immediately steadied himself, lifting the torch high and marching forward with steady, deliberate steps.

Rafael and Dylan exchanged glances.

The discipline here was strict.

Meanwhile, Carissa and the others had already dragged Tiberius into the passage and were moving forward. Not far ahead, a group of burly men was transporting the grain. The passage was too narrow for carts, so each man carried a heavy sack on his shoulder, trudging along with great effort.

There was a lot of grain, so the men would likely make several trips tonight, or perhaps even over several nights, to transport all of it.

As they ventured deeper, they found that the tunnel branched off into several paths. Each one was sealed with a door, and they would only know where they led after opening them.

Everett and Carissa took note, keenly observing the doors to see if they matched the markings on the map. If they aligned, it would confirm the authenticity of the map, making future exploration much easier. Along the way, the burly men paused to rest, but only briefly before continuing their laborious trek. The heavy sacks of grain bent their backs, but despite the strain, they moved with practiced efficiency. Clearly, carrying such loads was second nature to them.

After nearly two hours of walking, the flicker of a torch appeared ahead, signaling that someone was coming to relieve them.

Carissa and the others were some distance behind the group transporting the grain. As the men were much taller than her, she couldn't see who was approaching.

She surmised that if Rafael was indeed lying in wait with the grain transporters, he would likely be among these men. If they didn't spot him and Dylan this time, then something was seriously wrong.

Everett raised his hand, signaling for them to halt, his eyes fixed on the men ahead.

Sacks of grain were piled up, blocking the entire tunnel, making passage nearly impossible.

The leader waited until all the sacks had been set down, then ordered his men to step forward and begin moving them. The entire operation was efficient and orderly, without a single sign of chaos.

But to Rafael and Dylan, a lack of chaos was unacceptable.

As they stepped forward to help with the grain, someone suddenly shouted, "Watch out! There are venomous snakes!"

The men who had been about to carry the grain froze in alarm, hopping about on the ground in a frenzy to avoid being bitten by the snakes.

Indeed, two venomous snakes were slithering about, their distinctive green bodies unmistakable-the deadly adders.

The leader's voice rang out, calm and commanding, "Don't panic. Kill them!"

Rafael and Dylan sprang into action, chasing after the snakes. Watching the snakes head toward the pile of grain, they couldn't step on them or strike them, and it scared Tiberius' people, who began to retreat step by step.

"Over here!" Dylan shouted, bending low to grab one of the snakes. He managed to seize the adder by the head, but the next moment, he screamed in alarm. "I've been bitten! I've been bitten!"

He flung the snake forward, and it landed right on the leader. The man yelped in panic, swatting at the snake with frantic gestures. The others rushed forward to help.

In the confusion, Rafael and Dylan quickly stripped off their black clothes and veils, revealing their worn, grimy clothing underneath. They swiftly and silently maneuvered to Tiberius' side of the cave and retreated slowly.

Hearing Dylan's shout, Carissa knew that they had successfully infiltrated the grain transport group. Though she hadn't yet seen him, the knot in her stomach began to ease.

Once the snake incident had passed, the men resumed their task of transporting the grain.

Throughout the process, no words were exchanged. The sacks were dropped and quickly replaced, and the men returned to their task, seemingly ready to repeat the process several times throughout the night -or perhaps for the next few days.

Chapter 1266

Rafael and Dylan followed behind the grain transport group from Tiberius' side as they made their way out. The men here didn't wear veils, so when two unfamiliar faces appeared, they were suspicious, but they didn't question it. Perhaps they were just new arrivals who had been at the rear of the group moments ago.

Compared to the well-trained people back at Stone Village, Tiberius' crew was utterly disorganized. Everett and Carissa retraced their steps, distancing themselves from the others.

Rafael was aware of their presence up ahead, but he never dreamed it would be Carissa and Everett. He had assumed it was the supervising team, sent to ensure none of the workers were secretly stealing the grain. After all, these people appeared to be nothing more than hired laborers.

Carissa glanced back several times, but never saw Rafael. The crowd was thick, and the distance between them was far enough to make it hard to spot anyone. She kept turning her head because, though she had heard Dylan's voice earlier, she hadn't heard Rafael's.

Violet leaned in close and whispered, "Don't worry. During the chaos, two people infiltrated our group. Though we couldn't see them clearly, I suspect it was His Highness and Dylan."

She paused, glancing at Everett. "Besides, look at your martial uncle. He's as calm as ever. If he didn't know His Highness was somewhere in the group, he'd be more anxious than anyone else."

Carissa thought to herself that Violet had only half the truth. Everett definitely wasn't as anxious as she was. But since he had sharp ears, Carissa didn't dare to say it out loud.

Still, she felt much more at ease.

The journey back seemed much shorter. Soon, they reached the hidden room where the secret passage connected to the villa, where the grain was stored.

Everett and Carissa led the way, with Kyle staying behind to guard Tiberius in the hidden room. A dagger was pressed against Tiberius' back, and although he felt weak, he had no choice but to stand.

Kyle waited until all the workers returned, ready to make the second trip with the grain. Then, he issued the command. "The Realm Defender has ordered no further transport today."

The workers looked at Tiberius, confused. His eyes darted about, desperately trying to signal them that he was being held hostage, but the pain from the dagger pressing into his back made him speak quickly.

"We won't be moving anything else today," he said hastily. "We'll continue in a couple of days."

When they heard it was a direct order from the man, the workers finally scattered.

Rafael and Dylan were surprised to see that it was Kyle who had Tiberius under control. How did he know about the secret passage?

But they didn't rush to ask. Instead, Rafael stepped forward and patted Tiberius on the shoulder.

"In terms of seniority, I should be calling you Uncle Tiberius," he said with a grin.

Tiberius' face went pale. Staring at the dirty man before him, he didn't immediately recognize him. But the title of "Uncle" made it clear that at least Rafael had ties to the royal family.

"Let's go. We can have a good talk outside." Rafael gently urged him forward, then smiled at Kyle. "Thanks for your help. How did you and Travis find this place?"

Kyle returned the smile. "It wasn't me. Your mentor brought the map of the passage. Oh, and Cari's here too."

Rafael was momentarily stunned. Then his eyes lit up with excitement. "She's here? Where?"

"She's outside," Kyle replied. "She was in the passage earlier with us. Come on."

Kyle glanced at them, noticing their rough appearance. It was clear they had suffered quite a bit in the mountains.

As they exited, Rafael hardly spared a thought for the "uncle-nephew" reunion with Tiberius. His eyes immediately found Carissa, her eyes brimming with tears.

He handed Tiberius off to Dylan and quickly moved toward her. Just as he was about to embrace her, someone swiftly stepped forward and blocked their path.

It was none other than his mentor, Everett.

Rafael quickly greeted him. "Sage Everett."

Everett sized him up, taking a step back while pinching his nose. "You really are a handful. Don't you think you should clean up first?"

When Rafael saw his mentor's reaction, he realized how bad he must smell. He gave a sheepish laugh. "I lost track of time in the mountains. It's been more than 20 days already."

His gaze turned back to Carissa, the one he had longed to see for so many days. He wanted nothing more than to hold her close and kiss her. But seeing so many people around and realizing how messy he looked, he could only gaze at her deeply.

Carissa's tears instantly welled up. One reason was seeing him in such a state, knowing how much hardship he had endured. The other was that it reminded her of the first time they met at the Southern Frontier, when he looked just as bad.

Carissa and the others had already taken over Fernbrook Villa.

There was hot water when they needed it and clothes were provided, though they were a little short. To avoid inconveniencing Rafael, Everett sent someone to find a set of proper clothes that would fit him. Rafael was soaking in the bath, while Carissa was scrubbing the dirt off his body and washing his messy hair. Tiberius was someone who knew how to enjoy himself. The fragrant shampoo he used worked wonders. After scrubbing for a while, one's hair would become extremely soft.

But Rafael was a different story-he was far too dirty. It took three changes of water before he was properly clean. Then, Carissa gently helped shave off his stubble, revealing the handsome face beneath. Rafael looked at her face, which had become much thinner, and his heart nearly broke. He realized she must have been struggling with worry these past days. If he had known, he would have sent her a letter to ease her mind.

Since the new clothes hadn't arrived yet, he had to make do with Tiberius' garments, which were a bit too short. But with some socks to complete the look, it at least appeared tidy enough.

The two of them stood close, wrapped tightly in each other's arms. Rafael's voice was hoarse. "I didn't know you'd come. I didn't expect Kyle to think something had happened to me and to go to such lengths to gather everyone."

"I've been so worried since I didn't hear from you. I'm glad I came. At least I could see you sooner," Carissa murmured, snuggling against him. The warmth of his body pressed against hers erased the anxiety and restlessness that had clung to her for so long.

"I won't let anything happen to me. I'll be careful, always," Rafael whispered, pressing a burning kiss to

her forehead. His arms tightened around her, as though trying to merge her into himself. "You won't ever have to worry about me."

Earlier, she had cried in front of everyone, and he felt both heartbroken and touched. She was always very reserved with her emotions, so in the past, he would hold back his feelings a little to keep from burdening her.

He had never truly believed that he was of great importance to her he wasn't unimportant, but he hadn't believed he was essential to her happiness.

But after seeing her cry in front of so many people, he realized just how much she cared for him. The couple had so much to talk about, but there was an annoying interruption from Everett outside, knocking on the door.

"You two have a lifetime to enjoy your love," Everett called, "but duty calls. Once you're done cleaning up, come out so we can discuss matters."

When Rafael heard the insistent knocking, he sighed and called out, "Coming."

He opened the door to find Everett standing there, visibly irate. Upon inquiring, Rafael learned that no one had wanted to disturb the newly reunited couple, so everyone had hesitated to interrupt them. That left Everett no choice but to come personally to knock on the door.

Naturally, it was an embarrassing situation, so getting angry was a normal reaction.

While Rafael had bathed, Everett had taken it upon himself to question Tiberius. He learned that these private soldiers belonged to Yuvan, and Tiberius was responsible for covering up and transporting grain on Yuvan's behalf.

Tiberius insisted he had no knowledge that they were private soldiers and claimed to have never transported weapons. He distanced himself from any wrongdoing, but Everett wasn't looking for a confession at the moment. They had bound Tiberius and planned to deal with him properly when they returned to the capital. When they reached the Supreme Court, he would be forced to reveal whatever he knew.

Now that everyone had gathered, a heated discussion ensued, with no one certain whether these men were bandits or private soldiers.

Everett raised his hand to silence them. "Enough. I have a plan."

As soon as he spoke, the room fell quiet. All eyes turned to him, waiting for his guidance.

Everett continued, "First, we need to determine how many of them there are. If it's only 5,000, then I recommend we take action. We've got people on the way here, and with them, we'll have about three to four hundred people."

"Plus, most of us are skilled in martial arts, so fighting them head-on shouldn't be a problem. Also, Lunvale should have forces ready to fight bandits. If we declare our intention to crush the bandits, the local authorities will be forced to send troops."

Rafael had already been considering some action. Originally, he had planned to request reinforcements from Ebonflow after gathering more intelligence.

However, with Carissa bringing the Mystic Army and a number of skilled martial artists, as well as Everett having brought in apprentices from Meadow Ridge, their combined forces numbered three or four hundred. Plus, they were all trained in combat, with many experts among them. With this force, their chances of winning were quite high.

Based on the terrain, they could only engage in flexible, small-scale operations and couldn't launch a large-scale attack. They had to be cautious of any traps, especially since the enemy had been stationed there for some time and likely had developed strategies for defense. A full-scale attack could lead to heavy casualties.

Rafael shared his opinion, and everyone agreed.

Chapter 1268

In Lunvale stood the grand Eternalis Atrium, towering by the expansive banks of the Lunvale River. To dine at Eternalis Atrium was a privilege reserved only for the wealthy and the elite.

However, on the left side of Eternalis Atrium and facing the dock was a spacious and messy area where vendors set up their stalls every day. Some sold grain, others sold flatbreads or ravioli. The food was good and cheap, and most of the people coming here were common folks or dock workers.

Outside each stall, there were a few crude, low tables surrounded by small stools. The diners gathered here, eating heartily in the noisy crowd. Conversations buzzed around them, discussing everything under the sun-except for matters of the state. Politics were too far removed from the daily lives of these people.

At one of the ravioli stalls, two men sat. They were dressed simply, blending in with the rest of the crowd. One wore a gray cotton jacket and a faded cap, looking to be in his thirties. The other man, perhaps in his forties, wore a coarse green tunic. Despite the chill of the spring air, his attire seemed thin. After finishing his bowl of ravioli, he wiped his brow, small beads of sweat dotting his forehead.

The man in the gray jacket placed his cutlery down and spoke first. "So, we just let it go like this?"

The man in the green tunic wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, his voice low and measured. "They came prepared. Let it be for now."

"What a pity," the man in gray remarked.

The man in green gazed at the remaining sauce on his plate, which shimmered with a thin layer of oil. "It's time to make Yuvan uneasy. If we leave him to his own devices, he'll grow more entrenched. The longer we wait, the less chance we have of overcoming him."

"I've never understood why the king decided to release Yuvan from the capital," the gray-clad man said.

He shook his head, troubled by the decision. He felt that those in the capital couldn't possibly be unaware of Yuvan's rebellious intentions. Letting him go was like releasing a tiger back into the wild.

The green-clad man's lips curled into a cold smile. "They let him go because they know there's someone else lurking in the shadows and waiting to strike."

The gray-clad man froze, his eyes widening. "Do you mean we've been exposed?"

The man in green gave a low chuckle. "Not yet. If we were exposed, Rafael wouldn't be coming to Lunvale. He'd be on our doorstep instead."

He stirred the remaining sauce on his plate, the once-clear liquid turning murky as he mixed it, his eyes narrowing with cold intensity.

"Rafael likely came to Lunvale hoping to draw me out. We can't involve ourselves in the matter of Stone Village. In a way, it's working in our favor-forcing Yuvan's hand. He can't delay any longer. It's time for him to act.'

The man in gray thought for a moment before nodding. "Yes. Once Tiberius is escorted back to the capital, Yuvan will be thrown into disarray. He's already on edge. Pressure him a little, and he'll make a move."

The green-clad man's voice was calm, almost indifferent. "Then inform Sandoria and Westhaven. If it's time to act, they should prepare themselves."

"Understood!" The man in gray's expression was a mix of tension and anticipation, as if they had finally reached a critical juncture.

But the green-clad man remained relaxed, his tone almost casual, as though giving instructions for a dinner menu rather than plotting a revolution.

Their voices were quiet, and with the bustling noise around them, no one could overhear their

conversation. Their humble attire and the crowded market setting made it impossible for anyone to suspect they were scheming a rebellion.

Rebellion, after all, was a far-off concept to the common folk. Though they would be the first to suffer if it came to that, it seemed too distant for their daily lives.

Meanwhile, apprentices from Meadow Ridge guilds were making their way into the city.

Rafael had gone to the Lunvale and revealed his identity to the local governor, Gilbert Salter.

Upon learning that the villagers of Stone Village were in fact the rebels' private soldiers, Gilbert gasped, feeling as if the ground beneath him had just slipped away.

After his initial panic, he quickly said, "I will fully cooperate, Your Highness. Whatever you command, I will follow."

Gilbert realized that his failure to address the rebel soldiers under his watch was a grave mistake-a capital offense. Right now, his only hope of saving his life was by making up for it with a decisive contribution-his position was the least of his concerns.

This operation was labeled as a bandit suppression mission.

The night before, they gathered to discuss the details. The mission wasn't particularly dangerous or difficult, but there was one certainty-the people from Stone Village in Lunvale were not the same private soldiers from Stonebrook County.

So where had Yuvan's forces gone?

Randall had mentioned before that several counties and states had similar strongholds. Rafael guessed they were likely similar in scale to Stone Village-several thousand people, not too many, but certainly not a small number either.

Without military posts, relying only on local authorities would be insufficient to wipe out 5,000 men. It would be too easy for the enemy forces to turn the tables and take control.

If the same amount of private soldiers in several areas rose up at once, it would wreak havoc on the common people. By the time the main army arrived, it would be impossible to know how many places would have already been taken over.

Suppressing the private soldiers in Lunvale was not the problem. The real threat lay further ahead. Over the years, Yuvan steadily built his power, especially during the war on the Southern Frontier. The court had no clear defense against him, and even after the Southern Frontier victory, his expansion had not been fully curtailed.

Now, someone was working behind the scenes, and no one even knew who it was.

Rafael felt somewhat passive in this situation. Ever since arriving in Lunvale, he had been preoccupied with trying to uncover the identity of this unseen force.

When he and Jacob had analyzed the situation before, they had ruled out many suspects. But there was one man they had initially excluded who had slowly crept back into their thoughts-an idea that refused to leave Rafael's mind.

On paper, this man wasn't the most likely suspect. Investigations had shown that his territory was neither especially rich nor troubled. It was peaceful, and he didn't maintain a large private army.

There were no irregularities in his domain. Under normal circumstances, he would have been ruled out entirely. Yet Rafael had done just that-excluded him-only to later add his name back to the list, because something about him didn't sit right.

This man the true mastermind was clearly behind Yuvan, operating from the shadows. He didn't need to raise an army. Instead, he could secretly operate behind the scenes. He could target those around Yuvan and take control of everything Yuvan had in the end.

If this man had planned this from the very beginning, then he wouldn't have waited so quietly over the years. He would have developed his own underground network.

That underground network was the most dangerous part.

Rafael's mind drifted back to the Southern Frontier campaign. After his father-in-law and brothers-in-law fought hard and had already driven out Sandoria, they were able to return so quickly, which showed they had external support in terms of military funding and equipment.

So, the true mastermind could be working with Sandoria.

Coupled with what Carissa had said about Sandoria's spies hiding in the gentlemen's retreats in the capital, Rafael felt more certain that his suspicions were not far from the truth.

But if this was true, then it would be an incredibly risky move for the true mastermind. By aligning with Sandoria, he was not just handing over the Southern Frontier to them-he was essentially offering all of Starhaven to their grasp.

Unless, of course, he had a plan to keep Sandoria at bay and make them focus on the Southern Frontier only.

If that was the case, then Victory Pass might also need to be guarded. It was possible that he was also working behind the scenes with Westhaven.

For now, Rafael pushed these thoughts aside. He had to focus on the battle at hand.

At the same time, he sent a letter to Timothy in the Southern Frontier and Dominic in Victory Pass, warning them to be extra cautious. In his letter to Timothy, he made a special note to keep an eye on Oliver.

Oliver was like a poorly made firearm-while he might not be capable of great harm, he posed a constant danger of backfiring on his own side.

Once the letters were written, he entrusted them to Winona's messenger, who was to deliver them with haste. He also sent an urgent dispatch to Salvador, warning of the unfolding situation.

The bandit suppression operation began.

Gilbert cooperated wholeheartedly, but his forces were sorely lacking. He suggested requesting reinforcements from Ebonflow. It wasn't that he didn't trust Rafael; it was simply too risky to send a disorganized group to fight the private soldiers who had been operating in the mountains for so long. If they lost this battle, Gilbert's head would be at stake. Even though he faced repeated rejections from Rafael, he kept bringing it up.

Finally, Everett lost his patience and roared at him. "If you're not going to listen, then leave!"

The words nearly shattered Gilbert's eardrums. His head buzzed for a while, and he almost thought he was going deaf. When the outside sounds finally came through, he felt as though he had narrowly escaped disaster.

Chapter 1270

The operation began with a forceful strike.

One team headed straight for the northern road of Stone Village, which was the way into the village. However, before this main force set out, other smaller teams had already moved into the mountains, surrounding the area from all sides. Their numbers were few, but their formation was strategic, creating a trap that left the enemy nowhere to run.

Still, the battle wasn't an easy one.

There were too many places to cover, and the enemy was very familiar with the terrain. Fortunately, Everett had already sent people to block all the entrances to Stone Village's secret passages. This forced the enemy into continuously fighting.

Meanwhile, Dylan managed to rescue the two laborers he had previously left in the small cave. He sent them to find others, urging them to leave the village without their weapons.

The two men were grateful, but cold and hungry. When they learned that a fight had broken out, they hurried off to warn those living on the edge of the mountains and help them escape.

But the laborers were few. The real strength of the enemy lay in the 5,000 private soldiers occupying the village, making the battle that much harder to win.

Hours passed before the second team took Stone Village, cutting off their supply lines and forcing the enemy into the mountains. If Rafael's side could hold onto the food supplies, the enemy would be forced to forage, which would expose them.

After all, they were facing martial artists. Even the smallest movements in the wind could give them away. As for Gilbert, he waited at the northern road's entrance, ready to capture any laborers attempting to escape. He couldn't afford to let them carry messages to the outside world.

It was clear to Gilbert that such a large-scale operation would surely attract attention, and it was inevitable that someone from Lunvale would report the news.

However, Gilbert didn't think that far ahead. He just felt this battle was extremely dangerous, and he couldn't let the enemy get any reinforcements. After all, he knew these weren't really ordinary bandits- they were rebel soldiers.

After the intense fighting, Rafael and the others took turns resting, preparing for the next phase of the operation-mountain warfare.

Carissa and Rafael were not on the same team. Everett had insisted they be separated for this mission. As he put it, "One team doesn't need two commanders. A single commander leading a squad is just right." But Rafael corrected his words, explaining that both he and Carissa were capable commanders, which was why they should lead separate forces.

After a brief moment of silence, Everett realized he couldn't diminish his own apprentice's abilities and agreed with his assessment.

The battle raged on for three days and nights before the remaining scattered private soldiers were all wiped out.

Of the 5,300 men, over 2,000 were killed, and 3,000 were captured.

The weapons and armor recovered from the mountains were transported to the Lunvale government office. After a thorough inventory and inspection, any items deemed of good quality would be sent to the garrison in Ebonflow. If they weren't up to standard, they would be destroyed.

The news of this massive operation sent shockwaves through the citizens of Lunvale. Were there really so many bandits? Or could they actually be something else?

In the capital, Salvador had just received the victory report when the court was still in the middle of a heated debate. Some argued that the Hell Monarch had been reckless, suggesting that a disorganized group of men couldn't possibly defeat well-trained private soldiers. They even proposed sending reinforcements.

Before any resolution could be reached, the victory report arrived at the capital and was delivered directly to Salvador.

After reading the report, Salvador's smile stretched so wide it nearly reached his ears. Clapping in delight, he exclaimed, "The Hell Monarch truly lives up to his title as Starhaven's War God. Even a disorganized group under his command can be transformed into elite soldiers."

Though he said this, Salvador knew well that the so-called disorganized group wasn't just a random bunch of people. Martial artists lacked unity, but once united, their destructive power became formidable. Naturally, Salvador was still concerned. He had always looked down on martial artists, believing them to be eccentric individuals with little interest in the royal court or the government.

But then, Rafael and Carissa had managed to unite them. Despite the huge difference in numbers, they pulled off a decisive victory.

Salvador couldn't deny how terrifying their unity had made them.