

War Song 1321

Chapter 1321

After Jacob's investigation into Willowbrook Estate, he discovered that a few servants had indeed gone missing over the past few months.

He inquired at every pawnshop in the capital, but found out that none of the missing servants had been purchased there, meaning they must have come from elsewhere. He even went to the government offices to check the slave registration records, but found nothing.

Ultimately, after much discussion, it was Violet who decided she would stay at Willowbrook Estate. She told Carissa, "After all this time with Prince Hayden, I trust him. If he truly is the one who would deceive me, then I have no more to say."

However, Carissa wouldn't let her go alone. She insisted that Violet bring Bun and Cynthia along. That way, they would be there to offer protection if anything happened. Besides, if Hayden truly felt threatened, he wouldn't have refused their company.

After all, the more people to help, the better.

On the other hand, if he had called Violet there with ulterior motives, it would soon become clear.

Carissa saw them off personally. As they arrived, she watched Hayden greet them warmly, his face lighting up at the sight of their arrival. When he heard that Violet had brought two more guests, he clapped his hands and laughed.

"Well, it seems my place will be quite lively now. A warm welcome to you all!"

Violet grinned and responded, "If that's the case, I shall consider this place my home."

"That suits me just fine," Hayden replied, immediately giving orders to the kitchen to prepare extra dishes for the day's meal.

Carissa laughed and entered with the others, but not before giving Hayden a few more scrutinizing glances. She couldn't help but wonder whether his cheerfulness was genuine or feigned.

In this world, it was hard to judge a person's heart.

Carissa stayed to share the meal before heading back to the Capital Guard Headquarters.

Meanwhile, Violet asked Chaya to show the group around the estate. The flowers at Willowbrook Estate were beautifully grown. Though they could not compare to the ones at Meadow Ridge, they were still a delight to see, offering an air of refinement to the surroundings.

Chaya walked at her usual slow pace, leisurely giving them a tour of the estate and pointing out the various courtyards. There had originally only been herself, Hayden, and an older steward, Gordon, who had been considered part of the family.

"Gordon? Did you change stewards?" Violet asked.

"Yes," Chaya replied, her steps unhurried as she continued, "the previous one returned to his hometown -he was simply too old for the job."

She paused before continuing, "Also, most of the people who used to serve Prince Hayden have gone back to their villages. Only Sonny remains-he has no family left in his hometown, so now he stays with His Highness in the same quarters."

Violet exchanged a look with Cynthia and Bun. It all seemed so sudden.

"We saw them last time we were here," Violet remarked.

"They only just returned a couple of days ago," Chaya said as she walked towards the pavilion, her round face showing signs of fatigue. "I'm sorry, I get tired after walking a bit. I need to rest."

Violet and the others sat down as well. Violet eyed Chaya's figure and said, "You really should eat less. Every time I come back, I see you stuffing food into your mouth as if you're starving."

"I've been so hungry before, I can't help myself," Chaya replied.

Violet understood all too well what life had been like for Chaya in Eleanor's household. Hunger had been just one of the many ways Eleanor had tormented Chaya-there had been cruelties far worse.

However, Violet couldn't sit still. Barely a few words had been exchanged before she stood up and began strolling outside the pavilion. The pavilion was called the Elegant Pavilion, a name that struck her as rather pretentious.

Her eyes swept across the surroundings, and she soon noticed a few figures standing by the trees in the distance. They were standing perfectly still, watching the pavilion at first. But as soon as their gazes met hers, they quickly shifted their eyes elsewhere.

Violet was taken aback. The last time she had been here with Carissa, she had also walked through the estate. But at that time, the servants had been busy with their duties and never dared to glance in their direction. However, these people were unfamiliar to her-she hadn't seen them before.

Of course, Violet couldn't know all the servants in the estate. They may have been here before but just never made an appearance.

Turning back to the pavilion, she asked Chaya, "Are those new arrivals?"

She gestured toward the direction where she had seen the figures.

Chaya followed the direction of Violet's finger, her expression stiffening slightly before she slowly shook her head. "They were here before."

"Really?" Violet raised an eyebrow. "Then why are they standing over there, acting all suspicious?" "They're here to protect us," Chaya said, her gaze now fixed on her knees, her hands gripping tightly onto them.

Violet's curiosity was piqued, but she simply nodded. Without another word, she walked toward the figures.

They hadn't expected Violet to approach them. For a moment, they looked startled. Immediately after, they composed themselves.

"Greetings, Ms. Spencer," they greeted respectfully.

Chapter 1322

Violet observed the group before her.

Two of them were shorter in stature, stocky and muscular. They had arms that appeared unusually thick, and their necks had visible veins bulging slightly. The other three were taller. Though their breathing seemed normal, Violet couldn't help but notice that their shoes were nearly spotless, showing no sign of dust.

This suggested they practiced Silent Force, a type of internal martial arts.

Those who mastered Silent Force could control their breathing, making it shallow or deep at will. Judging by their composure, Violet suspected their skills were considerable.

"Do you know martial arts?" she asked.

The group all shook their heads, their faces looking notably sincere. "No."

Violet took another look; in a sudden motion, she threw a punch at the shorter man.

His eyes flickered with alarm, but then he quickly shut them, his face showing a look of fear.

Violet retracted her fist. From the brief flash of light in his eyes, it was clear this was the instinctive reaction of a martial artist. However, he controlled it well and didn't raise his hand to block.

This, in fact, revealed something. Even someone who didn't know martial arts would instinctively make a blocking gesture if suddenly attacked in the face, regardless of whether they could defend it. However, the short man didn't do that.

Violet smiled faintly and turned to leave.

The group exchanged a cold, silent glance before slowly backing away.

Chaya had been watching from distance. She placed her hand on her forehead, her gaze conflicted. It was hard to tell if she was hopeful or frightened, but she was certainly no longer as calm as she had been earlier.

Violet and the others were assigned to quarters beside Emerald Hall, which was Hayden's courtyard. It was a section of the estate filled with rose bushes, aptly named Rose Hall. A thin wall separated them, and those with sharper hearing could probably make out conversations from Emerald Hall, especially if someone were speaking loudly.

Chaya also resided in Emerald Hall, though not in the same room. Originally, when Eleanor had sent her to Hayden as a concubine, Hayden had no interest in one. He had taken her in more as a casual companion to ease his boredom. She had her quarters, but she had recently been staying in Emerald Hall.

That was what Violet had heard from the servants.

Living here, Violet couldn't help but notice the strange atmosphere that seemed to hang over Willowbrook Estate.

At night, many people seemed to be walking around, as though on patrol. Bun had noticed it too, rising from his seat and spotting a few shadows moving in the distance.

The atmosphere was tense-so different from the lighthearted feel of the day.

Violet didn't know where this heavy atmosphere came from, but it felt like there was an invisible killing intent even while she was lying in bed. During the day, they got up and observed everyone in the estate.

The staff all appeared well-rested, including the five individuals Violet had observed the night before. They gave no indication of working through the night.

It seemed that Willowbrook Estate housed quite a few people, after all.

The group split up to carry out their tasks.

Violet wandered through the gardens, curious to see how many unfamiliar faces she might encounter. Meanwhile, Bun made his way to the kitchen, inspecting the provisions. When he saw the large quantities of grains and meats set aside-enough to feed over a hundred people-he turned to the cook and asked, "Why are there so many supplies? How many days worth of them are this?"

The cook smiled and replied, "Just for today, my lord. His Highness always prefers fresh food."

Bun raised an eyebrow. "Then why buy so much?"

"The servants must eat too," the cook answered.

Bun couldn't help but feel confused.

The servants ate the same food as the master?

Everything-vegetables, meats, even fish and shrimp was the same in both quantity and variety.

As Violet strolled through the various courtyards, she noticed that each one of the gates was meticulously clean, as though they were regularly used. Yet, all the gates were closed. She asked Chaya if they could open them, but Chaya explained that she didn't have the keys and couldn't unlock them.

Without a second thought, Violet nimbly climbed the courtyard wall and peered inside. She saw that the doors to the inner rooms were also tightly shut. The gardens had no flowers but were overrun with weeds, some nearly waist-high. The only clear path was a stone-paved road, but the rest of the area was almost swallowed by the wild growth.

"Ms. Spencer, what are you doing?" came a worried voice from behind.

It was Gordon, the elderly steward. His back was hunched as he hurried toward her, followed by Hayden's trusted man, Sonny.

Gordon looked genuinely concerned, even extending his hands as if to catch her. "Quickly get down. Be careful not to fall."

Violet sat on the wall with a faint smile, and she turned to look at him. "Gordon, can this gate be opened?" "Of course," Gordon said with a warm smile. "If you wish to enter, simply ask me for the key. Why climb over like this? It's far too dangerous."

With that, he trembled as he pulled a set of keys from his pocket and handed them to Chaya.

"Here, open the gate for Ms. Spencer and let her have a look."

Chaya took the keys and went to unlock the gate. The heavy creak of the hinges echoed through the courtyard, as if the door hadn't been opened in years.

Violet jumped inside. Even without the keys, she could have entered.

Once inside, she pushed open the main door to the courtyard. The musty scent inside confirmed her suspicion-it had clearly been abandoned for quite some time.

Next, she checked several other rooms, all of which she selected on the spot, and the conditions were mostly similar to the first one.

She even checked each room individually; they were all in much the same condition, with no signs of occupancy.

Chapter 1323

Violet smiled and muttered something about the dullness of it all, then checked in with Bun and Cynthia before leaving the estate.

She made her way straight to the Capital Guard headquarters, where she found Carissa waiting for her. Carissa pulled her inside and asked, "Well? Did you find anything?"

Violet replied, "There's movement at night-almost like patrols-but I never see anyone during the day. It's as if they vanish the moment the sun rises. I checked most of the courtyards in Willowbrook Estate, and there was no sign of anyone living there. I even looked in the servants' quarters, and the number of beds matches what Chaya told me about the staff."

Carissa thought for a moment. "Could there be hidden passageways or secret rooms? The curfew is in place now. No one's supposed to be out after nightfall. If what you heard is true, then these people must be living at Willowbrook Estate."

"If there are hidden rooms, that's another matter altogether," Violet said. Then, remembering what Bun had found in the kitchen, she added, "The kitchen is preparing food for over a hundred people every day." Carissa's eyes brightened. "Then we just need to keep an eye on where these meals are being sent, and we'll know, right?"

"That's a good idea," Violet replied, feeling a bit foolish for not thinking of it herself. "Bun should be keeping an eye on that now. He's reliable these days."

Carissa smiled with pride. Everyone had grown up.

"Has there been anything odd with Prince Hayden or Chaya?"

Violet answered, "Nothing unusual from what I can tell. But yesterday, when we were walking through the courtyards, five men were watching us. They definitely know martial arts. I asked Chaya, and she said they're here to protect Prince Hayden."

"Do they live in the servants' quarters?" Carissa asked.

"Yes, they live with the staff," Violet replied. "Aside from them, I didn't notice anything strange. As for Prince Hayden's confidant, Sonny, I heard he's been with him for years. He has no family left in the countryside, so he's staying on to take care of Prince Hayden in his old age."

"Oh, right. There's also a new steward. His name is Gordon. He looks to be about 50 to 60 years old, and he's quite kind and amiable."

Carissa nodded. "I know of Sonny. He's worked with Prince Hayden for a long time. But this new steward doesn't sound familiar. Does he look like he knows martial arts?"

Violet thought for a moment. "I don't think so. He seemed frail, and his hands were shaking. Chaya told me he's treated like part of the family here, though."

"Go back and find out more about Gordon," Carissa said. "What's his background? How is it that he was able to step into the role of steward at Willowbrook Estate so easily?"

Violet nodded, then asked, "Has Winona sent any news? What's the situation with Nicholas now? Has he made any moves?"

Carissa shook her head. "Prince Nicholas is still in his fief and hasn't left at all. Prince Yuvan did send a messenger with an invitation, but he didn't go."

Violet frowned, deep in thought. "Could we be looking in the wrong direction? If he were the mastermind, he should be running around by now, shouldn't he?"

Carissa considered this, then shook her head. "There's something off about Willowbrook Estate. If it's not him, it could be Prince Nicholas' son or even Prince Hayden himself."

Violet let out a soft sigh, her expression clouded with worry. "I really hope it's not Prince Hayden. He's such a good man, but I also know that sometimes the least likely person is the one to watch out for."

-

Carissa shared her thoughts. Neither of them wanted to believe it, but they couldn't completely rule it out.

In the royal study, Salvador listened in surprise as Ian relayed the report. "You're saying Violet has moved into Willowbrook Estate?"

Ian nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. Ms. Spencer moved in yesterday. She also brought along two companions from Meadow Ridge."

Salvador pondered this new information. What was Carissa thinking, sending Violet there? Could it be that she suspected Hayden?

Willowbrook Estate had no household soldiers, and Nicholas rarely came to the capital, preferring to stay quietly in his fief. He had been thoroughly investigated and found to have little connection to the current situation. His interactions with Yuvan were few.

Both of them had royal blood, but they only communicated on the rare occasion of weddings or funerals, never for the New Year or other festivals. After the death of Yuvan's former princess

consort, Nicholas hadn't even visited Valken, and he had certainly not attended the wedding when Yuvan married Molly. Still, Salvador couldn't afford to trust Nicholas completely. The man was highly respected in Nerovia, where his fief was located. That was why years ago, Salvador had issued the command for Hayden to return to the capital and retire.

"Ian," Salvador said, his voice serious, "look into whether Nicholas has left his fief recently."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I'll send someone immediately." Ian bowed and withdrew.

Chapter 1324

Salvador's investigation matched Winona's findings.

Nicholas had not left his fief; he spent almost every day taking his wife and children to see plays or listen to music.

In Nerovia, there were a few orphanages that Nicholas had established. They were dedicated to caring for orphans and the elderly who had nowhere else to turn. He would often attend a play and then visit one of these orphanages afterward.

However, Winona uncovered something that Salvador had missed.

It was the fact that Nicholas had once saved Eustace's life.

This event occurred seven or eight years ago, when Eustace was not yet the head of the Spencer family. He had been ambushed during a routine inspection of his estates. By chance, Nicholas and his men had passed by, and he rescued Eustace from certain death.

Nicholas was a modest man, and he had no desire for recognition or further dealings with the Spencer family. He had asked Eustace not to make a public fuss over the incident. To Nicholas, saving someone's life was simply a matter of doing what was right, not something that required repayment.

At the time of the ambush, almost everyone with Eustace had been killed. Only Eustace and his trusted bodyguard, Marvin, had survived. Interestingly, Winona had helped Marvin once when he was attacked while escorting goods. So when Winona investigated and spoke to Marvin, the latter told her this old story. When Winona's report arrived, Carissa asked Violet about it, and Violet was taken aback. "Something like that happened? I didn't know anything about it."

That was seven or eight years ago, and Violet had been in Meadow Ridge at the time. Naturally, she hadn't been aware of what had happened at home.

"Should I write a letter to my dad?" Violet asked, furrowing her brow. Worry settled in her heart.

Eustace owed Nicholas a life debt. If Nicholas were indeed the mastermind behind the scenes, would he try to use that to pressure Eustace into helping him when the time came?

In the past, Violet had never been concerned when her family was involved. She knew her dad was loyal to the throne. As a royal merchant, he provided horses to the military and supplied weapons to the Ministry of Defense. It was impossible for him to support any traitors.

But if there was a life debt involved, that could complicate things. Even the most loyal subjects understood the importance of repaying such a debt.

Carissa reassured her, "There's no need to rush. Let's wait for Winona to finish investigating the details of your dad's ambush."

Violet's eyes widened. "Is Winona suspicious about what happened to my dad?"

"She only said she would continue looking into it. She didn't suggest anything else," Carissa soothed. "Don't worry. She'll get to the bottom of this, and I trust your dad. A life debt may be repaid, but there are boundaries to that repayment."

Violet was lost in thought.

"If Dad's ambush was part of a conspiracy, then Nicholas must have started plotting this seven or eight years ago. All these years, he has never let anything slip or given anyone reason to suspect him. Even after all the recent investigations, the only thing that's come up is the questionable lead from Willowbrook Estate. How terrifying must this man be?"

"With mountain bandits, robbers, and refugees stirring up trouble all over, I don't believe it could happen without his involvement. Prince Yuvan doesn't have the ability to pull this off on his own," Carissa replied. She continued, "He's been helping Prince Yuvan, but in reality, he's been helping himself. Prince Yuvan's just been a puppet. The wars between Sandoria and Westhaven, combined

with the mountain bandits causing trouble, have spread the empire's military forces thin. If he is the true mastermind-or whoever it is-they'll likely aim straight for the capital and seize the throne next."

Violet found people of such devious minds most frustrating, for they always made things complicated and hard to see through.

"So, what do we do now? Only the Mystic Army is left in the capital."

Carissa pressed her lips together. The Mystic Army had once numbered 30,000 soldiers, but not all of them were elite soldiers. Among them were members of the Garrison Unit, who were hardly fit for battle- most of them were nothing but drunkards and gluttons.

When they were sent to the Southern Frontier, they had taken 15,000 men and lost over 2,000 in battle. Afterward, hundreds were sent back home as they were unfit for duty.

Later, Salvador split the Mystic Army into separate units. So now, combining the Capital Guard, the Royal Guard, and the Garrison Unit, their total force was barely over 10,000 men.

Of course, if the Nightsteel Guard under Ian's command were included, they could muster just over 20,000 soldiers.

They had no idea how many men the true mastermind might have, or where they were hiding.

The one thing they did know for certain was that if an assault on the capital was coming, it would not be

delayed for long. The true mastermind's forces would already be in place, with some stationed outside the city and others inside.

Chapter 1325

The next day, Carissa went to the palace to meet Salvador. She suggested that all the Mystic Army soldiers in the Nightsteel Guard be placed back under her command.

Upon hearing this, Salvador fixed her with a piercing gaze. "Are you suggesting that I hand over all the forces in the capital to you?"

"The Mystic Army, Your Majesty," Carissa replied, lifting her chin, her eyes unwavering. "The troops stationed outside the capital, including 15,000 men of the Sacred Fire Regiment, are being sent to Valken. The capital's only remaining line of defense is the Mystic Army, and it cannot be split any further." Salvador repeated the question, his tone flat but tinged with skepticism. "You want me to place all the forces in the capital, including my personal guards, under your command?"

Carissa didn't hesitate or even consider whether he might suspect her. She simply nodded firmly and said, "Yes, Your Majesty!"

Salvador looked at her for a long moment, then smiled.

"Your husband commands the forces at the Southern Frontier. Your grandfather and uncles lead the troops at Victory Pass against Westhaven. General Murray is your dad's former subordinate, and General Farrell is one of the men you rescued. Now, you ask me to hand over the entire military force of the capital to you. Do you understand what this means, Commander Sinclair?"

Carissa stood tall, unflinching. "Prince Rafael defends the Southern Frontier. My grandfather and uncles protect Victory Pass from Westhaven. General Murray deals with the mountain bandits. General Farrell is stationed to confront the rebels. As for me, I will protect the capital. This is about each of us playing our part to defend the kingdom and its people.

Salvador nodded thoughtfully, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth, though it did little to soften the coldness in his eyes. "You make a compelling argument, but I would be entrusting the entire country-and my own life-to you all. Do you understand how heavy this trust is?"

Carissa's response was immediate and without hesitation. "I will give my all, even if it costs my life." Salvador studied her for a long moment before lowering his gaze to organize his papers.

"I agree. By the way, the queen dowager is now raising Connor, which is a great burden on her. I plan to bring Aunt Helen and Ryan into the palace. Aunt Helen will stay with my mom, and Ryan will act as Connor's study partner."

He didn't ask for her opinion. His words were declarative.

A surge of anger rose within Carissa's chest. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to stay calm. She reminded herself that Salvador was the king.

He was giving her command of the military, so he must feel insecure. This was normal!

She had to be patient. She had to endure!

After a long moment of silence, she finally looked up, her gaze sharp. "Your Majesty, I must ask-do you truly wish for my mother-in-law and Ryan to accompany the queen dowager in the palace, or do you intend to use them as hostages, to control us should my husband and I make a move against you?"

A dangerous glint flickered in Salvador's eyes, but his tone remained measured. "Carissa, you've gone too far!"

"Your Majesty, please allow me to be a little bolder one more time," Carissa said, her voice unwavering. "Earlier, you mentioned that Prince Rafael holds the military command at the Southern Frontier, and my grandfather and uncles are defending Victory Pass against Westhaven. Meanwhile, I've been given command of the Mystic Army.

"But what does all this mean? That we gain wealth and power? No. It's a matter of risking our lives and shedding blood to protect the land beneath our feet. We're not fools who seek to gain at any cost. We're putting ourselves at risk, and we even have to send our family members to the palace as hostages." Seeing Salvador's expression darkened even further, Carissa's frustration grew.

"As your subjects, it's our duty to ease your burdens and help you feel secure. But have you ever heard the saying, 'If you use someone, trust them. If you don't trust them, don't use them'? If you trust us, we'll give it everything we have. If you don't trust us..." She took a deep breath, her chest tight with emotion. "We'll fight with our lives, but it will be done begrudgingly."

Salvador studied her flushed face, his lips curling into a faint smile.

"Fine, then. You fight begrudgingly. But tomorrow, have Aunt Helen and Ryan come to the palace. I'm not bringing them here to use them as hostages. Connor is truly a handful for my mom. Aunt Helen is her confidante, the only one who can bring her joy. As for Ryan, I know he's a good boy. It's time for Connor to see what a truly intelligent and diligent child looks like."

Carissa bit back an angry retort.

This hypocritical king!

Salvador's smile widened, and his gaze softened slightly.

"Look at you, getting so worked up-there's no need for that. Putting aside the roles of ruler and subject, you should call me 'big brother'. Isn't this a family matter? You don't need to speak of hostages-it only damages our relationship. If I really wanted to hold this against you, I could punish you for disrespect with what you just said."

Carissa fought the urge to lash out, her fists clenched tightly. "Your Majesty, promise me that Ryan will not have to put up with Prince Connor's bullying."

Salvador's grin deepened, his tone light. "No one will dare to bully Ryan. If Connor dares to speak disrespectfully, I'll smack his mouth!"

Chapter 1326

Back at Hell Monarch Estate, Kyle tried to comfort the fuming Carissa.

"Sending Lady Helen and Ryan to the palace isn't so bad, is it? If the rebels really manage to break in, the palace guards are the most formidable. They'd be safer there than if they stayed at the academy or here at the estate."

Carissa drank down an entire jug of cold water, the chill in it only deepening her frustration.

"I know. That's why I agreed, but agreeing doesn't mean I'm not angry. He's not doing it to protect Mother and Ryan. He's using them as hostages. He knows that with Mother and Ryan in the palace, I'll have no choice but to protect it with my life, even if it means sacrificing everything.'

If the rebels broke into the capital, the first thing they would do was surround Hell Monarch Estate, capturing anyone useful to control Dominic and Rafael.

Carissa wasn't unaware of this-she just hated the thought of Salvador's motives. Besides, if Helen and Ryan weren't in the palace, she could still find a safe place for them.

Salvador constantly talked about loyalty to the kingdom, but in his eyes, the kingdom only existed for him. He expected others to risk their lives for him while holding their families hostage. And no matter what they do, he was always suspicious of their motives and ambitions.

It was tiresome.

Kyle ruffled her hair, messing it up even more. "Come on, why are you getting so upset? Unless you don't want to integrate the Mystic Army?"

"He knows I have no choice," Carissa muttered, her frustration evident.

Not integrating the Mystic Army wasn't an option. Right now, they were scattered with different leaders in charge. If the rebels attacked the capital, they would be nothing more than a disorganized mob-hardly the elite force they needed.

Kyle shrugged. "People with power want to control everything, even the hearts and minds of others. Just focus on what you need to do. Forget about the frustrations and the resentment for now. Once it's all over, we'll have all the time in the world to do whatever we want."

"I still have to talk to Lord Klein." Carissa ran a hand through her hair, looking at Kyle with mock annoyance. "Kyle, you've messed up my hair again."

"Hurry up and ask Lulu to help you fix your hair and wash your face. Get yourself tidied up you'll feel much better," Kyle said, his eyes filled with affection.

Carissa hurried inside, calling out, "Lulu! Lulu!"

Kyle laughed softly. Ever since Carissa was a child, she had hated when anyone touched her hair. She had so much of it that once it was disheveled, it looked like seaweed cascading over her shoulders. She used to say those were the "three thousand strands of worry". She insisted that no matter how big a problem was, she had to sort out her hair first.

Meanwhile, Anthony had heard about Salvador's decision to summon Ryan to the palace. He didn't say much, but asked Carissa one thing-would Ryan be bullied in the palace?

Carissa told Anthony that Ryan would be safe under Victoria's care, and Helen would also be there to look after him. So, he wouldn't suffer there.

That was enough to put Anthony's mind at ease, and he agreed.

He knew his opinion didn't matter, anyway. Even if he disagreed, Salvador could issue an edict, and he would have no choice but to comply. Plus, if it came to that, Salvador might get annoyed and cause trouble for Ryan instead.

So, he ended up reassuring Carissa instead. "It's not a bad thing. The queen dowager is wise and well-versed in worldly matters. Ryan could learn a lot from her."

"As long as you don't hold it against me, Lord Klein..." Carissa's voice was tight with concern.

"How could I?" Anthony smiled gently, his eyes warm with understanding. "I know this decision was difficult for you, but you've made it for the greater good-and for Ryan. Carissa, we're family. Don't feel the need to be so formal."

Carissa had initially felt her heart cool when Salvador talked about them being family. When she heard Anthony say it, her feelings were completely different. She felt warm inside.

Yes, a real family was about mutual trust and support, not secretly doubting each other or trying to control the other to make them obedient.

Helen wasn't thrilled about going to the palace to accompany Victoria. She had grown accustomed to the comfortable, free life at Hell Monarch Estate. The palace, with its strict rules and formalities, was hard for her to adjust to now.

But when she heard that Ryan would be going too, she agreed without hesitation. She immediately instructed Gillian to pack their things and start sending them to the palace.

Carissa went to fetch Ryan and his study partner, Evan. Ryan was a sensible boy-he asked no questions and simply said he would follow his aunt's arrangements. However, Evan was a bit more curious. He tugged at Carissa's sleeve and asked if he could go the palace with Ryan.

Ryan looked up at his aunt eagerly, and Carissa smiled as she gently ruffled their heads. "Alright, friends should study and play together."

Both boys grinned, their faces lighting up with joy as they took each other's hands and ran off to gather their things.

Chapter 1327

Carissa couldn't bring herself to tell Rafael about Helen and Ryan moving into the palace-she feared it would upset him.

She received a letter from Rafael, which came along with the report of their victory in the second battle. Salvador had specifically summoned her to the palace to hand it over.

Carissa knew Rafael had intentionally sent the letter through Salvador's hands, signaling that they hid no secrets. It was a gesture of transparency, even if it was a mere formality.

But it seemed to please Salvador, who didn't put on the usual fake smile. Instead, he told her not to worry too much about the situation at the Southern Frontier. Victory was within their grasp.

After her audience with the king, Carissa went to Serenity Palace to offer her greetings to Victoria and check on Helen and Ryan.

However, she didn't find Ryan or Evan there. They were in class; as they were Connor's study partners, they had to follow him to the study.

Moreover, Connor's tutor had changed. Trevor was now personally teaching him.

In the past, Salvador had suggested this, but Trevor had turned it down, citing health concerns. Now that Ryan was in the palace, Trevor immediately agreed, clearly doing it as a show of respect to the late Hector.

Although Salvador was a little displeased, he didn't say anything since he still benefited from it.

Carissa didn't find Helen, either. Victoria mentioned she had gone to see Dakota.

"Helen never got along with her, but now that she's back at the palace, it's like they're close sisters. She's truly heartless, even turning her back on her own sister," Victoria said. She complained about Helen without holding back, though she couldn't hide the smile at the corners of her mouth.

Carissa couldn't help laugh along. "It's not really a deep feud. They argue when they're together, but they start to miss each other when they're apart."

Victoria rubbed her forehead, a weary look in her eyes. "Yes, that's family for you. Sometimes you can't stand each other, but other times you find yourself missing them."

Carissa nodded quietly, then changed the subject. "Has Ryan been any trouble? If he's not behaving, don't hesitate to punish him."

Victoria's expression softened at the mention of Ryan. "How could he be trouble? I've never seen a child so well-behaved. He's neither servile nor arrogant, just respectful. You've done a wonderful job raising him."

Victoria could see the concern in Carissa's eyes, so she smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. While he's with me, Connor won't dare to bully him. And in class, Mr. Young won't allow it either."

"I'm not worried at all since you're here, Mother," Carissa replied.

After their conversation, Carissa decided to go and visit Helen. She took some time to walk with Helen in the royal garden, and asked about Connor and Ryan.

At the mention of Connor, Helen scoffed. "Prince Connor is truly troublesome-he's a rotten one. He can't bully Ryan, so he tried picking on Evan instead. He even had a young chamberlain bring dog feces to force Evan to eat."

Carissa's brow furrowed in concern. "Did he eat it?"

Helen chuckled, remembering the absurdity. "Of course not! Ryan grabbed Evan and ran straight to my sister. He complained to her, and my sister had them serve Prince Connor two full meals of dog feces. Prince Connor had the choice-eat it or go hungry. Now he's been thoroughly put in his place."

Carissa couldn't help but laugh along. As long as Ryan was speaking up, that was what mattered. She had always feared that Ryan might keep everything inside.

Endurance didn't earn one respect. Resorting to hitting the other person wasn't an option. At that age, the best weapon was always telling on someone.

Sometimes, Carissa would share stories from her youth with Ryan, telling him about life in Meadow Ridge. She would tell him how, whether she was the one being bullied or the one bullying others, her first instinct was always to go and report it.

She hadn't expected Ryan to listen so intently-and to remember it all. He really did have the same spirit as her.

Due to her busy schedule, Carissa couldn't stay until after Ryan's lesson. She had to leave the palace to return to the Capital Guard headquarters.

Ian retained a small team of elite guards, while the rest were reassigned to Carissa's command. Even Kevin was now under her leadership.

Kevin had improved rapidly. Whenever he had some free time, Travis would give him pointers, and occasionally, Carissa would spar with him.

Kevin had been incredibly unlucky on his journey to find a mentor. But now, his luck had finally turned around at this age. Though he was the last apprentice accepted by Violet, his martial arts had already surpassed that of Michael, Max, and Alistair.

Alistair had been in a half-suspended state due to what Oliver had done. Salvador had never officially removed him from his post, mostly because Alistair and Oliver had never gotten along. Their feud was well-known throughout the capital, and even Salvador was aware of it.

However, after Carissa took charge of reorganizing the Mystic Army, she didn't care about that. She needed capable people, and she was prepared to use whoever had the skills.

Chapter 1328

The city was under curfew, with the Capital Guard and the Garrison Unit taking turns patrolling. The Royal Citadel had also sent over officers to assist in the efforts.

At the city gates, Carissa had arranged for additional personnel to conduct thorough checks and stop any suspicious individuals.

Since Alistair had fallen out of favor with the king, the Royal Guard had temporarily been placed under Kevin's command. Meanwhile, Ivan was now a trusted bodyguard to the king. He could still pass information between Alistair and the others.

Homer, Felix, and the other scouts from the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team had also been integrated into the Mystic Army. They were given general ranks and were tasked with guarding the city. Salvador was intent on turning the capital into an impenetrable fortress.

He knew these people had the skills, though he hadn't dared to put them to full use before. Now, with the situation critical, all those with titles but no real positions were brought into action.

Strangely enough, aside from some unusual activities at Willowbrook Estate, there was little sign of covert movement in the city.

As for Violet, her investigation into where the food for over a hundred people was being delivered from the kitchen had yielded no answers.

Bun had been stationed at the kitchen door, observing the meals being sent out three times a day. In Willowbrook Estate, there was only Hayden, Chaya, and Gordon, along with their guests. It was impossible to need that much food, even if the rest supposedly went to feeding the servants in the estate. If there were hidden chambers or secret passages, it made sense that the food would be sent there. But there was no sign of that.

After the meals were delivered, Bun went inside to take a look and found nothing unusual-just a perfectly ordinary kitchen, even smaller than the one at Hell Monarch Estate. He checked two or three times but found no secret doors. After a few days, he decided to stay and watch the cooks prepare the food. When he went inside to keep an eye on things, he noticed that while there were a lot of ingredients, only the best parts were taken. For example, a whole pig would have its tongue, knuckle, or a piece of fatty and lean meat taken. The rest would be thrown into bucket.

They took only the bellies from 20 to 30 fish. Occasionally, they made fish sashimi. The rest of the parts were thrown into another bucket.

Other ingredients were treated the same way-only a small portion was taken, while the rest was discarded.

When the cooks started preparing meals for the servants, they took more of the remaining ingredients. But even then, much of it was still left over in the large buckets.

Bun was stunned and asked one of the cooks, "Are you throwing all of this away?"

The cook chuckled, "Of course not. It would be a waste. We're sending it out to help the poor folk." Bun followed the cook as they carried the food to Blessed Street, the district where the impoverished lived.

Upon arriving, Bun observed the gaunt, hungry faces of the people. When the cart from Willowbrook Estate arrived, they immediately lined up, eager to receive the food. It seemed the people from Willowbrook Estate had been regularly sending provisions here, perhaps even making it a daily habit. However, Bun started to notice something was off. They had been staying at Willowbrook Estate and watching the kitchen for many days. If the people from the estate had been sending food every day, then why were the impoverished here still so thin and starving?

Yet he didn't comment on that, instead offering a quiet farewell to the cook with the excuse that he wished to explore the area on his own.

Once the cook had left, Bun doubled back and knocked on one of the doors in the alley. However, he didn't see a person who was waiting for the food earlier. Instead, a stranger was looking at him in confusion.

With a smile, Bun asked, "The people from Prince Hayden's residence send food every day. Why didn't you come out to collect it?"

The man at the door stared at him in confusion. "That's not for us. Why would we come out for it?" "Not for you?" Bun pressed, confused. "But weren't the people who were just here waiting for food living here?"

"No, we don't know them," the man said, and he quickly shut the door.

Bun went around asking people in several houses, but they all said they hadn't received anything. One crippled laborer got annoyed and snapped, "If there were free food, would we still be out carrying heavy loads? Who are you? Don't accuse us of taking their stuff! We've never even heard of whatever royal prince you're talking about."

Still smiling, Bun took out a small pouch of coins and pressed it into the man's hand. "I'm just asking around. No harm meant."

The man's eyes lit up at the sight of the coins, and he quickly pocketed them. "Ask away." "Were those people already here before this?" Bun inquired.

"They've been here for two or three days now," the man replied. "Every day, a new batch of beggars are waiting right here. It wasn't like that before. If my leg wasn't so bad, I'd be out there chasing them off myself. They've been making noise all day, and I can't even rest properly. I've got a family to take care of." Bun understood. The whole thing started when he began watching the kitchen-it was all just a show for him and his group.

If someone were to tell him that nothing suspicious was going on in Willowbrook Estate, Bun wouldn't believe it.

Chapter 1329

Strangely, the movements that had been occurring every night suddenly stopped.

Violet and her group went to investigate, only to find that the Willowbrook Estate was eerily quiet. There wasn't a single patrol guard, and the servants had all gone to bed early.

Everyone had a strange feeling that something was wrong with Willowbrook Estate. It seemed like it was covered by a thin veil. If they could just lift it, they would see what was really going on.

The problem was, where was this veil?

It felt close, yet far away. They couldn't figure out the right approach.

Meanwhile, Hayden continued his usual routine eating, drinking, and occasionally going out. He would take Violet and the others with him to dine, drink, listen to music, watch plays, and sip a little wine. Then, he would return home in a slightly tipsy state as the evening sun set.

His days were nothing but leisure, completely unaffected by the turmoil at court or the wars beyond. He often boasted to Gordon and Sonny, "The life I'm living is far more comfortable than the king's.

Gordon would always smile and agree, "You're right, Your Highness."

However, Violet felt that living in the estate hadn't allowed her to uncover anything of note. Days were spent following Hayden from one indulgence to the next, and she had gained two pounds in the process. It felt like wasted time, with progress on the matters at hand.

Looking back, Violet thought that Hayden's invitation to stay might have just been a polite gesture. Maybe she and Carissa had overthought it. At present, Violet didn't feel that Hayden wanted to use her or needed any help from her.

She discussed with Bun and Cynthia the idea of returning to Hell Monarch Estate.

However, Bun remained suspicious of the things at Willowbrook Estate. "We haven't even figured out the food issue yet. Also, do you remember when we arrived, there were a lot of people moving around outside? Where did they all go? Doesn't it feel like something is happening right under our noses, but we can't see it?"

Cynthia rested her chin on her hand and frowned in thought. "But we haven't found anything, and Prince Hayden hasn't said anything to us. We're just here to eat and drink."

"Now it's like we can't leave, but we also can't stay," Bun said. "It feels like there's something here, and we won't feel right if we don't figure it out."

Violet suddenly looked up at Bun, her expression sharp. "If it seems like there's something, could it be that someone wants us to see on purpose? The flaws are too obvious, but after it was exposed, they've patched everything up, not letting us see anything."

Bun rubbed his temples, his lean face taking on a hint of resolve. "You're right. But who made this flaw? Was it Prince Hayden? If it's him, why not just tell us directly?"

"Because," Violet continued, following his train of thought, "he wants us to find something, just enough to keep us here. If we don't get the answer, it will gnaw at us, and we won't leave."

Cynthia frowned. "In short, he still wants to keep us here. But why? People always have

they do. He can't just want to keep us around for fun like he's a child, right?"

reason for what

The three of them pondered, deep in thought, but none of them could figure it out. So, they decided to head to the Capital Guard headquarters to seek out Carissa.

When they arrived, Carissa was still sitting with Rafael's letter, reading it over and over. The seal had been broken and re-waxed, so Rafael must have anticipated that Salvador would see it.

Since there was only this one letter, she needed to carefully consider every word to see if Rafael had left any hidden hints.

But no matter how many times she read it, all she found were the usual words of concern. He asked her to take care of herself, warned her that the weather would soon get hot, and advised her to place ice beside her when sleeping at night. He cautioned against drinking too many cold beverages in the summer, as it could upset her stomach.

The letter also reminded her to avoid rivers and dangerous areas while on patrol.

Did he think she was a child?

Nothing was mentioned about the situation at the Southern Frontier, likely because it was in the formal reports sent to Salvador.

When Violet and the others arrived, Carissa was still focused on the letter. She didn't even notice when Violet leaned in to peek.

"To my beloved?" Violet read aloud and chuckled softly. "How cheesy."

Carissa kicked her and quickly put the letter away. "Get lost!"

Bun burst out laughing. "My beloved? Why not 'my darling wife'? That's hilarious!"

Cynthia kicked Bun next. "Between those two, I prefer 'my beloved'. Got a problem with that?"

Bun jumped, clutching his legs in mock defense. "No problem! None at all!"

Chapter 1330

Violet sprawled across Carissa's desk. "Haven't you read this letter a dozen times already? Why are you still looking at it? Do you miss Prince Rafael that much?"

"He mentioned Prince Nicholas before he left, but I think there's something he hasn't fully figured out yet. The more tense the situation gets, the sharper his mind becomes. I wonder if he has figured something out recently and has given me some clues," Carissa replied.

"Why the need for hints? Why not just write it plainly in the letter?" Violet asked.

"This letter was sent directly to the king, who then passed it on to me," Carissa explained. "If it was something Raf deduced or suspected, he wouldn't have written it plainly. His Majesty has already opened it and read through it."

Violet scrunched up her nose in distaste. "Reading someone's personal letters? That's pretty low. But still, why didn't he just send it to you directly?"

"Because that's the fastest way to get to me," Carissa said. "And sending a letter directly could risk it being intercepted. If the contents were just his guesses, it could easily be twisted into accusations of slander."

After she finished speaking, Carissa turned to them and asked, "Have you found anything?"

Violet recounted their findings briefly, including their analysis. She mentioned Hayden's deliberate choice

to let them overhear the noises outside that night, as well as the shipment of food meant for over a hundred people.

Carissa thought for a moment, unsure of Hayden's true intentions or where his loyalties lay.

But one thing was certain—he and Nicholas were involved in this matter.

The question was: where were these soldiers?

They couldn't possibly be coming from Nerovia now. The journey would take them through Valken, and that would put them right into the hands of Thomas. If they traveled in groups, it would be too large a force to go unnoticed. Chester would certainly catch wind of it and destroy them on the way.

As the true mastermind had hidden behind Yuvan for so many years, they surely had more tricks up their sleeve.

"Has Prince Hayden been acting strangely lately?" Carissa asked.

"He's been enjoying himself," Violet said. "Eating, drinking, and indulging in all sorts of pleasures—watching plays, listening to music."

Carissa's eyes narrowed in thought. "I remember he didn't used to like going out much. Why the sudden change? Where has he been going?"

Violet shrugged. "To the third floor of Parapet Coffeehouse. You can listen to plays and enjoy the river view. I've been there for two days, and it's actually quite relaxing, almost to the point of feeling lazy." Since joining Carissa on the battlefield, Violet had rarely experienced such leisurely days. She always felt like it was a waste of time. It was far better to be busy and do something meaningful.

Because of this, she found it difficult to settle at Willowbrook Estate. It was like a carrot dangling in front of her, tempting her like she was a mule—leave, and she would regret it. Stay, and the days felt endlessly dull.

Carissa had visited Parapet Coffeehouse once. It was a three-story building. The first floor was dedicated to ballads and storytelling, the second to music, and the third to plays, with a view of the outside scenery. The third floor offered a full view of the city moat. But right now, the moat was being deepened and reinforced on both sides to handle the floodwaters from the summer rains.

In recent years, the rains had been particularly heavy, causing floods in many parts of the city. As a result, the riverbeds had been excavated and reinforced since last year to prevent a repeat of the disasters from a few years ago when the Royal Street had been submerged.

This was a major project under the Ministry of Infrastructure, with multiple sections being worked on simultaneously. So, the view of the river wasn't anything special now.

Carissa couldn't help but smile at the memory of Rafael's advice-telling her not to go near the river or other dangerous areas. But with all the construction, it was unlikely she would fall into the river if she went...

Her smile faltered as a thought struck her.

The river?

She immediately retrieved Rafael's letter and reread it carefully, focusing on the mention of "river" and "dangerous areas".

Violet chuckled lightly, "What's this? You're reading it again?"

Carissa sprang to her feet. "You all can go back to Willowbrook Estate. I'm going to the Ministry of Infrastructure."

The current Infrastructure Minister was Edwin, the Marquis of Elderglen and Lawrence's father.

After Lawrence's rescue, Edwin had always been grateful to Carissa. However, he was a man of propriety.

As the Infrastructure Minister, he couldn't be seen associating too closely with the Hell Monarch's household. So, he only sent gifts during festivals and avoided frequent interactions with them.

When Carissa visited the Ministry of Infrastructure to see him, he was surprised.

However, he quickly understood that her visit must be for official business.