

## War Song 1331

### Chapter 1331

When asked about the ongoing project to build the river channel and the foundation dam, Edwin took out the blueprints and explained everything in detail.

"The project has become quite large. It had been planned for years, but with the war depleting the treasury back then, we couldn't move forward. All we could do was clear the river silt every year. However, since the end of last year, we've begun constructing a reservoir at Gatekeeper Creek and started diverting the river. The river channels around the capital are also being reinforced, and the silt is being cleared. We expect most of it to be completed by the end of this year."

Impressed by the scale of the project, Carissa asked, "So, what kind of workers are used for building the reservoir, setting up the foundation dams, and clearing the river channels?"

Edwin thought she was concerned about the treasury's funds being drained for the war, so he reassured her, "Part of the workforce is made up of conscripts, and the rest are hired laborers."

"Altogether, there are around 20,000 workers, and their daily provisions are not cheap. To save on costs, the wages for the laborers have been reduced. Fortunately, more than 10,000 are conscripted laborers, so we only need to provide food and not wages."

Carissa nodded. "And which official is in charge of the riverworks project?"

"Cameron Judd. He works with the Waterworks Department," Edwin answered. "Where is he from?"

"He's from Valken. He has been with the Ministry of Infrastructure for seven years, and was promoted to the head of the ministry's Waterworks Department two years ago," Edwin explained. "He's a man of action, is decisive, and has nearly single-handedly managed the riverworks project. His Majesty has even praised him for his efficiency."

Edwin paused, his face shifting slightly as he remembered that Cameron was from Valken—a region that had recently revolted.

He began to understand why Carissa had come. The conscripts and workers were all familiar with Cameron. Though there hadn't been much large-scale construction in recent years, the same group had been clearing the river every year.

If Cameron wanted to make a move, it wouldn't be hard for him. However, he had always been diligent in his work, and Edwin didn't believe he was involved with Yuvan's rebellion.

Not wanting to jump to conclusions, Edwin said, "Commander Sinclair, I don't believe there's any cause for concern, but I'll investigate."

Carissa shook her head. "No need to investigate. We mustn't alarm anyone, least of all Mr. Judd. If anyone asks about my visit today, tell them I came to discuss expanding and renovating the Capital Guard headquarters and to work on a budget proposal."

"Very well, I'll follow your lead," said Edwin.

Carissa nodded. "Then, have someone come and give me an estimate. We'll make the whole thing look convincing."

Edwin paused for a moment, then chuckled. "You certainly think of everything, Commander Sinclair." With that, he stepped outside to send for Luther Smith from the Ministry of Infrastructure.

It only took about 15 minutes for Carissa to form a rough idea of the renovations in her mind. By the time Luther arrived, she had already outlined her requirements. She asked him to prepare the blueprints and a cost estimate, so she could submit a request to the Ministry of Finance for approval.

She wasn't careless with the details-she gave clear instructions, even for the smallest of matters. After Carissa left, Edwin turned to Luther and urged him to hurry with the plans and cost estimates. They didn't want to keep Carissa waiting, after all.

Luther took the task seriously and didn't waste any time. He stayed at the Ministry of Infrastructure, directing the staff to begin drawing up the plans.

Coincidentally, Cameron was also at the Ministry of Infrastructure that evening, dealing with some business of his own. When he heard that Luther was still there, he sent someone to order a few dishes, intending to share a meal with him.

Luther laughed. "I'm fortunate to be dining with you tonight, my friend. Once my business is done, I'll be sure to return the favor."

Cameron chuckled in return. "What's keeping you here so late, Luther? What's so urgent?"

"Commander Sinclair visited today. She wants to expand the Capital Guard headquarters. Since she now oversees the entire Mystic Army, and the Capital Guard headquarters hasn't been renovated in years, it's only logical that she'd want to expand. The training grounds are far too small."

Cameron poured Luther a drink. "I see. Is Commander Sinclair in that much of a hurry? Can't this wait until tomorrow?"

"She's anxious to get the funds from the Ministry of Finance. As you know, the process there is always long and drawn out. She's already had a cost estimate prepared and submitted, so at least her request is in line. It's all about getting in the queue," Luther explained.

Cameron's brow relaxed. "You're right. The Ministry of Finance is too slow. Even the funds for our riverworks project are barely trickling in. We've only received about 30 percent so far. They said they'll give us another 20 percent this month, but we're still waiting."

Luther sighed. "There's no helping it. With the war ongoing, the treasury is prioritizing military expenses. The Ministry of Defense is getting special approvals, while everything else is delayed. That's why

Commander Sinclair had to push ahead with her request."

"Well, let's eat. Don't stand on ceremony with me," Cameron replied, his doubts eased.

Chapter 1332

Jacob had received the complete file on Cameron.

The 47-year-old was a native of Valken. He had passed the first level of the national examination at the age of 13, then went on to pass the second level by 18. In Valken, he had been renowned for his abilities, often referred to as a man of extraordinary talent.

However, after passing the second level of the national examination, he delayed traveling to the capital for the next level due to his mom's illness. Instead, he took up a position as a scribe in Valken's local government.

Cameron's career had been nothing but steady. Both the people of Valken and the Ministry of Infrastructure had praised him for his decisiveness and ability to get things done. In the triennial evaluations by the Civil Department, he consistently received high marks.

In fact, some even said that being limited to the Waterworks Department was a waste of his talent. Of course, there were also those who believed his lack of connections was the reason he hadn't been promoted further. Otherwise, he could have possibly become the Ministry of Infrastructure's deputy minister.

The kingdom had many officials like him-low-ranking but reliable, with no grand ambitions, just quietly efficient and grounded. His life was simple and unremarkable. He had one wife, a concubine, a son, a daughter, and three servants. The house he lived in had once been rented, but in recent years, he had purchased a modest home with a small courtyard-just big enough for his family to live in.

Still, it could be said that working in the Waterworks Department was a lucrative job. The fact that he had only just managed to buy a house in the last two years spoke to his integrity in office. However, he wasn't entirely without flaws.

Jacob pointed out that several of the officials working under Cameron were living far more comfortably than he was. While their salaries couldn't compare to his, they were clearly managing to live well beyond their means. They must be dipping into the funds allocated for the riverworks.

Did Cameron not know? It was hard to believe.

What was strange was that he knew about it and allowed it, but didn't take any for himself. A truly honest official wouldn't tolerate corruption happening right under his nose, unless he was a major embezzler who was simply good at hiding it.

Or there was another possibility-he didn't take any for himself but turned a blind eye to his subordinates' corruption to win their loyalty and ensure they followed his orders.

By quietly operating this way for so many years, he had free rein to place whomever he wanted, whether they were laborers or personnel from the Waterworks Department, without anyone noticing.

Jacob laughed bitterly. "We were initially focused on the lords and nobles. After all, Eleanor was often in their circle, thinking she could draw some support from them. But I didn't expect that Mr. Judd would take such a different approach by targeting lesser officials instead."

Carissa frowned, her mind racing through the implications.

After a moment of thought, she said, "With Prince Yuvan leading the way, Mr. Judd could easily carve out these hidden paths, taking advantage of the gaps. Without Prince Yuvan causing a distraction, he would never have been able to operate so freely for so long."

Jacob nodded.

It was true. Without Yuvan's rebellion, the rise of bandits or rebels in the countryside, and the alliance between Sandoria and Westhaven, these riverworks in the capital wouldn't have amounted to much.

In simple terms, it was like someone trying to make a big, strong camel carry so much weight that it couldn't handle it. Then, they added just one more small thing to make it collapse. By doing so, they could achieve a big result with very little effort or cost.

It was a very clever plan.

"Continue the investigation. Have all the managers detained and halt the work immediately," Carissa ordered.

"That will require a royal edict, and right now, it's still just our suspicion. We haven't found any concrete evidence yet. The riverworks are crucial the summer rains are upon us, and any delays could lead to flooding that costs lives. Without proof, His Majesty won't order a shutdown," said Jacob.

Carissa thought for a moment, then replied firmly, "Three days. We need to uncover something by then. We can't afford to wait."

"Understood. I'll get on it right away," Jacob assured, leaving without hesitation.

As soon as he left, Claire rushed in, her steps brisk. "Your Grace, I have news regarding the person Lord Gerald was looking for."

Carissa massaged her temple. "The search for that person can wait. Right now, we have more pressing

matters.

"No, this is important. The man is closely connected to Prince Nicholas, and according to our investigation, all of Prince Nicholas' charitable expenditures in Nerovia are funded by him," said Claire.

Chapter 1333

The man Gerald had asked Carissa to look into was named Clifford Murphy.

One of the Murphy family's ancestors had once fought alongside the founding king, earning the hereditary title of the Marquis of Doveshire. But for reasons unknown, Clifford fell out of favor with Sigmund, and his noble rank was reduced to the Earl of Paxford. After that, he moved out of the capital to live in seclusion near Ebonflow. By now, few in the capital likely remembered him.

"He never married, and the Murphy family business belongs to him," said Claire.

Carissa's eyes widened in surprise. "He's the one behind the Murphy family business?"

The Murphy family business in Ebonflow was known to be immensely lucrative. While it didn't rival the Spencer family, it involved many industries, with extensive connections.

There were many people in Starhaven with the surname Murphy, but since Clifford had long since secluded himself, refusing to see visitors, no one suspected that he was the true owner of the Murphy family business.

A well-established name, the Murphy family business had been around for over a century. Before Clifford left the capital, no one had known his family was involved in business at all.

Claire quickly explained, "The Murphy family business wasn't always his. When Mr. Murphy arrived in Ebonflow, the business was struggling. It had severe financial troubles and was on the verge of collapsing. At that point, Mr. Murphy bought the business."

Carissa sighed. "Everyone's hiding their secrets so well."

"But what's his motive?" Claire asked, puzzled. "He has no heirs, has severed ties with his relatives, and is at an age where he could be nearing the end of his life. Could he be holding a grudge and seeking revenge against King Sigmund for stripping him of his title?"

Carissa thought that was a possibility. Some people lived their lives only to get even.

But there was also the matter of why Sigmund had taken away Clifford's title in the first place. Who really knew that, aside from Gerald? And maybe Jeremiah too?

Carissa considered which of the two to approach to find out the source of Clifford's resentment. In the end, she decided to visit Jeremiah. Gerald's health wasn't great, and he seemed to have a special interest in Clifford. If he learned that Clifford was involved in treasonous schemes, he might act out of anger, endangering his life.

But there was something even worse to consider. If Gerald felt guilty for not helping Clifford and decided to aid him, that would truly cause chaos.

Later that evening, Carissa headed to Jeremiah's residence.

The estate was dimly lit. Jeremiah lived a life of frugality, with the lighting of his desk being the only thing he spared no expense for. When he learned that Carissa had come to discuss matters concerning Sigmund's reign, he led her into his study.

Upon hearing Clifford's name, he froze for a moment, his eyes distant as memories resurfaced. There was a trace of regret in his gaze as he spoke, "He was once the commander of the Royal Guard under both King Augustus and King Sigmund. At the time, the Mystic Army hadn't been established yet, and the Royal Guard was under his command. He was highly favored by King Sigmund. They say a king has no friends, but King Sigmund was an exception.

"Mr. Murphy, being ten years or so older than King Sigmund, was not only a mentor to him but also a close friend. It's said that King Sigmund learned his martial arts from him. Both Mr. Murphy and Lord Quinton served as King Sigmund's teachers-one in martial arts, the other in literature.

Carissa listened intently, then asked, "So, even before King Sigmund became king, he already knew Mr. Murphy?"

"Yes, that's right. Back then, Lord Quinton was still a senior tutor. Typically, tutors to the crown prince would be people with vast knowledge and wisdom, but Lord Quinton was an exception. He was only about 30 years old at the time, though I don't recall the exact age. Mr. Murphy was about seven or eight years younger than him, I believe. Anyway, they were very close, with Mr. Murphy handling martial arts, and Lord Quinton taking care of the scholarly side."

Jeremiah chuckled softly, tapping his temple. "I'm getting a bit foggy in my old age. Please bear with me, Your Grace."

Carissa smiled gently. "No need to apologize. But what I'd like to know is why Mr. Murphy was stripped of his title."

This piqued her curiosity. Sigmund had treated Clifford as both a teacher and a friend, a bond not to be taken lightly. Why did they eventually fall out, leading to Clifford's title being stripped and his position taken away?

Jeremiah's face darkened slightly and seemed reluctant to answer, clearly finding this a sensitive subject. "Why do you want to know?" he asked.

"It's a matter of importance, not personal curiosity," Carissa replied, her lips pressing into a thin line. She felt a little guilty in saying that, as there was a bit of personal curiosity mixed with her professional interest.

Jeremiah raised an eyebrow. "Have you asked Lord Quinton about it?"

"Lord Quinton might not be the most forthcoming on this matter, so I thought it best to ask you first. Is it something you also cannot reveal, Mr. Murray?" Carissa asked.

Jeremiah hesitated before nodding. "If it concerns important matters, then there's no reason not to tell you."



## Chapter 1334

The topic was a delicate one, so Jeremiah took a few sips of his drink before continuing.

"To be honest, the truth of the matter is somewhat unclear. The official reason for Mr. Murphy's loss of title was that he showed great disrespect to King Sigmund. In a fit of anger, King Sigmund stripped him of his noble rank. Later, he was given the title of a mere earl.

"There were rumors going around court that Mr. Murphy and Lord Quinton had some unclear and complicated feelings for each other. King Sigmund was intolerant of such matters. When he found out about it, he berated Mr. Murphy harshly in his fury. The loss of his title crushed Mr. Murphy's spirit, and that was when he left the capital."

Carissa had suspected something like that, though she had never imagined anyone who served so close to the king would let their personal feelings show so openly. Besides, she was sure Clifford knew Sigmund's temperament. Such a lapse in discretion seemed out of character for someone so experienced.

Moreover, stripping someone of their title over a personal matter seemed like an overreaction. But now, hearing this from Jeremiah, it made sense.

Perhaps Clifford had truly regarded Sigmund as a friend, and the lack of subtlety was a consequence of that. It was also possible that as that kind of thing happened more often, Sigmund grew increasingly displeased, leading to the final fallout.

"So, do you think Mr. Murphy held any lingering resentment against King Sigmund when he left the capital?" Carissa asked.

Noticing her calm demeanor, Jeremiah realized she had likely already suspected this. His expression softened as he replied, "On the surface, no. But what was in his heart, only he knows. Or perhaps Lord Quinton knows."

Carissa didn't want Gerald to know, especially now when matters were so delicate. A lapse in judgment, even a small one, could throw everything into turmoil.

"Do you think anyone else, aside from Lord Quinton, might know?" she asked carefully.

Jeremiah pondered the question before saying, "Mr. Walker's mentor, Edgar Whitley, likely knows. He served King Sigmund for many years, and after the king's death, he was allowed to retire in the capital. Mr. Walker even bought him a house.

"He's old now, but his mind is still sharp. He should remember the details from back then, though he doesn't meet many people now. It would be best to have Mr. Walker take you to him."

Carissa hesitated. She didn't want Salvador to know about this just yet, especially since he had never been fond of Derek interacting with people from the Hell Monarch's household.

"I'd rather not involve Mr. Walker. Would you be willing to take me to him, Mr. Murray?" she asked. Seeing that the hour was still early, Jeremiah nodded. "If it's a matter of importance, we can go now." Edgar's modest home was located in the western part of the city, on the remote Harmonia Street. When they arrived in the evening, there were no lights on. They had to knock for quite some time before anyone came to answer.

The door was opened by an elderly servant dressed in grey, holding a lamp. He cast a brief glance at the two distinguished guests and seemed surprised by their appearance. Clearly, aside from Derek, few visitors came calling.

"Who are you seeking, my lord and lady?" the servant asked, eyeing Jeremiah and Carissa with curiosity. He didn't recognize either of them.

Carissa quickly replied, "Please inform Mr. Whitley that the prime minister, Mr. Murray, has come to visit." Upon hearing that it was the prime minister, the servant didn't hesitate to usher them inside with great respect, not needing to report to anyone further.

The house was small, with a modest sitting room leading to bedrooms and servant quarters. A narrow corridor ran along the back, connecting the kitchen and the servants' rooms. Aside from the old servant, there was a maid, who hurriedly poured drinks for them.

"Mr. Whitley has already retired for the evening," the servant explained. "I'll wake him."

Before long, the servant returned, helping the elderly man out of his room. Edgar's hair had turned completely white and his face was lined with wrinkles. However, his complexion remained unexpectedly rosy. His legs were unsteady, and though he was tall, his habit of stooping made him seem shorter than he truly was.

When Edgar saw Jeremiah, his face brightened and he started to kneel.

Jeremiah quickly stepped forward to help him rise. "Mr. Whitley, there's no need for such formalities. Please sit."

Edgar smiled, then glanced over at Carissa. His years of service at court had given him a sharp eye for distinguishing people of importance. Though she wore simple men's clothing, he could tell at once that her status was not ordinary. He offered a respectful bow.

After politely returning the gesture, Carissa went straight to the matter at hand without even introducing herself.

"I wish to ask about what happened Mr. Clifford Murphy all those years ago."

Edgar appeared taken aback that someone would bring up such a matter after so many years. He paused for a moment, then glanced at Jeremiah. Recognizing that the prime minister's visit at this hour meant he needed a precise answer, Edgar motioned to the maid.

"Go and retrieve the brocade box from the highest shelf in the cabinet," he instructed.

Chapter 1335

It was a dark red brocade box, thick with dust. Edgar blew on it, then wiped it with his sleeve. With a snap,

he opened the clasp and took out a malachite pendant, gesturing for Jeremiah to take it.

The prime minister hesitated before accepting it. Upon a closer look, he saw an intricate carving of a griffin encircling the malachite. It was unmistakably a personal item of Sigmund's.

"Look at the back, Mr. Murray," Edgar said.

As soon as Jeremiah flipped the pendant over, he froze. On the back, there was a circle of griffin patterns, but they coiled around a single maple leaf. Carved beside it, in delicate script, were the letters 'S.C'. The maple leaf and the 'S.C' were placed on opposite sides-one large, one small.

Carissa also saw it, but she didn't understand its meaning.

Jeremiah let out a heavy sigh and spoke softly, "The late king's first and middle names are Sigmund Constantine. As for Mr. Murphy, he spent some time wandering the martial world and earned the nickname 'the Iron Maple'."

Edgar explained, "This pendant was a gift from King Sigmund to Commander Murphy. The griffin carving was originally all it had, but Commander Murphy added the maple leaf and the letters 'S.C' himself. He carried this pendant with him, wrapped in a silk pouch.

"Somehow, King Sigmund discovered it. In a fit of rage, he threw it into a corner. I picked it up with the intention of returning it to Commander Murphy, but there was never a proper time. After he left the capital, it stayed with me."

Carissa stood there, stunned.

What... What did this mean?

Did she understand this correctly?

But hadn't Clifford had some kind of unresolved entanglement with Gerald? How did Sigmund fit into this? She had always assumed that Sigmund had discovered some improper conduct between Clifford and Gerald, or perhaps that Clifford had acted out in some way, which led the late king to cast him out of the capital. After all, Sigmund despised homosexuality. Since Clifford served in court, Sigmund would think he was deliberately ignoring the rules.

"Mr. Whitley, did King Sigmund strip Mr. Murphy of his title because of that?" Carissa asked. Though she realized the question might seem redundant, she couldn't help but ask.

Edgar paused for a moment, choosing his words carefully before saying, "Perhaps it was indeed because of that. After the incident, King Sigmund was furious. After stripping Commander Murphy of his title, the late king recalled their past bond and the merits of Commander Murphy's ancestors. So, he granted Commander Murphy the title of earl instead. As for why Commander Murphy left the capital... Well, it seems no one spoke up for him at the time."

"Did Lord Quinton not plead for him?" Carissa asked.

"None of them did, and Lord Quinton certainly didn't," Edgar replied, giving Carissa a brief look, realizing she and Jeremiah knew quite a bit.

Unable to hold back her curiosity, Carissa voiced her thoughts, "But wasn't there some kind of bond between Mr. Murphy and Lord Quinton?"

Edgar's brow twitched. Even after all these years, he felt as though Sigmund's gaze was still upon him, warning him not to speak of such matters. But tonight, with Jeremiah having visited personally, he felt the need to speak.

"Lord Quinton married and had children," Edgar said.

He then claimed he was feeling unwell and needed to rest early, signaling that it was time for the guests to leave. He had said all he could and believed he had made himself clear.

What Carissa understood was that perhaps in the past, Clifford had feelings for Gerald. But Gerald, pressured by the responsibility to continue his family line, got married and had children. His actions perhaps caused him to break the promise he had once made to Clifford.

While Clifford was heartbroken, he continued to spend every day in Sigmund's company. The late king's exceptional appearance was undeniable, evident even in the features of his descendants like Salvador, Kendrick, and Rafael.

In his fragile state, Clifford eventually fell for Sigmund, and that was when he crossed a line with the late king.

So, was this the root of the resentment-unrequited love?

While the exact details remained unclear, one thing seemed certain: Clifford must have felt betrayed, which affected his loyalty to Sigmund. As a subject, he was bound to be loyal to his king. But when that loyalty became entangled with other emotions, it was no longer pure. He was no longer bound by the simple loyalty expected of a subject to his sovereign.

And with Nicholas having Clifford's support, it made sense why the former had never felt the need to reach out to the Spencer family.

Of course, it could also be that he hadn't needed to yet, but would do so when the time came. It was likely because he understood that a life debt shouldn't be wasted, and had to be used at the right moment.

While Carrisa's end of the investigation was cleared up, Jacob had also gathered a full understanding of the situation with the river project.

## Chapter 1336

In recent years, the workers requisitioned for the riverworks project came from both inside and outside the capital. The same group of workers and conscripted laborers for the riverworks project were employed for various tasks.

Cameron was the head of the Waterworks Department, which was under the Ministry of Infrastructure. Under the guise of river repairs and irrigation drainage projects, the department had seized a considerable amount of land and resources.

They scattered houses across these areas, but not in any organized way. Workers and some conscripted laborers for the riverworks project now lived in those places.

The river channel crisscrossed the land, and the areas they'd taken covered all directions-east, west, south, and north. Jacob marked these locations and connected them with lines, revealing that they encircled the palace district like an inescapable net.

If these workers were private soldiers of the true mastermind behind the rebellion, then guarding the city gates would have been useless. They had been right there inside the city, constantly surveying the terrain in their free time. In fact, they likely knew the capital's layout better than even the Garrison Unit and the Capital Guard.

Carissa studied the map, a feeling of unease creeping over her.

She then posed a question, "Given that they have requisitioned so much land, they must have received approval from the Ministry of Infrastructure and the king, right?"

"That's correct," Jeremiah confirmed. "But as part of the river and drainage project, they weren't supposed to be building houses. Now, they've settled quite a few people in these areas. I went to the government office to check the household registrations, but none of those people are officially listed."

"Are the conscripted laborers living there as well?" Carissa asked.

"Most of them. The conscripted laborers requisitioned from outside the city are all housed in these locations. These are men who've spent years doing hard labor. They're strong-lifting a heavy hammer or sword is a trivial task for them."

Carissa furrowed her brow. Building the river channels and foundation dams sometimes required stone cutting. They had tools like large hammers, axes, and knives, all of which were provided by the court. What they had uncovered was only part of the puzzle. There was still much to be investigated. Not wanting to waste any more time, Carissa set out early the next morning to report to Salvador. Upon hearing her report, Salvador couldn't help but scoff. "That rabble are you suggesting they're rebels?"

"Your Majesty, they are not just rabble. These men have been working as conscripted laborers for years. They're strong and capable of feats of great strength," Carissa replied, standing firm.

Salvador shook his head slowly, his expression turning serious. "You've been in court for only a short while. You don't know how the Ministry of Infrastructure has been using them for years to clear river silt, open irrigation channels, and even clear the mountains.

"If they were truly rebels, they had their chance when the Mystic Army was at the Southern Frontier. That would have been their moment to strike. Even if you think Prince Nicholas is behind Prince Yuvan, could he have commanded them from Nerovia? Or are you suggesting that Prince Hayden is the one pulling the strings in the capital?"

Carissa pressed forward with her analysis, explaining, "Your Majesty, during the war at the Southern Frontier, the treasury was running low and the riverworks were limited to basic dredging. The conscripted laborers involved were minimal.

"But this time, it's different. This is a massive operation-there's large-scale construction of foundation dams, digging of river channels for irrigation, and building reservoirs. Together, the conscripted laborers and workers number nearly 20,000. Can you afford to take such a risk, Your Majesty?"

A risk.

Salvador loathed the thought of it. With both internal unrest and external threats looming, the last thing he wanted was for trouble to erupt in the capital.

Yet, when it came to risks, Salvador couldn't equate the riverworks project workers to the Mystic Army. He studied Carissa in silence for a long moment, weighing her words.

On one hand, he trusted her loyalty. Hector's principles were her guiding light, and she would never conspire against the crown. On the other hand, the full might of Starhaven's forces was concentrated in her hands, and that alone was a dangerous prospect.

If he ordered the riverworks to halt, there would be consequences. This year had already seen several bouts of heavy rain. If another storm came, the uncompleted works would lead to flooded fields and homes, and the people would be quick to voice their discontent.

"Are you suggesting we halt construction?" Salvador finally asked.

Carissa, undeterred by the weight of his gaze, answered resolutely, "Halt construction. Arrest and investigate the officials within the Waterworks Department."

"If construction is halted now, do you understand the consequences if flooding occurs?" Salvador countered, his tone sharp.

"Your Majesty, do you understand the consequences if the conscripted laborers turn out to be rebels?" Carissa shot back, unwavering.

Salvador fell silent, his expression darkening as he wrestled with the dilemma. Finally, after a long pause, he conceded partially.

"No arrests. Investigate in secret."

Carissa's brow furrowed in frustration. "How can that work? Even with a secret investigation, there are too many officials in the Waterworks Department. It could take months-far too much time."

Salvador no longer trusted either side, so he wouldn't listen to only Carissa.



"My decision is made. There's no need for you to investigate. I will arrange for Commander Walker to look into it," he said resolutely.

"So, in the end, you still don't trust me, Your Majesty," Carissa replied, her tone tightening as her frustration deepened.

Salvador's expression hardened. "If you want me to believe you, bring me evidence. As of now, you cannot even prove Prince Nicholas is a traitor, let alone implicate the riverworks project's workers." "Your Majesty-"

"Bring me proof," Salvador cut her off sharply, his voice rising. "Until then, you're dismissed!"

Chapter 1337

Carissa was livid. She felt like the stress might cause her to sprout gray hairs right then and there. No wonder court officials always seemed to age prematurely-Jeremiah, barely in his sixties, already had a head full of white hair.

Frustrated, she sought out Jeremiah, hoping he could sway Salvador and speak on her behalf.

The prime minister greeted her with his usual calm, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Already upset?"

"I wouldn't dare say upset," Carissa replied. "But this delay is slowing everything down and I fear we'll lose the advantage. Worse, we might alert the enemy. His Majesty still doesn't trust me."

Jeremiah leaned back, unruffled. "It's only natural that he doesn't trust you completely. Even if it were you in his position, would you believe everything someone under you said without evidence?"

"But he has no evidence that Prince Hayden is plotting treason either, yet he's constantly wary of him," Carissa countered.

"That's precisely why he's wary-because there's no evidence. If there were proof, action would've been taken already.

"You see, many things in court are far more complicated than you think. Every decision takes endless debate among the ministers. A policy might take a year or more to push through. And the riverworks project is already nearing completion by the year's end.

"Do you think His Majesty can halt it now and order the arrest of all officials involved without solid proof, merely because you suspect treason? Even if you convinced His Majesty, you'd never convince the rest of the court," Jeremiah explained with a soft sigh.

Carissa's face fell, her expression sour. "But Mr. Judd's land-grabbing is blatant! Anyone could investigate and uncover it easily."

"That's not land-grabbing," Jeremiah corrected patiently. "Those areas were approved by the court for temporary shelters-simple housing for the conscripted laborers working on the riverworks project. The land can be reclaimed at any time."

Carissa sighed. "So, you think I'm overreacting too, don't you?"

Jeremiah's gaze softened as he studied her. "I believe your instincts, Lady Carissa. And I agree something about this situation feels off. But when it comes to decisions that impact the court and the people, I would also require evidence before acting."

In other words, he trusted her personally. But as the prime minister, he needed evidence to act.

Jeremiah continued, "You may not fully grasp what the riverworks project means to His Majesty. The lands surrounding the capital are heavily cultivated, yet heavy rain leaves them flooded. Water stagnates, causing landslides and claiming lives.

"Even the streets of the capital-yes, even the royal avenues are flooded every few years. If His Majesty can fix this during his reign, it will be an outstanding achievement. It's not just a personal legacy, it's a public good that will benefit generations and alleviate the immediate struggles of the people.

He glanced at Carissa's still-troubled face and chuckled softly, shaking his head. "It's good for the young to have drive. I like seeing your energy and decisiveness. But don't let setbacks make you bitter. "Everyone in power faces challenges unique to their position. No one-not even the king-can afford to trust anyone completely based on one perspective alone. And frankly, if he were the type of ruler who did, you'd have even more reason to worry."

Carissa knew Jeremiah was right. People's hearts were inscrutable, and every official walked a tightrope. If ministers had to tread carefully, how much more so for a king?

"Fine," she said, rising to her feet. "I'll find the evidence. I only hope I can uncover it before they storm the palace."

Jeremiah offered a reassuring nod. "Don't be so pessimistic. Now that you've mentioned Prince Nicholas and the riverworks project workers, His Majesty will undoubtedly keep a close eye on them."

"Watching them isn't enough. The riverworks project workers might just be part of it. I'm afraid there could be others involved. I'll keep digging," Carissa replied.

Without waiting for further counsel, she spun on her heel and left, her exit as swift and fiery as her resolve.

Jeremiah watched her retreating figure, a faint smile playing on his lips. Her youthful energy reminded him of his own early days in court. He, too, had been determined to charge ahead, right every wrong, and follow his instincts no matter the obstacles.

But he had faced walls, learned that instincts could falter, and found that even evidence could be misleading. Over time, he had grown cautious, his youthful fire tempered by the weight of experience. Was that change a blessing or a curse? Perhaps it was both.

## Chapter 1338

Salvador promptly dispatched Ian to personally oversee the riverworks. Upon arrival, Ian found himself greeted by Cameron, who skillfully guided him through an inspection of the project's progress.

The riverworks had been ongoing for a while, and the reservoir was nearly complete. The quality of the reservoir was excellent, with the dam built solidly.

After inspecting the reservoir, they also checked the river channels. The dredging of the channels was complete, and the previously damaged dams had been repaired, raised, and reinforced.

Ian also sent people to chat with the riverworks project workers. The rough men, tanned from the sun, seemed a bit shy in front of the officials. Basically, they answered every question posed to them. When asked if they had any complaints, they hesitated for a moment before asking if the food could be improved, requesting more fatty meat.

Ian found them to be straightforward men with no signs of hidden resentment or malice.

Next, he inspected the temporary accommodations provided for the workers. The makeshift shelters, primarily constructed of wood and thatch, were modest at best. Each hut contained a communal sleeping area with large shared platforms, housing seven or eight men. The arrangements were untidy but functional.

There were no weapons in sight. Tools and equipment were stored in a large central warehouse, accessible only during work hours and meticulously returned at the end of each day.

After inspecting the area, Ian found nothing suspicious. The workers seemed no different from the usual riverworks workers.

As for Cameron, he presented himself as a man of simple means. Clad in plain garments, he dined alongside the workers and spoke passionately about the riverworks project. However, when it came to court matters, he appeared shy and clueless, acting as if he didn't understand much.

After days of scrutiny, Ian returned to the capital and presented his report to Salvador. His opinion was that neither Cameron nor the riverworks project workers seemed problematic.

Salvador furrowed his brow slightly. "Keep watching them. And ensure that the warehouse is closely guarded."

"Do you suspect something is amiss, Your Majesty?" asked Ian, confused.

"Caution is never misplaced," Salvador replied curtly.

In truth, the king had been uneasy ever since Carissa mentioned the head of the Waterworks Department. To cover all bases, Salvador had already ordered Galen to investigate Cameron and his subordinates. Cameron was flawless in every way, but the officials under him were indeed living well, just as Carissa had said. In contrast, Cameron, their superior, lived very simply, almost to the point of poverty. Of course, Salvador knew exactly how much salary they received each year.

With so few dependents in his household, there was no reason for Cameron to live so frugally-not to the point of denying his wife and children decent clothing. Though, this could simply be attributed to personal thriftiness.

But the subordinates' corruption was undeniable. Given Cameron's expertise in riverworks, he would know the exact costs of materials and labor. Every expenditure passed through his hands.

Could he truly be unaware of his subordinates' embezzlement?

The most likely explanation was that he condoned their behavior. By allowing them to indulge in corruption, he could secure their loyalty and ensure their silence. Even if one of them noticed something amiss, they wouldn't dare report it.

Of course, there was another possibility: that Cameron himself was embezzling funds on a grand scale. Those who were heavily corrupt were often good at hiding it, making their own lives appear extremely simple as a cover.

Whether it was the former or the latter, the king needed evidence. This was why he had instructed Ian to keep a close watch.

For now, with the project's completion imminent, Salvador was reluctant to disrupt the progress. If corruption was indeed at play, he would wait until the riverworks project was finished, then launch a full- scale investigation.

If the matter went beyond corruption-if this was part of a larger conspiracy to incite rebellion-then surveillance would reveal their next move soon enough.

As for Nicholas, Salvador's suspicions remained. However, with the prince stationed in Nerovia, any plan to march on the capital and coordinate with the riverworks project workers seemed destined for failure. To reach the capital, Nicholas would have to move his forces through Valken, where Thomas was stationed. Thomas was a seasoned military commander with a scout's sharp instincts. He would never allow Nicholas to leave Nerovia so easily.

If the prince couldn't make it to the capital, then the riverworks project workers posed little threat. A rebellion required a leader at the helm. Even if an uprising succeeded, Nicholas' subordinates could easily seize power for themselves.

Meanwhile, Carissa sat by the riverbank, chewing on dry, flavorless bread as she watched Ian lead his men through another round of inspections.

He had already spent several days investigating, and was now simply going through the motions. His attitude had grown noticeably lax, his inspections perfunctory at best. After a cursory glance at the ongoing riverworks, he and his men would retire to a nearby coffeehouse to relax.

Carissa knew Ian didn't believe there was any issue with Cameron or the riverworks project workers. He was merely fulfilling his duty in the most superficial way possible.

She couldn't rely on Ian, so she took it upon herself to keep watch. She also observed the officials from the Waterworks Department, hoping to find one who appeared overly fearful—someone she could interrogate later to at least get some information.

#### Chapter 1339

After two days of careful observation, Carissa decided on her target: Miles Grant, the deputy head of the Waterworks Department.

He was 35 years old and had served five years in the Ministry of Infrastructure. Born to a family of farmers and scholars, he lost his parents at a young age. To secure his education at the most prestigious academies, he drained his older brother of every last resource.

After passing the last level of the national examinations, Miles entered government service. His obsession with wealth and his miserly nature were well known. He had long since severed ties with the brother who had once supported him, casting him aside like an old shoe.

If that weren't enough, Miles had also discarded his first wife, citing jealousy as the excuse. Then, he remarried the only daughter of his former mentor, who was the headmaster of Whitecloud Academy. His mentor had since passed away, and while Miles' second wife came from a noble background, she was treated no better than the first.

He was scum. An ungrateful scoundrel.

Still, men like him were useful—too consumed by greed and too selfish to hide their weaknesses. Once one had control over them, they would spill everything.

That very night, Carissa ordered Travis to act. Miles was seized and taken to a secluded estate on the western edge of the city. There, he was locked in a woodshed and left to stew in the dark for the night. Fear and hunger would soften him up before the real questioning began.

Ambushed on his way home, Miles had been thrown into a burlap sack before he could cry for help. When he awoke, he found himself in a pitch-black room that offered no clues about his location. He assumed he had been kidnapped for ransom.

He wanted to shout out, but then realized not only were his hands and feet bound, he had also been gagged. All he could make were muffled sounds.

Hours passed. Alone in the dark, his thoughts spiraled into panic.

By the time the door opened the next morning and light poured in, he instinctively turned his head to avoid the blinding glare. He hardly waited before turning his head back, staring intently at the figure in dark clothing.

The person was dressed as a man, but Miles immediately recognized who it was-someone he had seen before.

It was the Hell Monarch's princess consort, Carissa Sinclair.

He was shocked. He had thought he had been kidnapped by bandits, but to his surprise, it was Carissa. Hoarse and strained, Miles' voice quivered as he spoke, "Your Grace, I don't understand how I've offended you."

Carissa didn't answer. Instead, she sat down on a chair that Travis had brought over, her gaze steady and unreadable as her men worked behind her. One by one, they carried in an assortment of tools: an iron brazier, tongs, whips, wooden stakes, and a rack, its surface mottled with rust.

The sight of those items drained all color from Miles' face.

His breath hitched. "W-what is this? What are you planning to do?"

Finally, Carissa said, "There's no need to panic. I only have a few questions for you. Answer honestly, and you'll walk out of here unharmed."

Miles noticed her calm and even tone. She didn't sound like someone ruthless. For a moment, he tried to regain some composure, forcing a harsh tone as he spoke.

"Your Grace, I am a court official! Kidnapping a servant of the kingdom and holding a private interrogation -do you not fear the king's wrath? If His Majesty learns of this, he will not forgive your transgressions!" Carissa chuckled. "Are you reminding me that I can't let you leave here alive?"

She tilted her head and mimicked a slicing motion across her neck, her dark eyes glinting with dangerous intent.

Miles' legs buckled beneath him as he stammered, "What... What do you want from me?"

"I told you, I have a few questions. Answer them properly, or you'll suffer for it," Carissa replied, her tone tinged with impatience.

As her words settled in the air, Travis tossed a pair of iron tongs into the brazier. The flames licked hungrily at the metal as he flipped the tongs to ensure they heated evenly, the sound of crackling embers filling the room.

Miles had spent his career in the Waterworks Department, far removed from the harsh realities of a criminal court. The sight of the glowing brazier and the tools laid out before him sent his heart into a frenzy. His eyes bulged as he began nodding frantically, desperate to show his compliance.

Carissa leaned back, crossing one leg over the other. "First question: How much have you embezzled?" Miles' eyes widened, and he instinctively shook his head. But when the red-hot tongs were aimed at his eyes, a scream ripped from his throat.

"I'll tell you...!"

Travis tossed the iron tongs back into the brazier, the sudden hiss of the coals sending sparks into the air. Miles' voice trembled as he stuttered, "One... one or two thousand silver coins. I can't remember exactly...'



Carissa's eyes narrowed. Without hesitation, she picked up the iron tongs herself and pressed them lightly against his chest. The searing sound of flesh burning filled the room, followed by Miles' agonized wails.

"Three thousand! No, 30,000 silver coins!" he cried, his entire body convulsing with pain and fear. Sweat poured down his face as he gasped for air. "I swear it's the truth! No more lies!"

Carissa tossed the iron tongs back into the brazier. "Second question: Does Mr. Judd know you've been embezzling?"

"Yes."

He could no longer lie, his face draining of color from the pain.

"And what about him? Has he taken anything for himself?" Carissa asked, her tone sharp.

"I... I don't know. I really don't know!"

Panic crept into Miles' voice as he feared that the answer wouldn't satisfy Carissa.

#### Chapter 1340

Carissa sat back in her chair and said, "The king has known about your corruption for some time now. He's allowed me to handle this privately to give you a chance. If you confess, your life will be spared. If you can provide valuable information, the worst you'll face is a demotion. You'll still be able to work your way back into the ranks."

Miles had been around long enough to understand what she was implying. Offering valuable information could only mean one thing-betraying both his superiors and subordinates.

There was no doubt in his mind that Carissa spoke the truth.

Two things made it clear. First, Ian and his men had been constantly patrolling the river. Second, Carissa's personal involvement in the interrogation. If Salvador hadn't authorized it, she wouldn't need to be here and could have easily sent someone else to extract the truth through torture.

Of course, Miles had no idea that Carissa had already analyzed his situation in detail and anticipated his thoughts.

She leaned forward slightly, her gaze never leaving his. "How far does the corruption go? What's Mr. Judd's stance on it?"

Miles hesitated for a moment, then said, "To be honest, he encouraged us to embezzle. He called it a 'hardship allowance'. Basically, a way to make extra money. At first, we just took a little and he didn't care. Over time, our confidence grew.

"Then, one day, he warned us that he was keeping a record of every bribe we took, but he didn't take action. We figured he was just as guilty as us. After that, we got bolder and bolder, and he didn't seem to care at all."

Carissa raised an eyebrow. "So, he hasn't done anything about it, not even until now?"

Seeing the tall young man beside Carissa pick up the iron tongs again, Miles quickly said, "Well... there was one time, just before this riverworks project started. He called us all together and warned us strictly not to take any money this time, not even a single coin. He said we should be careful not to draw any attention. He even arranged for us to take turns going on leave while he personally oversaw the work." Carissa tilted her head slightly, her tone casual as she asked, "Why such special attention this time?" Miles' eyes flickered nervously. "It's probably... probably because this project is especially important..." Before he could finish, Carissa swiftly grabbed the iron tongs and pressed them to his arm.

"

His last words ended in a painful scream, followed by a deep breath as he whimpered, "I'll talk. I'll tell you everything! I swear, I won't hide anything!"

"Speak!" Travis barked sharply.

Miles was in so much pain that tears and snot were flowing. He was both afraid and resentful of Carissa, but had no choice but to tell her everything.

"Actually, we don't know what he plans to do. We just noticed that some of the familiar conscripted laborers and workers disappeared. New ones came in, gradually replacing many of the existing

people. We thought something was wrong, but with the evidence of our corruption in his hands, we didn't dare ask."

Carissa's eyes narrowed dangerously. "How many people were replaced? How did it happen?"

"I don't know how they were replaced. We don't go and oversee the riverworks project often, since there are so many projects going on at the same time. Sometimes, they replace workers at the reservoir or the moat; other times, they take over at Clearflow River or step in for dredging crews... Anyway, since last year, I'd say several thousand people have been replaced," Miles replied.

Carissa furrowed her brows. "You noticed something was off and didn't ask Mr. Judd about it? Didn't you didn't report it to the Ministry of Infrastructure?"

Replacing thousands of people like that was like one person being quietly swapped for another. No wonder nothing unusual showed up in the labor records.

"Who would dare ask? Who would dare say anything? He's got our weaknesses in his hands," said Miles, looking as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

"Did you never suspect that these replacements were for some other purpose?"

Miles answered honestly, "We never thought about it. It wasn't our business. The fewer questions, the better."

"Have there been more replacements recently?" Travis interjected.

Miles thought for a moment before replying, "I went to the reservoir a couple of days ago. It's almost finished, and since Mr. Walker and the others have been keeping an eye on it, Mr. Judd had all of us get to work. It seems like some people have been replaced, but not many."

Carissa asked a few more questions, but none of them concerned Nicholas. Miles answered everything he could, and if he didn't know something, he simply said so. No amount of heat from the iron tongs could get more out of him.

Carissa knew she couldn't hold him much longer as it would raise suspicions.

So, before Miles could see what was coming, she spoke to Travis, "You stay here and keep an eye on him. I'll go to the palace to report to the king and see what he wants to do about this."

"Yes, Your Grace!" Travis responded.

But Carissa didn't go to the palace. Instead, she went back to the Capital Guard headquarters, where she arranged for her men to secretly monitor various locations at the construction sites. After waiting for two hours, she returned to the courtyard.

With her hands clasped behind her back, she coldly regarded Miles. "Because of your contribution in providing information, His Majesty has decided to spare your life for now. You may go, but it's best you stay home, pretending to be ill. And remember, not a word to anyone. If a single whisper escapes your lips, your life will be forfeit."

Travis released Miles, who collapsed to the floor, crying and repeatedly bowing in gratitude. He had never imagined Salvador would show him mercy. He thanked his stars that he had confessed, for if he hadn't, he would likely be on his way to Astral Prison now.