

## War Song 1341

### Chapter 1341

Still, hardship was inevitable.

Travis broke Miles' leg, then secretly sent him to Arcane Sanctum. The story he was to tell the outside world was that he had drunkenly fallen and fractured his leg. This would allow him to rest at home without drawing any attention.

Once the matter was settled, Travis returned to ask Carissa, "Why don't we send him back to gather intelligence for us? We could intimidate him and tell him the king has ordered him to spy. He wouldn't dare disobey."

Carissa shook her head. "He won't be able to uncover anything and will be more likely to slip up."

Travis recalled the pathetic state Miles had been in earlier. Indeed, he was of little use. Sending him to investigate would quickly attract suspicion from Cameron. It was safer to let him stay home and nurse his leg. That way, they could be sure of a clean outcome.

Even if colleagues came to visit him, Miles wouldn't dare say anything reckless. Someone as selfish as him would surely want to take all the credit for providing information. Sharing the recognition with others would only create trouble for himself, wouldn't it?

That man wouldn't risk a thing.

Having worked for many years in the Ministry of Infrastructure, Miles had never found a true friend. A man who abandoned the brother who supported his education, discarded his first wife, and mistreated the daughter of his mentor-someone so utterly self-centered-could never have genuine friendships. In his eyes, it was all about personal gain.

Carissa returned and discussed with Jacob and Kyle whether they should report to Salvador. After all, the confession had been obtained under dubious circumstances.

In the end, the three agreed that regardless of whether the king would believe it, the report had to be made. The crime of illegally detaining a government official could not be left unchecked, though they knew Salvador would not mete out punishment at such a delicate moment.

This time, Carissa brought Kyle, whom the king had always held in high regard, with her to the palace. When she had been sent to the Southern Frontier, it was a forged letter from Kyle that Salvador had seen through.

However, when they arrived at the palace, they were told they couldn't see the king. Derek came out to deliver the message that Salvador was coughing up blood and had nearly collapsed. Robert was still attending to him.

Carissa quickly inquired, "Is it his health that's failing, or has he been poisoned?"

The question itself was laced with suspicion. Under normal circumstances or in the presence of anyone else, she wouldn't have dared to ask. But the situation was different now, and it was Derek standing before her, which gave her the courage to voice her concern.

Derek sighed, his face full of worry. "Mr. Lester has ruled out poisoning. A recent bout of stress has affected His Majesty. He's been restless, unable to sleep or eat properly.

"On top of that, the sudden shifts between hot and cold weather caused him to catch a feverish cold. He's been coughing for days, and taking medicine hasn't helped much. Today, his coughing worsened and wouldn't stop. It escalated to the point where he coughed up blood and nearly choked on it."

Carissa felt a slight relief upon hearing it wasn't a poisoning. If it had been poison, it would have meant someone had infiltrated the palace, making matters far more complicated.

Coughing up blood could either be a serious issue or a mere complication. Carissa didn't leave right away, instead waiting outside for the royal physician to emerge and provide more information. There were also several other officials outside, waiting to report urgent matters.

An hour later, Robert finally came out. He explained that Salvador had fallen asleep after being given needle treatment and medication. He added that any urgent matters would have to be postponed and could be reported to the king another day.

Since men were not allowed into the inner palace freely, Carissa asked Kyle to leave first and made her way to Serenity Palace to visit Ryan and Helen.

The news of Salvador coughing up blood was kept from Victoria, but she had already heard about it. Since the king had instructed that it be kept quiet, the queen dowager refrained from visiting him. However, she sent someone to inquire with Robert about the details.

When Carissa finally came to see her after waiting for an hour, Victoria immediately asked about the situation. She relayed what Derek and Robert had told her, assuring the queen dowager that Salvador was under divine protection and would recover.

But Victoria wasn't comforted by such talk of divine protection. She sighed heavily and said, "He's burdened with too much worry, always taking everything upon himself. On top of that, he doesn't delegate tasks wisely. How could he not fall ill from all this stress and overwork?"

Helen quickly stepped forward, gently patting her sister's back to comfort her. "Don't worry so much. Stress can sometimes make you feel like you're about to cough up blood. I feel that way too, at times." Victoria shot her a look. That kind of comfort was worse than none at all.

Carissa was able to see Ryan and Evan today. With Salvador ill, Trevor had allowed Connor and the others to return to the palace so the prince could show his devotion by caring for his dad.

After comforting Victoria, Carissa took Ryan by the hand and suggested a walk.

"Have you been mistreated while in the palace?" she asked.

Ryan shook his head. "Don't worry, Aunt Carissa. The queen dowager is very kind to me. I'm not mistreated at all. The food here is better than at the academy."

Carissa chuckled. "So, you're thinking about food again? What about your studies? Have you been learning diligently from Mr. Young?"

Looking around cautiously, Ryan lowered his voice as he replied, "I've been learning, but I always say I only know a little. I don't want to outshine Prince Connor. When I don't do well, he gloats and teases me a bit, but he doesn't make things too hard for me."

Carissa patted his head. This child was just too considerate for his age.

Having other matters to attend to, Carissa gave him some advice before sending him back to Serenity Palace. Then, she excused herself and left the palace.

## Chapter 1342

Because Salvador assigned Galen to handle other matters, the management of Astral Prison had been left to the Supreme Court officials, with Randall overseeing it.

Later that evening, Randall arrived at Hell Monarch Estate to see Carissa. He mentioned there was something troubling him and needed her advice. Carissa only ate a few bites of her meal before rushing out to meet him, her mind preoccupied with worry about Zoey and her children.

However, when she heard Randall's concerns, she learned that the problem was with Evelyn and Viola. Since their arrival at Astral Prison, the two women had been consumed with worry. Their meals, looking worse than what was fed to dogs, left them weak. Within days, they both began suffering from severe vomiting and diarrhea.

Carissa had already provided some medicine for easing any symptoms of an upset stomach to Zoey, and taking it had helped Evelyn and Viola. But with the continued poor food, their condition had worsened again. Now, Viola was running a high fever.

Evelyn had begged for a physician, but Randall was unable to make a decision and had come to Carissa for advice.

"What about the others? Are they experiencing the same symptoms?" she asked.

"Some of them did. After all, they went from living in luxury to being prisoners. It's hard to adjust to the food. But everyone else got better after taking medicine. Only those two seem to be getting worse." Randall glanced at Carissa and added, "Ms. Prince looks like she's on the brink of death, while Madam Prince cries every day, nearly making herself blind with grief. Perhaps we should find a physician for them?"

Carissa paused, considering, then said, "Have you spoken to Deputy Commander Kimber? He used to handle matters at Astral Prison. He would have the authority to decide."

"I've already gone to him," Randall admitted. "Deputy Commander Kimber said that Ms. Prince left Mr. Warren when he fell from grace, so she's not a good woman. He refused to allow a physician to be called."

Carissa was taken aback; she hadn't realized Galen and Barrett had such a close relationship. "Then, why don't you go to Mr. Carter?" she suggested.

Randall lowered his gaze, his fingers clenched. "He's placed great expectations on me. I don't want to bother him with every little issue-he'd be disappointed in me. But I truly don't know what to do. Since Deputy Commander Kimber already refused, I'm afraid to act on my own and anger him."

Carissa observed him thoughtfully. He was indeed lacking in decisiveness, yet he had a compassionate heart. In fact, once he consulted with Galen, who had given his refusal, Randall could have easily stayed out of the matter.

Carissa sighed and said, "I can't make a decision for you, but I can offer some advice. His Majesty ordered their imprisonment in Astral Prison, hoping that Mr. Prince might turn himself in, swayed by family ties. But as the one responsible for their custody, you must ensure they stay alive."

Randall let out a breath of relief, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Understood. I'll make sure to arrange for a physician for them."

He turned to leave, but then stopped and turned back. "What should I say if Deputy Commander Kimber asks about it? He didn't approve of calling a physician."

Carissa sighed. "You'll have to figure that out on your own, alright?"

Seeing the disappointment in her eyes, Randall didn't dare ask further. He muttered a quick farewell, then left.

Once he was gone, Carissa instructed Lulu to go to Arcane Sanctum and take Rowan to Astral Prison to check on Zoey, Cedric, and the others, to make sure everything was alright. After all, they had shown symptoms as well.

Later that evening, Rowan returned with Lulu, both carrying the unmistakable odor of prison. Lily sprinkled some scented water on them to wash away the stench, along with a bit of the bad luck associated with prison.

Carissa instructed Lulu to bathe and change, while Rowan was served coffee and snacks.

Rowan set his medical kit down on the table. "A physician has already visited and given them a prescription. But considering how difficult it is to prepare medicine in Astral Prison, I left them some pills instead."

"And how are they doing?" Carissa asked.

"Ms. Prince and Madam Prince are in worse condition. The others are managing okay, though Ms. Courtney has a slight fever as well."

"How did that happen? Is it the food?" Carissa questioned.

Rowan sighed. "The conditions aren't ideal. Everyone is eating, sleeping, and... well, relieving themselves in the same place. The environment is poor, and they are all people who are used to luxury. It's no surprise that their bodies are struggling to adjust."

"The men are doing better as they're stronger, but Mrs. Prince has been suffering from headaches, likely due to poor sleep. I gave her needle treatment and left some ointment for her."

"As for Ms. Prince, she didn't have any major issues previously. But she's been so anxious and has taken too much medicine. It drained her, which is what made her condition much worse. Meanwhile, Madam Prince is in a constant state of worry and cries every day. Her eyes are almost going blind from it." Rowan paused for a moment, sipping his drink before continuing, "Mrs. Prince has it the hardest. She has to manage everything in Astral Prison. She's battling splitting headaches herself while trying to comfort everyone else. She can't just ignore them-there are so many people, and negative emotions can spread easily. If they were separated, it would be easier on her."

Carissa's heart ached for Zoey, but she knew that separating the prisoners was an unlikely solution.

Chapter 1343

"Do you think Madam Prince and Ms. Prince are in immediate danger?" Carissa asked.

"Madam Prince should be fine, but if Ms. Prince's fever doesn't break soon, she could be in real danger. She's too anxious. When she saw me, she kept grabbing my hand, asking if she was going to die. She kept babbling nonsense-blaming one person, then another, before turning the blame on herself for all the wrong decisions she'd made," Rowan replied.

Carissa said nothing.

She had no right to judge someone else's life, but she couldn't help but wish Viola wouldn't drag Zoey down with her. If Viola were die in Astral Prison, it would only cause panic among the Earl of Silverstone's family. This would undoubtedly increase Zoey's already heavy burden.

"Rowan, please check on them again in a couple of days."

He nodded. "Of course."

Carissa thought for a moment, then added, "I'll accompany you when you go."

She wanted to have a private conversation with Zoey. In a hopeless place like prison, having no one to

talk to and only listening to endless crying would make the days feel like years.

But right now, Carissa had other matters to attend to. With Salvador ill and court in recess, her only option was to find Jeremiah and inform him of the change in the riverworks personnel, explaining how Cameron had replaced the workers.

More importantly, she had to meet with the generals of the Mystic Army to devise strategy and plan their defense.

The next day, after speaking with Jeremiah about the personnel change, she asked him to report it to Salvador. Then, she returned to the Capital Guard headquarters. She also gathered Kyle and Jacob to discuss the matter.

They had to consider many possible scenarios. They couldn't rule out internal collaboration, so they needed to be ready for that. Those guarding the city gates had to be on high alert.

At the same time, scouts needed to be dispatched to patrol the countryside surrounding the city. There were many large villas on the outskirts, some housing hundreds of people. It would be hard to know who might be hiding among them.

However, this was one of the most difficult areas to investigate, as the villa managers often hired workers based on cheap labor and skill rather than background or identity. Many times, they would recruit refugees from other places. So long as they could work for a meal, what did it matter who they were? The search had already begun, but progress was slow. The countryside was vast, and apart from the villas, there were many small villages.

The defense fortifications were set to begin that very day, with strict surveillance of all key routes into the city. The main street leading to the palace would be a particular focus.

While waiting for news from Jeremiah, Carissa visited Zoey in prison. This time, she had Randall bring Zoey to the back courtyard of the Supreme Court, where they had some meat porridge prepared for her. Zoey looked terribly worn-her face gaunt and her body frail, with large eyes that seemed devoid of life. As she looked at the porridge in front of her, inhaling its fragrant aroma, tears fell from her eyes in heavy drops.

Carissa didn't try to comfort her, letting her cry it all out.

Zoey had likely been holding back her tears for a long time. In Astral Prison, she was the pillar of strength for everyone, the one who couldn't show weakness. She had to keep her spirit alive, for if she faltered, everyone else would lose hope.

When her tears finally subsided, she picked up the now lukewarm porridge and began to eat, her hands trembling. She hesitated, the thought of saving some for her children tugging at her heart. But she knew that was impossible.

After Zoey finished one bowl, Carissa could see that it wasn't enough and asked for another to be brought.

Zoey's voice, choked with emotion, broke the silence, "That's enough, Your Grace. Thank you."

One bowl of porridge, in her family's current state, was a luxury.

"Mrs. Prince, you need to pull yourself together," Carissa said softly.

Zoey gave a bitter smile. "Why call me that? I'm just a woman who has sinned."

Carissa fell quiet for a bit before saying, "Then, let me call you Zoey."

That seemed to pull Zoey out of her daze. How long had it been since anyone had called her in such a familiar manner?

"Do you have any news of him? Will he be caught?" Zoey asked, her voice filled with desperation as she lifted her tear-filled eyes to Carissa.

Every day, all she could think about was Oliver's capture. Her children's survival depended on it.

Carissa shook her head, regretfully replying, "No news yet. Although the arrest order has been issued, with wars breaking out everywhere, they probably can't spare the resources."

"If he dies, I hope it's in a place where someone will see it. At least if a body is found, that would give us some chance of survival," Zoey said bitterly as she wiped away tears, her voice barely holding stable. "I don't care if I die, but seeing my children suffer, living in fear every day, is breaking my heart."

Carissa gently patted her back and asked, "Are the headaches still bothering you?"

"It's much better now, thanks to you." She tried to take Carissa's hand, but when she saw her own hands -dirty and blackened, the stench unbearable-she instinctively pulled back. "I'm filthy. Don't come too close."

Carissa smiled at her. "You're not filthy. Your heart is still pure."

Zoey smiled through her tears, a small, shaky laugh escaping her. She had needed a place to cry, a familiar face to help bolster her strength. Now, she was feeling much better. Her resolve would remain strong.

#### Chapter 1344

Although it wasn't proper, Carissa had someone buy two pots of meat porridge before Zoey returned to her cell. She told Zoey that it was a gesture of thanks from the common people, to repay her for her years of distributing food.

This time, Zoey was moved to tears. She wished so much that her children could have a bowl of hot porridge, even if just a small spoonful.

After leaving the Supreme Court, Carissa paused for a moment before instructing Jacob to spread the story of the supposedly donated porridge.

Once, people had spoken highly of Zoey's charity. Over time, however, the talks had dwindled. Now, Carissa saw an opportunity to reignite that warmth, using this small act of kindness to revive Zoey's image.

Naturally, Jacob spun the tale a little more, embellishing it with compassion. He spoke of a man who had once been a starving refugee from the outskirts of the capital. He had been barely alive, eating the porridge at the charity stalls for several days. Before he left the city, the stall attendants had given him a package of dry rations.

Now, the man had heard of Zoey's misfortune. Although his life was still hard, he had traveled to the capital, bringing with him two pots of hot meat porridge as a token of his gratitude, and begged to have it sent to the prison for his benefactor.

Randall, the one in charge of Astral Prison, was moved when he heard the full story. He made an exception and allowed Zoey's family to receive the meat porridge.

The story of gratitude spread through the streets, quickly filling every corner of the city. The talk turned once more to the Earl of Silverstone's family and Zoey's strength of character. People began to speak of her again, pitying her and condemning the treatment she had received.

Many felt that Zoey's fall from grace wasn't due to her own shortcomings, but rather the collapse of her family's fortunes. It was also because she didn't have any maternal family members to rely on, making her an easy target for Oliver's repeated mistreatment.

The more they learned of Oliver's cruelty, the more sympathy they felt for Zoey.

Soon, the Oversight Department caught wind of the stories. Once again, reports were sent to Salvador- this time, while he lay on his sickbed.

Salvador had just heard from Jeremiah about the change in the riverworks project workers, and was now listening to the tale of the grateful citizen who had traveled so far to deliver the porridge. Perhaps because of his own recent illness, the king's heart was softer.

Jeremiah spoke gently, adding that it was clear that Oliver, who was in the wrong, had expected his family to suffer for it. Even during his escape, he likely foresaw what awaited them. And now, the man who had caused all this harm was safe, while his family suffered.

On the other hand, Zoey was truly pitiable. She had never known peace since marrying Oliver, much like Carissa when she was married to Barrett.

The difference was that Zoey's situation was even more tragic. At least Carissa was young and had martial arts skills. Able to fight on the battlefield and earn achievements, she wouldn't waste her years and end up imprisoned in Astral Prison.

After a long silence, Salvador ordered, "The women of the Prince family are to be demoted to commoners. The men are to be exiled to the Southern Frontier for three years. As for the rest of the household servants, they are free to go as they please."

"Your wisdom is unmatched, Your Majesty!" Irvin exclaimed, quickly bowing in gratitude on behalf of the Prince family.

After sending Irvin away, Salvador summoned his strength to rise from his bed. He called for a meeting with the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Infrastructure, and Carissa, the commander of the Mystic Army.

Edwin was paralyzed with dread. He could hardly believe that such a critical project had fallen into such disarray. Where had the conscripted laborers gone? Who had they been replaced with?

As his mind raced in panic, he felt as though his position Minister of Infrastructure was now hanging by a thread. Without thinking, he glanced toward Carissa, who was speaking about defense matters with such precision. He couldn't help but admire her; he hadn't expected her to work so quickly.

Salvador was taken aback too. He watched Carissa, who had laid out a map on the table, guiding her fingers from one checkpoint to another. Her words were clear and concise, her plan unfolding effortlessly. The distribution of troops and their roles were laid out in just a few short sentences, all perfectly understood.

Salvador looked at her bright, determined eyes, her face almost glowing with focus. For a moment, he lost himself in the sight.

Just then, Carissa finished speaking and turned to him. Noticing his silence, she mistook his expression for dissatisfaction.

"Do you think the Sacred Fire Regiment shouldn't be used, Your Majesty?" she asked.

The Sacred Fire Regiment was responsible for guarding the palace and the city gates. Since the first batch of six-barreled matchlocks had already been sent to the Southern Frontier, the Ministry of Defense and Isaac were working quickly to assemble more.

When Salvador didn't respond immediately, Carissa added, "The Mystic Army has its own Sacred Fire Regiment. Though we've always used single-shot matchlocks, we'll be fine with a bit of training. You needn't worry. If that doesn't work, we can use arrows. Our Elite Marksmanship Unit is also quite formidable."

Salvador was taken aback by the brilliance in her eyes. She handled such a crisis with remarkable calmness, making many men pale in comparison.

"Good," he said at last, his throat tight.

He wanted to say more, but for some reason, the words wouldn't come out.

## Chapter 1345

The Mystic Army's defensive measures turned the capital into a place of unease and tension. With a curfew in place, many businesses in the entertainment districts found their activities stifled. Coffeeshouses and taverns closed their doors at sunset, and by night, the city seemed as lifeless as a tomb.

The strategy now was simple-if the enemy did not move, neither would they.

The riverworks project continued without interruption. As long as the work did not stop unnecessarily, the Mystic Army would remain on standby, prepared to mobilize at any moment. Carissa knew that this was the only way to gain an advantage.

If the work remained uninterrupted, it would benefit both the court and the people.

Though no open battle had yet occurred, the air was thick with tension, the scent of war hanging over the city. The city gates were now under constant scrutiny. It was unlikely that the true mastermind behind the rebellion would stay away from the capital.

His life and wealth were at stake, so how could he command remotely?

Carissa suspected that the true mastermind might already have returned to the city. However, Violet, who was still living at Willowbrook Estate, had seen no signs of anything unusual.

The only people around Hayden were the two elderly servants, while the other household servants were busy with various tasks. The servants who left to buy the daily necessities were being closely watched by Bun and had no contact with the outside world.

It was a headache, to say the least. Carissa needed to take a moment to breathe.

The Prince family had been dealt their punishment. All the men were to be exiled, and even Cedric would not escape this fate. Exile to the Southern Frontier wasn't so bad, at least. There, they would have some protection.

As for Zoey, Viola, and Evelyn, they weren't in a position to purchase a large estate right now. Though Zoey had left money with Isaac, the current situation meant they had no choice but to take up residence in Skye Embroidery.

At first, Carissa had feared that Viola would protest living in such humble conditions, as she had always held herself above such things. But the harsh reality of Astral Prison had a way of softening even the sharpest of edges. Viola had said nothing, silently accepting her circumstances.

As for Courtney, Carissa had plans to settle her at Hell Monarch Estate, where she could spend time with Roxana. Roxana was a martial arts prodigy, while Courtney was a sharp, intelligent girl. Though they were of different ages, Carissa felt they could easily become fast friends—one a scholar, the other a warrior. Courtney had been demoted to a commoner, but she had not been enslaved. This meant she could still return to Gracewood Women's Academy. In fact, a commoner woman could easily attend the academy if she wished.

As for Luna's daughters and the daughters of Oliver's concubines, Carissa had asked them what they wanted to do. They said they wished to remain at Skye Embroidery and learn embroidery from Camila. An education might not always guarantee a livelihood for a woman, but working with her hands was a skill that could ensure she never went hungry.

Carissa didn't press them. After all, they were literate, and Zoey had never treated them poorly. Even Oliver's concubines had always respected a lady of the house who showed such kindness to their children.

In the main hall, Carissa and Zoey spoke.

The latter seemed much more at ease, her demeanor calmer now that she knew her brother-in-law and son had been exiled to the Southern Frontier. Though the journey would be arduous, she took comfort in the fact that there would be people to help them along the way and care for them once they arrived. There was still hope, even if the path ahead was difficult.

She wore a simple cloth gown, looking refreshed. Her energy was completely different from the heavy, worn-out expression she had once worn.

She curtsied deeply to Carissa, her voice thick with emotion as she said, "If it weren't for you, I fear we would still be suffering in Astral Prison, Your Grace."

Carissa smiled gently. "Zoey, you flatter me. You're more than capable of managing a household. You'll be invaluable at the workshop, helping with both the internal and external matters. I'll be counting on you." Zoey nodded solemnly. "I will do everything I can to manage the workshop. If no one wants to go out and sell the embroidered goods, I can do it. I'm no longer afraid of stepping out into the world." "With you here, I can rest easy," Carissa said sincerely.

She truly meant it. Lately, she had been running around like a whirlwind, and the workshop and women's academy had both suffered for it.

Now, aside from the Prince family members, there were over ten women living at Skye Embroidery. Some of the women, having learned there was a place that would take them in, had chosen to leave their marriages rather than endure any further hardships.

Though the numbers were still small, Carissa was optimistic. Progress was progress; they had to take things one step at a time.

Viola was still recovering, so she hadn't come to meet with Carissa. It might have been an excuse, as Rowan had said she was no longer in serious danger.

Carissa suspected that Viola didn't quite know how to face her. After all, she had once been her imagined rival. However, Carissa wasn't bothered. She believed that if Viola stayed stubborn, Kayla's next visit with supplies would only make it harder for her to face Carissa.

Chapter 1346

Violet and the others had stayed at Willowbrook Estate for so many days, turning the place upside down. Yet, they found nothing.

She had decided it was time to leave.

Spending every day following Hayden's indulgent routine of eating and drinking had become tiresome. Violet felt as if the days were slipping away, especially now that Carissa was so busy and she hadn't been able to help.

It left her feeling unsettled.

At dinner that evening, she turned to Hayden and said, "I'll leave tomorrow."

Hayden glanced at her with a smile. "What's this? Haven't I treated you well with good food and drink? Why the sudden departure?"

Violet answered honestly, "The food's been too good-every day, it's either mountain delicacies or seafood."

Hayden laughed heartily.

"You're like a wild boar, unable to appreciate the finer things!" He waved it off. "Fine, if you're tired of it, then go ahead."

He called for Sonny. "Sonny, go to the storeroom and pick out some gifts. When they leave tomorrow, make sure they have something to take with them."

"Certainly, Your Highness," Sonny replied.

Gordon was standing outside the door. He overheard and said, "Your Highness, I'll go."

Hayden gave him a casual glance and waved his hand. "Alright, you go. Pick something nice-don't embarrass me."

"Of course, Your Highness," Gordon responded before turning to leave.

Violet looked up, almost calling out to Gordon, but hesitated. It seemed strange to bring gifts after having stayed for so long, especially when they'd come to just enjoy the food and hospitality. She felt a pang of guilt.

As she watched Gordon's retreating figure, something caught her attention. His posture-straight and dignified had never seemed so noticeable before. She hadn't really paid attention to how he walked, with one hand casually resting behind him, his fingers slightly curled. It gave him an air of someone accustomed to noble treatment, someone almost graceful in his manner.

For a moment, she was lost in thought. Then, she remembered how he had always spoken in a graceful and somewhat arrogant manner in front of Hayden and the others. It hadn't stood out before, but now with Sonny ahead of him and Gordon behind, the contrast was apparent.

"Violet, what are you daydreaming about?" Hayden's voice broke her reverie.

Violet quickly snapped back to attention and hurriedly smiled. "I was just thinking it's too much. We've been imposing for so long, and now you're giving us gifts? It makes it seem like we've come just to take advantage of you."

Hayden chuckled, his tone teasing. "I know you're wealthy and lack for nothing, but when I offer something, you should take it without being so polite. Don't act like a stranger."

Violet laughed lightly. "Well, since you insist, I'll accept with thanks."

Hayden looked at her with a thoughtful expression, his gaze lingering a moment longer before he returned to his food.

Violet ate with her mind elsewhere, the food barely registering as she poked at it absentmindedly. After finishing her meal, she excused herself and took Bun and Cynthia for a walk in the garden.

The lamps in the garden flickered softly, their light shimmering in the night. They looked both close and distant, as if the truth were just the same always just out of reach, yet present in every moment. Cynthia, still with a cheerful smile, chattered about how curious she was to see what gifts Hayden might give them. Young girls, after all, always enjoyed receiving presents. Even the smallest token, no matter how insignificant, brought joy simply because it was given by someone else.

It was Bun who broke the silence, noticing Violet's preoccupation. "Vivi, don't you think there's something off about Gordon?"

Violet looked up sharply. "What do you mean? What have you noticed?"

Bun paused before replying, "His martial arts skills are unusually high."

Violet blinked in surprise. "He knows martial arts? I didn't think so."

From his footsteps to his breathing, she had never noticed anything that suggested he was trained in combat.

"Yesterday, when we were out with

Prince Hayden, carrying all those parcels, Gordon was giving orders to the servants to prune a tree. The young men who were carrying the items didn't notice him, and they were about to crash into him. Just as was about to shout, he spun around and sidestepped them, barely missing the collision."

Cynthia and Violet hadn't noticed this at the time. They had been too wrapped up in their conversation, laughing and joking.

Cynthia shook her head. "So he sidestepped? That's not such an extraordinary skill. Maybe he just heard the sound and dodged."

Bun shook his head. "No. It was

different. He turned and moved in a way that was almost impossible to catch with the eye. His feet barely left the ground, and the movement was so quick and controlled that I almost thought I'd imagined it. It's a level of skill that none of us could replicate, not even Cari."

Violet fell silent. They could certainly spin with their feet barely leaving the ground-it wasn't a difficult move.

But if the movement was fast and there was barely any space to spare, there was no way they could pull it off if they hadn't made any preparations.

However, that wasn't the main point.

The real focus was that someone trained in martial arts could sense movements from the outside and hear the breath from within. Yet, Gordon revealed nothing. Even after days of being in close proximity, there hadn't been a single flaw. It showed just how deep his training had gone and how strong his self-control was.

Chapter 1347

Cynthia suggested testing the waters, but Violet immediately shook her head.

"Don't try it. Pretend you don't know anything. We leave at dawn, and then we'll tell Cari and Jacob." However, a thought suddenly crossed Bun's mind. "But can we really leave?"

Cynthia blinked, surprised. "You mean he won't let us go? He's going to keep us here? But Prince Hayden said we could leave."

"Why did Prince Hayden call for Vivi, then? Have you thought about that?" Bun asked.

Violet paced back and forth, feeling a bit uneasy. She had discussed this issue with Carissa before. It clearly wasn't about asking for help. Could it be a hostage situation?

It didn't seem like that, either. Instead, it felt more like someone was deliberately trying to reveal a flaw for them to notice.

"Is it possible that Prince Hayden and Gordon aren't on the same side?" Violet murmured, recalling the strange dynamics during their stay at Willowbrook Estate. Gordon had been everywhere, yet he never felt quite present. He was always in the background and always unnoticed.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a small but persistent idea, one she dared not voice aloud: Could Gordon be using a disguise? Could he actually be Nicholas?

"Let's not talk about it anymore. We'll sleep on it," Violet decided.

Speaking her suspicions out loud didn't feel right-if Gordon's martial arts were really that advanced, they had no idea if the three of them together could even stand a chance.

"We'll all squeeze in together tonight," Cynthia said, linking her arm with Bun's while pulling Violet in. "Just in case."

The three of them made their way back to the room. Bun set up his bedding on the floor, while the two women took the bed.

"I'll keep watch," Bun volunteered, sitting up on the floor.

Cynthia turned to him. "If we're in danger, why not leave tonight?"

"Curfew," Bun replied simply.

"To avoid alarming them," Violet added.

Cynthia considered this and nodded. "Both reasons make sense."

That night, Hayden did something unusual-he didn't retire early. Instead, he stayed in his study, sitting in silence. He had Chaya fetch him a tobacco pipe. Lighting it, he took a slow draw, the faint curls of smoke rising in the still air.

As he puffed on it, the room quickly filled with smoke. Chaya hesitated before asking, "Would you like another?"

Hayden glanced at her, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "You never used to let me smoke so much."

Chaya smiled and said, "We don't have many days left to live anyway. Might as well do whatever we want now."

Hayden responded, "I've told you to leave, but you refuse. Staying here will only lead to your death." Chaya lowered her gaze, tidied up the tobacco pipe, and lit a lavender-scented candle.

"Where would go if I left? No one has ever cared for me in this life. You treat me like a granddaughter, and that more kindness than I've ever known, Your Highness. Even if I end up in the underworld, at least there's someone there to look after me."

Hayden looked at her with pity, his gaze soft. "I could leave you with Lady Carissa. She'll take care of you.

If that doesn't work, you could always go to the workshop."

"I won't go anywhere," Chaya replied,

sitting down with a grunt. She clasped her hands around her waist where the excess flesh made sitting uncomfortable. "I'll enjoy whatever little comfort I can while I'm here. Tomorrow's troubles can wait, or maybe they won't be worth thinking about at all."

Hayden sighed, glancing at the shadows that loomed outside the door. The figure had been standing there for quite a while but hadn't knocked.

He motioned to Chaya with a wave of his hand, indicating she was dismissed.

Chaya nodded and rose, heading to the door to open it. She saw the person standing outside and curtsied deeply. "Your Highness."

"You should go and rest." The voice was warm, soothing, almost pleasant to the ear.

"Yes, Your Highness." Chaya slowly turned and walked off into the dark, her steps heavy.

The figure at the door stood for a moment, then entered the study, closing the door behind him.

The study still carried the lingering scent of smoke, mingling with the faint aroma of lavender. It created a strangely refreshing atmosphere in the room-strange, almost unearthly, but undeniably unique. "Dad," Nicholas said with a slight frown, his tone gentle yet firm. "You've been coughing a lot lately. You should quit the pipe. It's not good for your health."

Hayden narrowed his eyes, studying him for a long moment. "You're quite the talker, always spouting sanctimonious words. I have to admit, I'm impressed. How do you manage to say all this without feeling disgusted by your own hypocrisy?"

Nicholas remained unmoved, standing straight, his expression as calm as ever.

"Why are you angry, Dad? I've let you

do whatever you want these days. You invited Violet here to stay, deliberately making noise late at night, and even taking them to See the riverworks. You're practically shouting to the world that I'm a traitor, but I don't hold that against you."

Chapter 1348

Hayden let out a cold grunt. He deliberately turned his face away, refusing to look at Nicholas. Nicholas stood tall and elegant, though he wore Gordon's face.

In a calm and steady tone, he said, "I will fulfill my promises to you. The riverworks project will be completed. There will be no senseless bloodshed, no harm to the people of the capital, no destruction of crops. And rest assured, Dad, I will not let you die. Once I claim the throne, I promise you, you will be the one to ascend to the royal seat."

Hayden scoffed, the derision in his voice unmistakable. "You really are the picture of a devoted son." Nicholas' gaze remained steady, his words sincere. "I have vowed, and I will keep my word. You will sit on the throne, ruling over all. No more threats from Sandoria, no more stagnation at the borders with Westhaven. The people will prosper, and Starhaven will flourish."

Hayden spat contemptuously. "You, an ungrateful traitor working with Sandoria and Westhaven, have the audacity to say such things. It makes me sick to my core."

Nicholas remained unflinching. "That was merely a temporary measure. Once you are crowned, I will turn the tide, expel the enemies, and ensure they never dare to threaten us again."

Hayden's fingers itched, as if he wished to tear away Nicholas' facade and see if there truly was a wolf's skin beneath this so-called gentle exterior.

How could he say such things with a straight face? How could he have such a heart?

The Southern Frontier had been reclaimed at such a cost. Countless soldiers had fallen in the effort, their bones forever buried in that land. And now, Nicholas wanted to hand it over?

If the Southern Frontier fell into the hands of Sandoria, was it really so easy to just take it back? Or was he planning on gifting the land to them?

To Nicholas, the land had no value. All he cared about was the throne.

"You alone are a traitor. Don't you dare use my name to further your ambitions! You thought of a good plan, didn't you? The common people will call me the traitor, the rebel who plotted to overthrow the throne. Throughout history, I'll be remembered as the man who betrayed the kingdom. You'll make yourself look clean, all while gaining a reputation for being a devoted son."

Hayden knew his son better than anyone.

Nicholas was a man who spoke of benevolence and righteousness, but whose actions threatened the very foundation of the nation.

If he were truly so devoted, Nicholas would have listened to Hayden. He would have obediently remained a county duke and lived a life of idle wealth and leisure without care.

"Say whatever you wish, Dad. You likely will never understand this act of devotion of mine. Rest assured, Violet and the others will be allowed to leave safely," Nicholas said calmly.

Hayden's fury flared. "Dare you prevent them from leaving? I'll expose your schemes to the world!"

His eyes burned with rage.

Nicholas simply smiled, unruffled.

"Even if you expose me, it would

make no difference. The king already knows about me, and the checkpoints in the capital are tightly controlled. They're just waiting for me to enter the city. They hope the riverworks project will be completed, and the Royal Astronomer has forecasted heavy rains this year. The river channels are essential. Besides, once you ascend to the throne, this will be a political achievement for you-something to gain the respect of the world."

The fire in Hayden's gaze seemed to scorch him. "You're well-prepared, but you won't succeed."

Nicholas' smile never faltered. "What use is preparation? The true generals are already on the battlefield. Do you really think a woman could stop me?"

Hayden did not let Nicholas' casual

dismissal of Carissa ease his

thoughts. In fact, it only made his concern deepen. Nicholas never underestimated his enemies. Even someone like Yuvan, whom he considered a fool, had been handled With great care.

Nicholas had taken painstaking efforts to infiltrate Yuvan's forces, turning Yuvan's core people into loyalists-bit by bit, until there was nothing left.

In a sudden fit of rage, Hayden hurled his cup at Nicholas. "Get out!"

Nicholas didn't flinch, allowing it to strike him. He gave a resigned smile, wiping his cheek as he said calmly, "Very well, Dad. You should rest. I'll take my leave."

Hayden glared at him, the mocking smile on his son's face only making him feel sicker. "Aren't you worried I'll reveal your true identity to Ms. Spencer? To Lady Carissa?"

Nicholas shook his head, a note of pity in his voice.

"You won't do that. If you were going

to, you would have done it already.

You spent so many years in Nerovia, treating its people like your own children. You would never want the forces of Yuvan's rebellion to ravage the people there. I'll ignore the subtle hints you've given to Violet, but I trust there won't be another instance of it."

Hayden's face drained of color, fury rising within him like a storm.

"Leave. Get out. Now!"

Nicholas gave a final, mocking smile before taking his leave, the door closing softly behind him.

## Chapter 1349

Hayden stood frozen, staring at the shards of his broken cup scattered on the floor. The pieces weren't particularly sharp, but they were enough to tear through skin, perhaps even slit a wrist.

Slowly, he bent down and picked up a fragment. His mind was lost in a haze of dark thoughts. Before he could move further, a hand gripped his wrist, pulling him back sharply.

"Be careful, Your Highness. You'll cut yourself."

The sudden pain in his wrist was sharp as the grip tightened. The shard was swiftly taken from his hand. The man who had appeared was dressed in black, his silhouette swallowed by the shadows, as if part of the darkness itself.

Hayden had no idea how many people like this were in his household. Everywhere he went, the sense of being watched clung to him.

These people were more than just skilled. Their martial arts were advanced, and their inner force was formidable. They wielded weapons and hidden blades with frightening precision. Even when Hayden was with Violet and the others, the pressure never let up.

He had hoped Violet and the others might sense the presence of these watchers, but it was hopeless. They were like ghosts-silent, invisible, and untouchable.

Yuvan's suicide soldiers were nothing compared to these people.

When the man released Hayden's wrist, Hayden could already see the dark bruises taking shape where the fingers had been. He was powerless, even when it came to his own death. Despair flooded through him as he sank to the floor.

The man in black showed no concern and disappeared into the darkness.

The next day, Violet and the others prepared to leave Willowbrook Estate. Before departing, Violet took the time to say her farewells, one by one. She thanked Hayden, Chaya, Sonny, and lastly, Gordon. Standing before Gordon, she smiled warmly. "While we were staying at the manor, the hardest work fell on you. You took care of everything-food, drinks... When I have more time, I'll invite Prince Hayden and all of you to the Glimmering Tower for a meal."

Gordon, his back slightly hunched, smiled humbly. "Please don't mention it, Ms. Spencer. It's our duty. You should not trouble yourself over such things."

Violet waved her hand casually, her smile bright. "No trouble at all! It'll be a pleasure. You're doing us a great favor."

Gordon thanked her repeatedly, smiling as he saw them out of the gate.

As Violet turned to leave, she glanced back and saw Hayden standing in the morning light. He didn't have a smile on his face at first, but when she turned, he forced a smile.

Something about him seemed different today. He looked more worn than usual, the signs of a sleepless night evident in his eyes.

Violet couldn't help herself and ran back. "Take care of yourself, Your Highness. You should throw that pipe away."

Hayden's gaze lingered on her. He seemed to want to say something, to impart some kind of message, but he knew the rules. Some things could be hinted at, but others had to be said outright. He remained silent, his expression heavy with unspoken thoughts.

He made one last effort and said, "Don't worry, Gordon and Chaya will keep an eye on me."

Violet returned his smile, her eyes twinkling. "Good, then I can rest easy."

The three of them rode off, laughing

and chatting loudly about the amusing little things they had noticed during their stay at Willowbrook Estate. They spoke of which dish was the best, which flower bloomed the most beautifully, and how wonderful it would be if a pavilion could be built in the middle of the pond.

Their conversation only came to a halt when they reached Hell Monarch Estate. They dismounted and handed their horses to the stableman, then quickly headed inside without a second glance.

When they had originally followed Hayden out, they hadn't suspected Gordon, so they weren't as alert. But this time, all three of them felt as if someone had been watching their backs the moment they mounted their horses.

It was unsettling.

They thought they could see Carissa if they left early, but they learned that she had already left for the Capital Guard headquarters at dawn.

So, they told Jacob and Kyle that they had an unsettling feeling about Gordon. They believed his martial arts might be more than it seemed.

Violet turned to Bun and Cynthia, her

expression serious. "There's

something else I'm wondering if you two noticed. When we left, I told Prince Hayden to stop smoking his pipe. He said that Gordon and Chaya would be watching him. That can't just be my imagination. He meant it literally."

Cynthia paused, trying to remember. "I think he did say that. But Chaya should be fine, don't you think?" Bun nodded slowly. "Chaya should be harmless, but when he mentioned Gordon, that raised a red flag. It makes me wonder if Prince Hayden was trying to warn us about something."

Violet agreed, her face hardening. "Yes, it's highly likely. I can't shake the feeling that Gordon is no simple man. It also felt like we were being watched on our way back."

Jacob and Kyle exchanged a glance.

It seemed like Gordon might actually be Nicholas. He had already entered

the city early on. If that were the case, the Nicholas who had been supposedly keeping an eye on things in Nerovia-sipping wine and listening to music every day-was just an impostor.

It was a clever distraction.

Jacob quickly turned and left, scribbling a note to be sent via carrier pigeon to the scouts in Nerovia, instructing them to expose the false Nicholas.

Chapter 1350

Today was Adrian's birthday, but Everett insisted that it wasn't.

It didn't really matter, though. Since Adrian wanted a lively celebration, he had sent out invitations a few days ago to the Meadow Ridge factions and a few of the more amicable martial arts guilds. Over 30 seats were set for the feast.

Everett personally took charge of the event, as he handled most matters within the Pathfinders Guild. He didn't mind putting in the effort, but what bothered him was the stipulation his martial brother had made in the invitation-no birthday gifts.

That was a bit much.

The Pathfinders Guild had money, certainly, but it wasn't meant to be squandered so carelessly. When they went to other people's banquets or birthday celebrations, they never went empty-handed. There were always gifts and tokens of goodwill.

But Adrian, a man who had more money than sense, couldn't stand being idle without finding an excuse to spend a little. He would never pass up an opportunity to splurge.

What struck Everett as odd was that Adrian usually avoided socializing. However, he had changed today. In the past, when there was a celebration or a joyful event, he would just nod and say a few words, nothing more.

Today was different.

Seizing the opportunity with a bit of a drunken haze, Adrian disregarded any boundaries and grabbed the hand of the Lunar Guild's leader, Isolde Thompson, and said, "I'm planning a trip to the capital tomorrow. Would you care to visit Travis, Alana, and Leah? Bring your apprentices along and come with me, won't you?"

Isolde quickly pulled her hand away, taking up her cutlery to pick up some food to eat. "I don't have the money for travel."

"What are you talking about?" Adrian laughed, clearly tipsy. "I'll cover everything. Do you know of the Glimmering Tower? That place belongs to me. You can eat whatever you want and stay however long you like. They won't take other guests, only you. If you're silent, I'll take that as a yes. Okay, it's settled!" Isolde hadn't even swallowed the food in her mouth, so she couldn't respond. By the time she was about to speak, he had already turned away.

Next, he caught the hand of the leader of Inferno Guild, Conrad Palmer, his tone soft with false concern. "You haven't seen your precious apprentice Violet for so long. Don't you miss her? Why not bring your apprentices and come to the capital with me? I'll cover everything-the food, the entertainment, the fun. All on me."

Afterward, he moved on to the Crystal Bloom Guild's leader. "I've already prepared items to add to Cynthia's trousseau. As for Bun's engagement gift, I've got that sorted too. I was thinking, why don't we just hold their wedding in the capital? Let's all go together. It's settled."

And then there were the Coldmoon Guild, the Sandsworn Order, the Verdantleaf Order, and the Skyblade Circle...

Normally, Adrian drank slowly. He would savor each sip rather than downing them one after another. But tonight was different. He said it was his birthday, and since he was so rarely happy, he wanted to enjoy himself. He drank cup after cup with the guild leaders, clan heads, and manor lords, while hugging them and sharing heartfelt words.

The heartfelt words were simply about how he had admired them for a long time and was so happy to finally gather together.

But, he added, if they all agreed to come with him to the capital, his happiness would be even greater.

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When he first began inviting them to the capital, everyone hesitated. But after the wine had flowed for several rounds, the mood grew lighter. One by one, the men became tipsy, pounding their chests and calling each other brothers. They also declared that if any trouble arose, they were there for each other-no need for formalities.

Adrian kept pulling them in, shouting that when a brother faced hardship, they shared it, and when good fortune came, they shared that too... Though by the end, he was too drunk to remember the rest of the phrase.

But everyone understood the sentiment.

Everett's mind was working furiously. The feast had cost a thousand silver coins, but it had achieved a goal-one that might cost lives.

Still, he believed that no matter how

sharp his own plans were, Adrian's schemes were far better. His plans were so precise that they hit the mark perfectly, and the guild leaders would follow his lead to cheer him on and applaud.

Everett's eyes grew wet. He knew his martial brother well. Over the years, Adrian had become more and more quiet. Whenever he needed something, it was usually just

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gesture or a look, and even

a grunt

seemed like too much effort.

But tonight, Adrian had spoken more than a thousand words. His mouth never stopped, as if he were born

to socialize a smooth-talker who could handle any situation.

After the birthday feast, Adrian grabbed a spittoon and vomited until he was completely out of it. Everett sighed and personally took care of him. "For your little apprentice, you're willing to risk your life and everyone else's, huh?"

Adrian tugged at Everett's sleeve to wipe his mouth, then collapsed to the ground, his head spinning as if it had been twisted by some unseen force.

"Isn't that also what you wanted? The capital's fine, and Rafael can focus on the Southern Frontier without worry. Once the capital is secure, she can lead the Mystic Army to the Southern Frontier and help Rafael." Everett pulled back his sleeve and, with a blank expression, turned away. "I'll go make preparations." "Get my red cannon down the mountain!" Adrian shouted.

His shout only made his throat rasp, and soon, he was retching violently again.