

## War Song 1291

### Chapter 1291

In the evening, Carissa presented Rafael's leave request to Salvador, who summoned her to an audience. Seeing her reddened eyes, he believed Robert's words. It was clear that Rafael's illness had come on strongly this time.

"Don't worry too much," Salvador said gently. "With Mr. Lester's treatment, he'll recover soon."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I've also sent someone to hurry after Sebastian. He has the best medicine for heart ailments."

Carissa's voice was faint, as if her strength had been drained, and she sounded fragile.

"It's the Snowdrop Pills, isn't it?" Salvador asked.

He knew of the medicine. The nobility in the capital often kept a few on hand, just in case. But he had heard that the pills had become scarce over the past two years, as some of the ingredients were no longer available.

"Yes," Carissa confirmed.

"When can he return? Can't you find the pills at Arcane Sanctum?"

Carissa's expression darkened with worry. "It will take at least two or three days. Arcane Sanctum no longer carries the pills. Rowan, Sebastian's apprentice, told me that only Sebastian has two left on him." "Is there no other medicine that could work as well?" Salvador pressed, though he wondered if the Snowdrop Pills were as miraculous as people claimed, or just an exaggerated rumor.

"Other medicines likely won't compare." Carissa hesitated, her face growing more uneasy. "Mr. Warren's late mom suffered from a heart condition and was close to death. It was the Snowdrop Pills that saved her life. Afterward, she had to take a dose every month to maintain her health. It really works."

Salvador thought he had heard of that incident before, but discussing a dead person at this moment felt rather ill-fated.

Noticing Carissa's eyes redden again, he tried to reassure her, "Mr. Lester told me the situation is now under control. With some time and proper care, Rafael will recover. Don't worry too much."

Carissa lowered her gaze, hiding the redness in her eyes. "Yes, Your Majesty. I'm grateful for Mr. Lester's help today."

Salvador dismissed her to return to Rafael's side, temporarily placing the matter aside.

When Carissa returned to the estate, she finally confided in Jacob and Kyle. Jacob clutched his chest, genuinely shaken by the events of the day. Neither of them opposed the plan. It was risky, yes, but perhaps it was a lesser danger than risking the lives of so many soldiers at the Southern Frontier. Jacob immediately began to consider the situation, weighing the details in his mind. "I think His Majesty will send someone tomorrow. After all, with His Highness' sudden heart ailment at such a crucial moment, it's hard to imagine His Majesty won't grow suspicious."

"Tomorrow might be the easiest. But you said the medicine lasts for 72 hours. My worry is that they might come over the next few days," Kyle said.

Carissa reassured them, "There's no need to worry too much. It will only be two or three days at most. I've already told His Majesty that Sebastian is on his way back. Once he arrives, I'll inform Mr. Lester that he's no longer needed."

Despite her words, everyone felt uneasy. It all felt so covert, like they were preparing for something dishonest.

Carissa didn't speak further. Her mood was heavy as she silently returned to Orchid Hall.

Helen had already been persuaded to leave. This was not something Carissa could share with her. Once Rafael left, she would tell Helen that he had gone to Sebastian's residence to recover.

As Carissa looked at her husband, pale and lying there, her eyes grew red again. She had been prepared for this, but seeing the bloodstain on his chest from earlier still made her heart race. Tears began to fall uncontrollably.

"Does it still hurt?" Carissa asked softly, leaning down to embrace him. Her throat was tight with emotion. "It's bearable," Rafael managed, lifting his hand with difficulty to stroke her hair. "Don't cry."

The dull pain in his chest was still sharp, spreading to his back and down his left arm. He had tried taking deep breaths, but the pain worsened each time, leaving him with no choice but to lie there helplessly. Carissa raised her head, her eyes now brimming with tears. "I'm sorry."

Seeing her tears only made Rafael's chest ache more. He groaned in pain, his heart tightening. "Don't cry," he murmured. "When you cry, it makes me hurt even more."

Carissa quickly wiped her tears away, her voice trembling as she promised, "Okay. I won't cry. I won't."

Chapter 1292

As expected, Galen arrived with a few Vanguard Unit guards, accompanying Robert and Derek to Hell Monarch Estate.

Carissa had taken a few days off, leaving the matters of the day to Michael and Max.

Violet was now fully aware of the situation, and upon seeing Robert and Derek's arrival with the guards, she decided to stay out of sight. If she couldn't play her part well, it was better not to cause any trouble. Robert and Derek noticed Carissa's red, swollen eyes, recognizing that she had spent the night worrying. Derek spoke gently, offering some comfort, "Your Grace, please don't worry too much. With Mr. Lester here, everything will be fine."

"Thank you, Mr. Walker," Carissa replied quietly.

The Vanguard Unit guards, including Galen, couldn't enter the inner chambers, as it was the prince and princess consort's private quarters. Jacob stood outside with them.

Galen studied him for a moment before asking, "Mr. York, His Majesty is quite concerned about His Highness. He sent me to inquire about his condition. Has His Highness suffered from any illnesses before? What caused this sudden heart ailment?"

Jacob suddenly felt irritated. He had been feeling this way for a while now, knowing that the questioning and probing were rooted in distrust. Though his irritation remained hidden, his face still betrayed deep

concern.

With a sigh, he replied, "With His Highness being so busy, his health is bound to suffer. He's been at the Supreme Court all day, reviewing documents and questioning witnesses.

"Also, he often stays out late and returns only in the early hours of the morning. Sometimes, he has less than two hours of sleep before he rushes out for the morning court meeting. On top of that, he caught a cold while hiding in the mountains in Lunvale, and hasn't had a proper rest since he returned."

Galen fell silent. He was here on orders to check on things, but at the moment, he couldn't help but feel a deep respect for the Hell Monarch. Not many could endure such a grueling schedule. If it were him, after a few late-night duties and no rest, he would barely be able to stand.

The Hell Monarch was, after all, only human-not made of steel-and illness was inevitable.

Galen didn't understand why Salvador was so insistent on probing. After asking Jacob, Galen steeled himself and turned to question the maids who served in Orchid Hall. They were the ones who knew Rafael's condition best.

The maids shot him strange looks. Though they didn't speak openly, he could tell they were displeased. They were well aware that, despite Rafael's illness, Galen hadn't shown much concern. Instead, he had come to ask them about every detail.

He had no choice but to say that Salvador was deeply concerned about Rafael's health and wanted to know more about his condition. Galen felt a twinge of guilt as he spoke, but it was an order from the king, so he had no choice but to carry it out.

Robert stayed behind while Derek and Galen left to return to the palace and report to Salvador. He comforted Carissa, telling her that Rafael's pulse showed a slight improvement today compared to yesterday. However, as with any serious illness, recovery would take time. It would not happen quickly. Carissa barely acknowledged the words, her mind racing with worry. She only hoped Robert wouldn't stay here overnight. By midnight, it would be time for the Snowdrop Pills, and Rafael's pulse should begin to return to normal.

Sensing her unease, Jacob asked to speak with her privately to keep her from making any hasty decisions, like asking Robert to leave.

"I've spoken with Rowan," Jacob said quietly. "Even with the Snowdrop Pills, his pulse won't return to normal right away. The poison is damaging to the body. When Mr. Lester diagnoses him, he will likely say that rest is required."

Carissa nodded. "I know, but the situation is critical. After taking the Snowdrop Pills, most of the symptoms will disappear, and with his internal force protecting him, his pulse will appear normal. The problem is his sudden recovery. It will look suspicious to the king."

"Will Sebastian be back tonight?" Jacob asked. "If he is, we can administer the Snowdrop Pills. Even if His Highness shows improvement, it would at least prove the pills' effectiveness to His Majesty."

Carissa had Snowdrop Pills on hand, but she had already told Salvador that only Sebastian had them and she didn't have any.

"Sebastian should be able to return. He hasn't gone far," she said.

Carissa felt sorry for Sebastian. They had really put him through a lot.

Jacob sighed in relief. "Then, it will be fine. Everyone's nerves are on edge right now, and tempers are short. We'll have to be patient and not reveal anything."

At the very least, they had to wait until Rafael had been away from the capital for a few days. That way, even if their plan was exposed, it wouldn't matter as much.

Carissa composed herself, her eyes gradually regaining their calm focus. "Yes, you're right."

Chapter 1293

Robert was supposed to stay the night, as he was worried that Rafael's condition might worsen. But by the time it was about nine at night, Sebastian returned. Without a word, he immediately administered a Snowdrop Pill.

After taking the pill, Rafael claimed that the pain in his chest had lessened. Robert took his pulse and, sure enough, the improvement was remarkable. The Snowdrop Pill worked better than the medicine he had prescribed.

Though a skilled physician himself, Robert had heard much about Sebastian's renowned expertise. Now that Sebastian was here, there was no need for Robert to stay the night. Carissa saw how exhausted he was after two days of treatment. So, she kindly gave him a token of gratitude and had someone escort him back to his residence.

Once Robert left, Sebastian prepared another prescription, instructing someone to head to Arcane Sanctum to fetch the necessary ingredients and brew the medicine. After taking the new concoction, Rafael felt as if the heavy weight pressing on his chest had been lifted, leaving him much more at ease. "Mr. Lester will probably come by again tomorrow. So, you'll need to wait until tomorrow evening to leave the capital," said Sebastian.

Carissa's brow furrowed with concern. "But if Mr. Lester comes tomorrow to check Raf's pulse, won't that expose everything?"

"We'll have someone watch the door," Sebastian replied. "If he comes, I'll just give His Highness another dose..."

"Another dose?" Carissa's eyes widened in alarm. "He can't take any more!"

Sebastian gave her a sidelong glance. "If you were so worried, you shouldn't have had him take the half pill in the first place."

Seeing the regret in Carissa's eyes, Sebastian explained, "I'm not talking about giving him another half pill. What we'll give him is a Frostbane Pill. It's a cold-acting medicine, specifically for treating extreme heat in the body. After taking it, we'll have him circulate his inner force. His pulse will still be chaotic, but it won't appear as alarming."

Carissa nodded, then asked, "But the previous pill has already affected his heart. Won't circulating his energy after taking the Frostbane Pill clash with the effects and weaken his constitution?"

"It's not a problem. There are plenty of other pills to help stabilize his body," Sebastian reassured her.

Travis, who had been listening nearby, couldn't help but speak up, "If we had used the Frostbane Pill from the start, His Highness wouldn't have suffered from that chest pain for two days."

Sebastian shot him a glance. "How could it be the same? If it weren't a genuine heart ailment, do you think the royal physicians wouldn't have noticed? Just a chaotic pulse isn't enough.

"Mr. Lester has already made up his mind, believing it's a sudden heart ailment. Tomorrow, when he diagnoses His Highness' pulse as still erratic, he'll just confirm that more rest is needed."

Travis quickly fell silent. Sebastian had never been that harsh before. Today, he was downright fierce.

Back at the palace, Salvador had asked all the questions he wanted to. Between Galen, Derek, and Robert, Rafael's condition had been thoroughly explained.

Later that night, the Nightsteel Guard reported that after Sebastian returned, he had sent someone to Arcane Sanctum to fetch medicine. It was clear that Salvador's earlier worries had been unnecessary. With his doubts dispelled, he now felt a twinge of regret for ever suspecting his younger brother.

But given the internal and external pressures, he couldn't afford to be careless. The true mastermind behind the rebellion had yet to be uncovered. Who could have the influence to manipulate those around Yuvan?

Salvador cursed his doubts, but in his heart, he found a justification. His suspicions were not unfounded. What if Rafael was hiding behind a supposed illness, planning to slip away to Valken? Or perhaps there was some other hidden agenda?

He firmly believed that Sandoria's resurgence was fueled by great confidence. Over the years, they had been relentlessly waging war, nearly draining their resources. They wouldn't launch a decisive strike now if they weren't confident of victory.

This suggested that traitors had colluded with them, setting up plans at the Southern Frontier. And for someone to arrange such plans without Louis and Timothy noticing—who could it be?

It wasn't just Salvador being overly suspicious. There were simply too many unanswered questions. How could he not know that Oliver's abilities were limited? But the entire Earl of Silverstone's

family- men, women, young, and old-numbered in the hundreds. Oliver would never betray his kingdom. Salvador didn't need Oliver to be a great warrior. He just needed him to rally the troops with a few loud shouts and boost morale. So, even if Oliver stayed seated in the marshal's residence, it wouldn't negatively impact the battle.

## Chapter 1294

At the Southern Frontier, Oliver could scarcely sit still. He hadn't expected Sandoria's army to really arrive, yet here they were. The letter from the Spencer family had been true.

300,000 soldiers were marching in, their advance relentless. Over the past few days, Oliver had been discussing strategy with Timothy and the others. They didn't seem overly concerned.

"Let them come. We'll fight," they said, their confidence bolstering Oliver, though it didn't ease his mind entirely.

However, the battle ahead would be brutal. Once the fighting became fierce, Oliver knew he wouldn't be able to stay Redstone Manor, issuing orders from a safe distance.

And even more troubling: Did Timothy and the others truly have the strength to win? The Sinclair Army and Hell Monarch Army had long been unruly and difficult to control. On top of that, they had spent the past two years focused more on farming than military drills. If it came down to an actual fight, he believed their chances of victory weren't very high.

Oliver ran his hand over his leg, lingering on his knee that ached every time it rained. A jagged scar ran down his thigh-a reminder of how close he had come to losing that leg on the battlefield. After spending months recovering in the capital, he could now walk without limping, but it still wasn't easy.

He still remembered the feeling of being close to death on the battlefield. Everyone was blinded by bloodlust, exhausted in body and mind. Lifting the heavy saber felt like an impossible task, and his arms ached as if they weren't even his own.

His armor had been too heavy for him to escape from an enemy ambush. If not for the intervention of others, his neck would have been cut by the enemy's sword.

Of course, Oliver was a marshal now; he didn't have to lead the charge anymore. But at the Southern Frontier, there was a tradition: even marshals had to lead their troops on the battlefield, not hide away in the marshal's residence giving orders.



That was one of the bad rules Hector and Rafael had set.

Louis and the others had absurd explanations for this. They claimed that during the Southern Frontier battle to reclaim the lands, the marshals had gone to the front lines to inspire the troops. That was why they could take back the cities that had been plundered.

The door creaked open, and Celeste entered with a cup of coffee.

Oliver quickly masked his worry, turning toward her. As his gaze fell on her, he noticed her reddened eyes, the faintest hint of tears still clinging to her lashes. Her delicate face was troubled, and he immediately knew she had been crying.

"What's wrong?" he asked, rising and speaking gently. "Are you worried about the battle?"

Celeste set the cup down on the table, her eyes growing redder as fresh tears welled up.

She walked over and gently pressed Oliver back into his chair. Then, kneeling before him, her delicate hands rested on his knees.

"Do you still remember what you promised me, my lord?" she asked, her voice raspy and laced with sorrow.

Her eyes were red from crying and her entire form seemed fragile, like glass on the verge of shattering before his very eyes. His heart aching at the sight, he quickly reached out to steady her.

"Foolish girl, don't worry. I'm the marshal. Even if we go to battle, I won't be on the front lines."

Tears slid down Celeste's face, her voice breaking she spoke, "No, I haven't told you this... but for days now, I've been dreaming of war at the Southern Frontier. The enemy forces kill you, decapitate you, and hang your head on the gates of Simonton City. They throw me into a brothel camp, and our son is butchered in the chaos. I can't let you risk your life."

Oliver was shocked. "You've had these dreams for days?"

Crying harder, Celeste continued, "Not just for days... Ever since I received the letter from my adoptive father, I've been having the same dream over and over. I even consulted a witch. She said our family faces a grave fate, so that's why I urged you that day. If war breaks out, we must leave the Southern Frontier immediately."

Oliver was so shocked his eyes nearly popped out. He was a man who believed deeply in these things. When he first came to the Southern Frontier, he had sought out fortune tellers, asking whether his journey would bring him fortune or disaster.

As he thought back on it, he realized he had definitely obtained fortune-he had pocketed a fair share of the military funds and gained a beautiful wife.

But as the saying went, fortune came with misfortune. Now, disaster was finally upon him.

At the time, Oliver had promised Celeste he wouldn't fight in a moment of tenderness. But later, he

realized it was impossible. The world belonged to the king-if he fled in the heat of battle, where could he go?

Now, hearing her say that she had dreamed of those horrors night after night, he realized she was trying to warn him through her visions.

As cold sweat broke out across his skin, he suddenly stood, urgently saying, "Where is the witch? Send for her at once!"

Chapter 1295

The witch slipped quietly through the back door of Redstone Manor. After just a brief moment, barely 15 minutes, she was hastily escorted out again.

But by then, Oliver was paralyzed with fear. His chest felt tight, as though he couldn't catch his breath. It felt as though he had been thrown into a vast, endless ocean and was unable to reach shore, choking on the suffocating sensation.

The witch had come in for only a short time, scanning the room before she fixed her gaze on him and uttering a simple sentence, "Be safe, Marshal Prince."

No matter how much Celeste pleaded, the witch refused to say more. Even when Celeste asked her to perform a ritual, she turned her down, saying it would be useless.

The witch then looked at Oliver and said, "This land is a graveyard for military commanders. Marshal Prince, you should see to your family's safety."

It was those words that sent a chilling wave of terror through Oliver.

How many generals had been buried at the Southern Frontier? How many had met their end here? Hector and his sons were warriors as brave as any, and where had that led them?

Oliver knew his own limitations. He was not as fierce as Hector, and he was certainly no match for the young generals of the Sinclair family. He admired them but had no desire to follow their tragic path. What glory was there in dying? It was living that mattered.

If he died on the battlefield, the title of Earl of Silverstone would go to his family, but none of it would concern him anymore. Even Celeste and their son wouldn't be able to live freely or enjoy the fruits of his legacy...

No, the real tragedy was that Oliver wouldn't be there to enjoy any of it. He wouldn't be there to hear people address him respectfully and in awe.

Celeste's arms tightened around him from behind, and he could hear her quiet sobs. The sound of her grief weighed on him like a thousand stones.

"My love, if you fall on the battlefield, then I and our son will follow you," she cried, her voice thick with grief.

The warmth of her tears burned his shoulder, as though her sorrow was searing through him. Without thinking, he blurted, "No, I cannot die!"

His hand shot out to grasp Celeste's, pulling her to him. His eyes, for the first time, were filled with a resolve he had never shown before.

"None of us will die. We promised each other that if war came, we would leave this place."

Celeste looked at him, a flash of confusion in her eyes. "But how do we leave? The people in the manor aren't all loyal to us, and we can't just leave with nothing. We can't go unprepared."

Oliver's mind raced. Of course. If they were to leave, they would have to go into hiding. He had grown used to the comfort of his life, and the thought of a life of poverty filled him with dread. How could he go from riches to rags?

He needed a reason, a legitimate excuse to move the gold and silver out. He had trusted men by his side, enough to get it done. If they stayed, they would likely die here anyway, so they likely would follow him. The people to transport it were there, but how could they leave without raising suspicion? Timothy and Louis had spies everywhere. They were still investigating the misappropriation of military funds. If he tried to move the valuables openly, it would certainly arouse suspicion.

He needed a plan, a way to make it all seem legitimate!

"I might have an idea," Celeste's soft voice broke through his thoughts, drawing his attention.

Oliver's gaze locked onto her. "What is it?"

Celeste leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. She outlined her proposal, and as she spoke, her eyes reddened with unshed tears.

"Do you think I'm cruel, my love? But I only want to be with you forever."

Oliver's face went pale, and he remained silent.

The plan had merit, but there were too many risks. A hasty escape might only result in his own execution. But following Celeste's idea would bring ruin to his entire family. He couldn't do that.

"My love, we must make a decision quickly," Celeste whispered, on the verge of tears.

Oliver hesitated.

For the first time, he thought about his family back in the capital. At the very least, he had to make sure they were safe. Otherwise, he would truly become a person who was disloyal, unjust, and neglectful of his family.

His gaze darkened, his nails digging into his flesh. "Your plan can work, but we can't kill General Farrell and the others, or the Southern Frontier Army will have no commander. I heard from the scouts that Sandoria's army will take at least three to five days to arrive. I'll invite the generals to a strategy meeting, and while they're distracted..."

He paused, taking a deep breath, feeling the suffocating pressure in his chest. Whether it was fear or a desperate rebellion against fate, he wasn't sure.

"We'll use illusion powder," he concluded.

Illusion powder, also known as poisonous mushroom powder, was deadly in large doses. But if used carefully, it could induce discomfort, nausea, or hallucinations. With the right medical attention, those affected would recover.

Chapter 1296

A flicker of disgust passed through Celeste's lowered eyes.

What a waste-no skills, no abilities, lacking in both wisdom and courage, unable even to be ruthless. How could someone like that accomplish anything significant?

But when she lifted her gaze, her eyes shone with renewed light. "You have a kind heart, my love. I didn't fall in love with the wrong man."

Having made his decision, Oliver found himself unexpectedly calm.

He cupped Celeste's face in his hands, imagining a future where they ran away together-living in

secrecy, enjoying a life of wealth and leisure. That idea didn't sound half bad.

He had known glory once, served the kingdom, and given his all. Who didn't value their life? He wasn't doing anything wrong.

And honestly, to speak what shouldn't be spoken-whether he stayed or left the Southern Frontier, it would hardly matter. After all, Louis and the others didn't hold him in high regard.

"Send for Carl. I need to discuss things with him. If we are to leave, we'll take everyone with us," Oliver instructed.

Carl had once been the drill master at Silverstone Estate, and Oliver had brought him along to the Southern Frontier.

Oliver hadn't known that Zoey had sent her people along with him. When Celeste arrived, she had discreetly removed all those spies. Now, everyone left in Redstone Manor were trusted confidants. Carl was initially stunned by the plan but quickly warmed to it.

He had been accustomed to the luxury of the capital, enjoying a comfortable life as a drill instructor in Silverstone Estate. But since arriving here in the Southern Frontier, everything had been a struggle. Even a simple drink was hard to come by, and there were no fine dishes to enjoy when they dined out.

If he could return to wealth and comfort, why would he stay here and suffer?

Moreover, if war came and Oliver went to the frontlines, could they sit idly by? They would be expected to fight too. It would be a death sentence for them! They weren't even official soldiers. Even if they tried to flee, they wouldn't be punished.

So, it was better to leave with Oliver. They had accumulated a fair amount of wealth in Redstone Manor. If they could take that with them, they would live comfortably, no matter where they went. Whether or not they returned to the capital mattered little.

Though that was Carl's thoughts, he was surprised Oliver would dare do such a thing. After all, if Oliver fled from battle, it would bring disaster to his family. Even if he didn't lose his head, his assets would likely be seized, and he could be exiled.

But then again, if Oliver didn't care, why should he?

The next day, Carl announced that with the war imminent, Oliver would send his wife and young son back to the capital. So, they needed to buy some supplies for the journey. He also needed to send the household servants back, so they would buy a few carriages.

Timothy and Louis heard the news but gave it little thought. After all, Oliver's wife was not one to endure hardship. Why would she want to stay in a war zone with the fighting imminent?

Besides, the infant had only just turned a month old-leaving the child in such a dangerous place was hardly fitting. Sending them away seemed entirely sensible.

That day, the necessary items for the journey were procured. Five carriages were prepared, along with boxes, crates, and several crates of local Southern Frontier delicacies. They were said to be gifts for Evelyn and Zoey in the capital.

Timothy knew Zoey well enough. She was a woman of virtue, skilled in managing a household, with both the strength and the wit to lead. It was unfortunate she had married a man like Oliver.

Now, with Oliver's concubine and child returning to the capital, this "grand gesture" was surely a tribute of the highest order.

Timothy couldn't help but feel a pang of irony.

That evening, Oliver hosted a banquet at his manor, claiming it was also to discuss preparations for the battle. He invited Louis and Timothy, as well as the two military advisors, to join him.

The Southern Frontier Army now numbered little more than 200,000. There were several generals, but in truth, it was Louis and Timothy who had long held the reins. Today, they had even sent for Zachary Larkin. Zachary was busy overseeing repairs to the catapults and other siege equipment. Once the repairs were completed, he had to inspect them, so he didn't attend the banquet.

"Whatever plans are discussed, just have General Quinton brief me later," Zachary had said.

Louis and Timothy had their strategies to share. Ever since they received reports from scouts, they had been preparing for battle. Multiple plans had been drawn up, and today, they would finally be able to hash out the details.

## Chapter 1297

When Louis and Timothy arrived at Redstone Manor with Ivor Ziegler and Alec Walker, they saw the household guards of the manor loading crates into the waiting carriages.

Recognizing Carl, Louis called out, "Leaving tomorrow?"

Carl greeted them with a smile. "Yes, General Quinton. We leave first thing in the morning. Marshal Prince will escort them for part of the way, so we're getting everything packed tonight.'

"Marshal Prince will escort them for part of the way?" Louis frowned.

How could the marshal leave camp at such a time?

Carl shrugged nonchalantly. "It's just a short journey-only a couple of hours."

Then, with a sly smile, he added, "Marshal Prince said that women need to be pampered. She's traveling

far with such a young child. He said it's only fitting to see her off personally to show his regard."

Louis understood Oliver's fondness for this woman, so it wasn't surprising that he would send her off. Louis didn't say anything further.

A lavish feast had been prepared in Redstone Manor, and Oliver himself came out to greet them. After exchanging formal greetings, Oliver invited them to take their seats.

They glanced at the laden table that held a wide assortment of fine dishes, their fragrances so rich they could almost hear their appetites stir.

Everyone knew Oliver was particular about food, but they hadn't expected such extravagance. The spread was enough to feed 15 or more people, yet there were only five seated at the table.

Everyone couldn't help but feel nostalgic. Whether they followed Hector or Rafael, there was always food during meetings. But most of the time, it was just a bowl of potato stew, and it was rare to have even one or two meat dishes.

Of course, there was no comparison to be made. Wartime fare and peacetime indulgence were worlds apart.



"This is too much. We can't possibly eat all of this," Timothy said with concern.

"Indeed, it's more sumptuous than a festival feast," Alec added.

Oliver laughed heartily, waving off their concerns. "Sounds like I'm treating you all poorly. It's a little lavish, yes, but most of it is just snacks to go with the wine. You'll see, once we start, you'll wish there were more."

"We're here to discuss matters of war, not drink," Louis interjected.

"Come now, just a little drink," Oliver insisted, a wide grin on his face. "Let's speak freely tonight. I know some of you have concerns. With the great battle looming, if there's anything troubling you about me, feel free to speak up. If I have done something wrong, I will correct it. If there's nothing wrong, I'll commend you. We all need to be united, no divisions among us."

The men exchanged glances before taking their seats.

Were there concerns? Of course, but they had tried voicing them before Oliver had never listened. It was likely that now the battle was nearing, Oliver was unsure and was trying to smooth things over with them.

However, at the subtle urging of the two military advisors, Louis and Timothy refrained from pointing out Oliver's flaws.

Military generals were straightforward, and they said what was on their minds. However, military advisors knew how to approach matters with finesse. Everyone had known from the moment Oliver had arrived at Southern Frontier that he could not take criticism well.

Asking for input now was more about maintaining appearances. If they were to actually voice their true concerns, it would only lead to unpleasantness. Tonight, their main focus was preparing for the battle and crafting strategies.

Even if Oliver's words were harsh at times, they had to swallow their frustrations for the greater good. "To the war effort!" Oliver ordered, signaling for more wine to be poured.

Wine-what man could resist it? Especially those stationed far from home. Wine had become a comfort, a way to stave off the loneliness that came with being away from family.

In the past, they had made do with rough, unrefined liquor. But tonight, there was something better to drink. Though they told themselves to drink sparingly, the rich, smooth taste encouraged them to indulge a bit more than they should.

Luckily, they had a good tolerance for alcohol. So, drinking a couple more cups wasn't a problem, and their mind stayed clear.

With the mood lifted by the wine, Louis finally spoke. "According to the scouts, Sandoria's army is moving at a steady pace. In three or five days, they'll be here. When they arrive, we expect them to launch a direct assault on the city, so our first priority is to plan the defense."

Oliver listened closely, nodding in agreement. The only point of contention arose when Louis mentioned that Sandoria's matchlocks wouldn't have much of an impact. Oliver was momentarily taken aback. "Matchlocks won't have much of an impact? That doesn't sound right."

"What I meant was that when it comes to attacking a city, the matchlock's advantages are limited," Louis explained.

Timothy chimed in, "Matchlocks need to be reloaded after each shot, and the shooter has to aim again. In a siege, Sandoria's forces are unlikely to use them."

"So you're planning to use archery to counter the matchlocks?" Oliver asked.

"Archery is essential," Timothy replied.

Oliver nodded. Inwardly, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of relief that he was planning to escape. If he had to fight, he might very well lose his life here in Southern Frontier.

How had they won any battles in the past like this?

Chapter 1298

The two military advisors noticed the shift in Oliver's expression, so Alec quickly interjected, "Have you seen the archery skills of the Elite Marksmanship Unit, Marshal Prince? Or the ballistaes we've improved? They're quite ingenious."

"I have seen them," Oliver replied curtly. When he first arrived at Southern Frontier, he had gone to oversee their training sessions.

Timothy recalled the visit as well. But at that time, they had just selected a new batch of archers and had been working on their accuracy. They hadn't even had the chance to use the new ballistaes either.

"We also have matchlocks," Louis added. "But when it comes to a direct confrontation between armies, we won't be relying on them. A sword is far more effective. Speed is the key."

Matchlocks were more useful in close-quarter combat, where there was cover to hide behind. After firing a shot, one could reload while staying out of sight. However, in a face-to-face battle, before one could even raise the weapon, their head might already be taken off.

Louis added a few more points, but Oliver seemed disinterested.

Timothy recalled that Oliver favored matchlocks. So, when he saw Oliver's reaction, he said, "I've heard that the Ministry of Defense is working on improving the matchlocks, and I believe they'll be sending some to Southern Frontier soon."

This was meant to be a morale booster for Oliver, who might feel at a disadvantage, with Sandoria using matchlocks while they wouldn't.

But instead of cheering him up, the remark only solidified Oliver's belief that his decision to flee had been the right one. The continuous shipment of weapons to Southern Frontier-even the matchlocks that had previously been underused-was proof of just how intense the impending conflict with Sandoria would be. Everyone was frustrated by Oliver's reaction but did their best to suppress their emotions. At such a critical moment, it was wiser not to provoke him. As the marshal holding the military command emblem- and being so petty-offending him would only harm the greater cause.

Fortunately, after discussing various strategies for defense and counterattack, Oliver did approve of their plans, though he added only the most superficial input. His suggestions were shallow, uninspired, mere regurgitations from military textbooks, and entirely unsuited for the unique challenges posed by Sandoria. By the time the discussion carried on into the late hours, fatigue had set in for everyone. Oliver finally instructed the servants to bring in some soup to sustain them.

As everyone had eaten their fill, they politely declined the offer for more, but Oliver smiled warmly and insisted, "This soup you must try. It's a mushroom soup made from mushrooms that my wife had someone sent from the capital. She made sure to have some brought for you all, but I forgot. Now that you're all here, it seems only right to share it with you."

Hearing Oliver mention his wife, their thoughts turned to Zoey. With Oliver's concubine and son returning to the capital, no doubt rumors would swirl about Zoey's reputation and how it might be affected. The servants brought in five bowls of soup. One was handed to Oliver, and the rest were distributed among the four men. The mushroom soup was paired with fresh meat and ham, simmered to perfection, and the aroma was intoxicating.

Alec examined the mushrooms carefully. It wasn't that he distrusted Oliver, but certain mushrooms were poisonous, and one could never be too careful. He inspected the mushrooms closely, but they appeared safe to eat, so he relaxed and began drinking.

The others, seeing no reason for suspicion, followed suit, sipping the fragrant soup.

Oliver glanced at them, blowing lightly on his bowl before drinking his own. The mushrooms, of course, were safe to consume. However, the illusion powder, ground into fine dust, was sprinkled in just before serving and mixed well so no one would notice.

The dose wasn't heavy, so its effects wouldn't kick in for another hour or two-by which time they'd have already returned to their quarters. Even if someone noticed something was off, they'd likely just assume it was from overdrinking.

By the next day, if anyone didn't wake up or experienced severe vomiting, the military physicians would naturally step in to treat them.

Oliver waited until they had finished the soup, then had his servants escort them out.

They left in high spirits, as this was the most pleasant discussion they'd had since receiving the scout's report. Oliver hadn't been entirely dismissive this time and even showed signs of approval now and then. Louis leaned toward Timothy, saying quietly, "Maybe we've misjudged him. He wasn't difficult at all tonight, right?"

"Misjudged? Not at all," Timothy replied. "It's just that with the enemy army pressing in, he needs us to fight. Of course he's being more cooperative."

## Chapter 1299

Before dawn, the carriages from Redstone Manor set off.

The manor's guards saw Oliver off, as he had previously insisted on personally escorting Celeste and their young son.

The procession slowly began to move forward.

Originally, there were only five carriages. But after leaving the manor, several more joined them. These were arranged by Carl ahead of time. Now, Carl and his men rode ahead on their warhorses, clearing the path.

It didn't matter if they were spotted-Oliver and his men were just seeing them off and would return afterward.

But when night fell and Oliver had still not returned, the manor's guards began to grow anxious. They hurried to find Louis and Timothy.

However, the manor's guards couldn't find them. Louis and Timothy had left the manor not long after the dinner last night, only to begin feeling dizzy and vomiting soon after. As they didn't share the same room, the guards attending them assumed it was simply the result of drinking too much, so they had the kitchen prepare some hangover soup.

After drinking the soup, they continued to vomit. Once they were done, they felt a little better and fell asleep.

By afternoon, they had still not woken, and the guards began to realize something was wrong. When they inquired further, they discovered that all those who had dined at the manor the previous evening had similar symptoms. They immediately called for the physician.

The military physician, Brandon, examined them and was stunned. "They've been poisoned by toxic mushrooms."

At once, Stuart, Louis' subordinate, was sent to Redstone Manor for an investigation. If they had been poisoned, there was a good chance that Oliver had been poisoned as well.

This was serious-how could they go to war with both the marshal and the generals incapacitated?

At the manor, they were told that Oliver had left to escort his wife back to the capital, and that he had not returned since.

Stuart felt uneasy, but he never imagined that Oliver had fled. He simply assumed that the commander had fallen ill along the way, causing a delay in his return.

The priority was to investigate the poisoning-whether it had been an accident or a deliberate act.

The manor's cooks explained that the mushroom soup had been made with ingredients sent by Zoey, the Earl of Silverstone's wife, and they assured Stuart that it couldn't possibly be poisonous.

They still had some of the mushrooms left, so the cook took them out for Stuart to inspect. Not being familiar with identifying mushrooms, Stuart had them sent back to Brandon for further examination. After a thorough inspection, Brandon confirmed that the mushrooms were safe to eat, and he decided to personally visit the manor for a more detailed investigation.

The cook explained that everyone had finished the leftover soup from the previous night, and none of them had shown any signs of poisoning. This meant the issue lay with the specific bowls of soup that Louis and the others had consumed.

Brandon's expression grew serious. "If that's the case, then they were deliberately poisoned. The person responsible knew exactly what they were doing ensuring they wouldn't die, but only suffer vomiting and fainting."

Stuart's face shifted, and then a sudden realization hit him. His eyes widened in horror.

No, it couldn't be-it was impossible!

That would be a crime punishable by the beheading of an entire family.

For Oliver to do such a thing... He must have lost his mind!

Without wasting a moment, Stuart sent word to track down Oliver, unsure if the marshal had fallen ill from poisoning and stopped to rest, or if he had truly fled.

Seven full hours had already passed since Oliver left. If they followed the direction he took, they might catch up. After all, with his family and so many carriages, it wasn't hard to follow their trail. At first, they were able to find the right direction, but as they continued, no one had seen the convoy.

It seemed likely that Oliver and his men had scattered in different directions.

They couldn't catch up, but in just one day, rumors spread like wildfire-whispers claiming that Oliver, fearing the advance of Sandoria's forces, had fled with his family.

There were even tales claiming the Southern Frontier to be a place where generals went to die. After all, the legendary Hector and his sons had all perished there despite their prowess.

Some claimed that Sandoria didn't bring an army of 250,000 men, but a staggering 800,000.

With rumors swirling, the morale of the troops began to falter.

After all, if the marshal had fled under the cover of night, what did that say about the chances of victory? It was a signal that the coming battle might be one they couldn't win.

## Chapter 1300

Oliver's sudden flight not only shattered the morale of the troops but also left Louis, Timothy, and the others feeling deeply disheartened and demoralized.

Had Oliver stayed and died here, the effect wouldn't have been nearly as disastrous.

Meanwhile, rumors spread quickly throughout the Southern Frontier. It seemed someone was deliberately stirring the pot, creating panic and undermining the soldiers' spirits. If Sandoria claimed victory in the first battle, it would be a crushing blow, and the Southern Frontier Army would likely be on the defensive from then on.

An urgent dispatch was sent to the capital, racing to deliver news of the crisis.

Before the dispatch could even reach the capital, Salvador was the first to realize that Rafael had gone missing.

On the fifth day of Rafael's sudden illness, Salvador sent Robert and Derek to visit Hell Monarch Estate

once more.

Jacob originally planned to stick to the story that Rafael had gone to Sebastian's villa to recuperate. On second thought, Salvador had sent the royal physician again just a few days later, even though he knew Rafael's condition was improving under Sebastian's care.

Clearly, Salvador's doubts hadn't been put to rest.

Since Salvador still had doubts, simply claiming that Rafael was at Sebastian's villa wouldn't suffice. Robert could go there, and if Rafael wasn't found, it would only raise more suspicion. So, Jacob told Robert and Derek that Rafael had left for Meadow Ridge the previous day to rest and recuperate.

Of course, Salvador wouldn't believe this, but Jacob knew he wouldn't send anyone to investigate either. He would only grow increasingly suspicious, likely wondering if Rafael was plotting something in secret- or even worse, if he was taking advantage of the chaos during Yuvan's rebellion to make a move of his

own.

The more sinister Salvador's thoughts, the less anger he would direct at Rafael when he eventually learned that the latter had gone to the Southern Frontier to fight in the war.

Because of this reasoning, Salvador wouldn't take action against the people at Hell Monarch Estate. At most, he would send someone to keep watch.

Sure enough, after Derek returned to the palace to report, Salvador's face turned ashen. He immediately summoned Ian.



"Keep an eye on Hell Monarch Estate," Salvador instructed. "Watch Carissa closely—every move she makes and who she speaks to. Also, keep an eye on Jacob in the estate. I want to know everything!" Ian was Salvador's trusted confidant. He knew Salvador's mind well enough not to question too much, though he understood the gravity of the situation. He nodded, acknowledging the order.

Once Ian left, Salvador was left alone, his thoughts spinning. From the moment Rafael had fallen ill, he had felt something was off—something wasn't right about the entire situation.

It was precisely at this time when internal strife and external threats arose that the court desperately needed capable men. And yet, Rafael's illness had struck with such speed and suddenness.

Now, it seemed Salvador's suspicions had been confirmed.

For all this time, Rafael had been investigating the forces behind Yuvan's rebellion, but hadn't come close

to discovering anything. Was there a possibility, though, that Rafael himself was the one pulling the strings behind Yuvan?

With Yuvan's betrayal, Rafael's sudden "illness" and departure for Valken made perfect sense. With his commanding presence, Rafael could effortlessly take control of Yuvan's forces, shifting the power in a heartbeat.

Of course, this theory was riddled with complications, such as the fact that Rafael had mentioned another figure behind Yuvan's rebellion. If this mysterious person was indeed Rafael, then why mention them at all? Surely he could have kept that information to himself.

Unless, of course, he wanted to mislead others—perhaps to throw suspicion onto the plot and draw himself into the conspiracy. It would allow Rafael to get closer to the people involved on that side, positioning himself in the middle of the treason.

But what about Lunvale? That didn't make sense, either. Did Rafael know that the 5,000 soldiers there were completely loyal to Yuvan, and that he had assessed the situation and found it impossible to control? Was that why he decided to use the forces from Meadow Ridge to eliminate them instead?

The possibility certainly existed.

Salvador's thoughts were a tangled mess, swirling with rage and a fear he could not ignore.

No one was more suited for rebellion than Rafael. He held royal blood, was a military genius, and had the support of the Southern Frontier's army. Most importantly, he had established a reputation with the people, winning their hearts and minds.

All he needed was a legitimate excuse to rise in rebellion.

That was why Salvador had hesitated to make a move against the people in Hell Monarch Estate. Once

he did, Rafael would have the perfect reason to act-one that could justify any uprising.

Suddenly, something occurred to him, and he ordered Derek, "Send for Carissa!"