

War Song 1351

Chapter 1351

The Pathfinders Guild was known for its strict selection of apprentices, so Adrian's true apprentices were few-15 in total, including those who had long since left the guild.

The apprentices who left did not betray the guild. Rather, each had their own path to follow.

Adrian was not rigid. He allowed his apprentices to pursue their own desires, as long as their actions did not harm the common people or the innocent.

Only a few days ago, Adrian had sent messages by carrier pigeon to those former apprentices. Now accomplished their own rights, they would all return to the capital at his summons, to assist their youngest martial sister.

There were other apprentices in the guild, but they were not Adrian's personal apprentices. They were, however, called apprentices out of respect. Adrian occasionally gave them guidance, but their martial training was primarily overseen by the guild's two senior martial elders. On rare occasions, Adrian's direct apprentices would step in to help.

They were skilled in martial arts, but since they still had to handle daily chores, they couldn't focus solely on training. As a result, they were far behind those who were personally mentored by Adrian.

They were not part of the elite group Adrian sought. He needed only the finest. That was why he had staged a birthday feast, inviting the leaders of various factions-though, of course, he would owe them a debt of gratitude for honoring him with their presence.

In the martial world, people might boldly swear to fight for loyalty and honor, but they couldn't just accept favors without thinking about what they owed in return.

Everett asked him, "Adrian, you've never involved yourself in court affairs. Why go to such lengths this time? Do you not trust Carissa and the Mystic Army?"

Adrian stood in the weaponry storeroom, planning to select a handy weapon.

"If you were Nicholas," Adrian said, "what would your first move be?"

Everett thought for a moment. "Wait for the right opportunity?"

"The opportunity will come," Adrian replied, choosing a fan before discarding it. "But if I were him, I would first make sure there were no generals left in the capital. With Mystic Army under Cari's command, it will briefly fall apart if you remove her. Just those few days of chaos would be enough for him to succeed."

A cold glint flashed in Everett's eyes. "You think he would kill Carissa?"

Adrian finally chose a sword. Spinning it in a flourish, he turned to Everett. "How do I look? Handsome?" Everett glanced at him. "Trying to charm all the widows of the capital?"

Adrian nodded. "I must avoid being too flamboyant."

Adrian finally chose a six-barreled

firearm-a special design of his own, equipped with a sharp blade. The blade was made of unyielding obsidian ore, designed for dual use, both as a cutting weapon and a firearm. It was efficient and deadly.

The city gates of the capital remained heavily guarded. Though rumors circulated that Gordon might be Nicholas in disguise, the true Nicholas from Nerovia had yet to be exposed, so it remained uncertain. Carissa had been summoned to the palace multiple times.

After several days of deliberation, a consensus had been reached, though anxiety still plagued everyone. The riverworks project was progressing smoothly, and it was an important initiative for the people. But if possible, Salvador hoped to first eliminate the rebels once and for all.

The problem was that the workers were genuinely working on the riverbanks, repairing the infrastructure, and building the foundation dams. How could they be labeled as rebels?

Nicholas' subtle approach was designed to provoke the court into sending military troops. This would give them a reason to rebel against the Mystic Army. By doing this, they wouldn't be seen as rebels, but as poor commoners forced to fight by the government.

This way, they would gain the support of the people.

Salvador urgently pressed his advisors to find a way to force the enemy's hand. Once they were branded

as traitors, he could swiftly launch a crackdown. In other words, it was all about stirring up conflict and gaining the upper hand first.

The court was divided, with some

supporting Salvador's strategy, while others suggested it would be better to delay. On the one hand, the riverworks project was important. On the other, they could wait for Thomas to return to the capital after defeating Yuvan.

Some officials harbored doubts about Carissa's leadership. While she had shown competence in leading the Mystic Army in peacetime, her abilities in war-especially in the capital-remained uncertain. Despite her martial prowess, she lacked experience in large-scale battles. This made some question whether it was too hasty to make her the commander just because she had led a couple of victorious campaigns at the Southern Frontier.

Chapter 1352

For several days, Carissa had attended the court meetings. In doing so, she began to understand the truth behind Jeremiah's words that in matters of state, everyone had their own opinion, each with its own merit. The debates went on endlessly, with no clear direction given.

Arguments were made for and against, yet nothing was resolved.

Carissa felt she could no longer be a part of these discussions. Over the past few days, she had been swept up in the tide of conflicting opinions, unsure of which step to take next.

Moreover, Salvador's health had not improved. He continued to cough persistently, trying to hold his composure despite his weakening body.

Some people took advantage of the situation and suggested it was time to designate the crown prince. It was brought up by a group of young officials, students of Malcolm, who had been won over by Kylie. They had been working hard to support Connor. Seeing Salvador's worsening health and the growing troubles both inside and outside the kingdom, they suggested it was time to settle the matter of the succession sooner rather than later.

Malcolm was livid, his face turning a shade of red with anger. Despite his strong objections in front of Salvador, it only made people think he was trying to retreat strategically or distance himself from the issue.

The whole situation pushed Salvador to the brink of collapse, leaving everyone in a state of chaos and confusion, desperately scrambling to resolve the mess.

Seeking a way to remove herself from the chaos, Carissa made an excuse to focus on military training and withdrew from the court discussions.

She returned to speak with Jacob and Kyle about the matter.

Jacob furrowed his brow and said, "Isn't the queen under house arrest? How can she still be stirring up trouble? If she's making a fuss at a time like this, she's only throwing herself and the Quinton family into danger."

Carissa had little interest in the Quinton family and Kylie, but it was undeniable that what had once been a unified court was now being divided by this issue.

Kyle spoke up. "I have a suspicion. What if the one pushing to name the crown prince now is actually Prince Nicholas? The people the queen has gathered-could they be his people instead? He's always been good at winning people over."

Jacob thought for a moment.

"It wouldn't be surprising. Prince

Connor is mediocre at best. If he's named, His Majesty will surely oppose it, but he hasn't abandoned him either. Now, he has Lord Ryan studying with Prince Connor, and he even brought Mr. Young back to help. It's clear they intend to groom him. But now, with things so urgent, bringing this up could anger His Majesty. If he issues an order to stop the queen's plans, everything the queen has done will be for nothing."

"And it would drag the Quinton family down with her," Kyle added with a sigh used to hear that the queen was a very intelligent and

a

sensible woman. Heget

talented lady was renowned

throughout the capital. But now, in the face of the nation's crisis, all she cares about is naming the crown prince. It seems hunger for power can truly change a person."

Jacob nodded. "Perhaps her reputation was just a facade crafted by the Quinton family. But that's no longer our concern."

The matter of the crown prince would be settled by the court officials, with Salvador and Jeremiah making the final decision. Carissa had no place in such deliberations-her role was to address the situation at hand. All else was secondary.

Winona also sent word from various fronts, updating them on the latest battle reports. Thomas had not launched a direct assault on Valken yet, choosing instead to lay siege and enter negotiations.

The strategy served two purposes. First, it delayed matters, buying time for Chester to swiftly eliminate the bandits and join forces. Second, Thomas feared that cornering the enemy could provoke the indiscriminate slaughter of Valken's citizens, which would only worsen the situation.

Meanwhile, Chester had made remarkable progress. With Valken no longer a concern, his army had surged forward, winning several decisive victories. However, the rebellion had spread across a vast area, reaching even the distant Nanyara region, stretching his forces thin.

On the Southern Frontier, three consecutive victories had been secured. To date, the Sandorian forces had failed to breach Simonton City. These reports came from Winona's network of spies, mixed with rumors of a scandal within the Sandorian camp. It was said that Victor was furious, angrily denouncing the Starhaven people for their lack of honor.

It was almost laughable. After withdrawing previously, the Sandorians had signed a pact promising not to invade. Now, they had the audacity to demand the rebels uphold some kind of honor and open Simonton City's gates to allow them to march in unhindered.

The Southern Frontier's situation wasn't as dire as it seemed. The Sandorians, after all, had traveled from far away, and a prolonged stalemate would strain their resources. Meanwhile, the Southern Frontier had already developed. Crops were plentiful, and the Sandorians simply couldn't sustain a prolonged campaign.

Victor was now in a precarious position and was unable to retreat. It seemed he had made a binding vow when he took command, promising to return victorious or face death upon his return. So, he dug in, unwilling to relent.

Meanwhile, Leroy pressed forward in

Victory Pass with great intensity, but his forces were limited in number. Still, it would be unwise to underestimate him. The king of Westhaven had sent Leroy, and he was driven by a thirst for revenge and the ambition to conquer Victory Pass. His troops fought with fervor, seeing themselves as the righteous army, and their morale was high.

However, Leroy and Edmund had never seen eye to eye, and each had their own agenda. With

Lisandra's balancing influence, Edmund's support for Leroy was limited.

At this moment, the greatest danger lay within the capital itself.

After all, the situation in the capital was still far from clear.

Chapter 1353

News arrived from Nerovia-the imposter posing as Nicholas had been uncovered. It turned out he was just a common man, someone who bore a striking resemblance to Nicholas. After being noticed by Nicholas, he had been taken in and trained to mimic his every move.

After Nicholas left Nerovia, this man had assumed his identity, visiting the places Nicholas was known to frequent. This explained why earlier investigations had suggested that Nicholas rarely left his fief. In reality, he had long since disguised himself and moved about freely.

"Has the man been secured?" Carissa asked quickly.

"Don't worry, he's been taken care of," Jacob replied.

Carissa let out a small sigh of relief. "Good. Prince Nicholas cannot appear in Nerovia again. I've come to understand his intentions. He's been hiding under the guise of Gordon, sending orders from Willowbrook Estate. Everyone would believe that the so-called rebel leader is Prince Hayden. Meanwhile, Prince Nicholas would have been known to be in Nerovia this whole time, never once involved in the rebellion." Jacob nodded. "Yes. If the rebellion fails, it won't concern him. He can even claim righteousness by killing Prince Hayden. If the rebellion succeeds, all of it would have been his to claim."

"Then what of Mr. Murphy? Is he in Nerovia now?" Carissa asked.

Jacob shook his head. "Mr. Murphy isn't in Nerovia. He's likely taken control of most of Prince Yuvan's forces. I've already sent word to General Farrell. Even if Prince Yuvan surrenders, we must remain cautious. There could be a trap."

Carissa recognized Clifford's cunning, but she knew Thomas was facing challenges of his own. She turned to Jacob and said, "Shouldn't you consider going to General Farrell's aid?"

"No," Jacob refused firmly. "The siege at Valken is critical. Even if Mr. Murphy is manipulating Prince Yuvan's feigned surrender, General Farrell will be prepared. The capital, however, is our primary concern. Their end goal is to force a palace coup. I cannot leave."

"Then please keep an eye on the situation and send a carrier pigeon to General Farrell immediately," Carissa said.

"Of course," Jacob agreed. "But do be cautious during your patrols, Your Grace. Prince Nicholas hasn't made a move yet, but his silence is unsettling. I fear he may be planning something-especially against you."

"Don't worry, I will," Carissa assured him.

She had already considered this possibility, which was why she seldom joined the patrols, only going out when necessary.

Carissa knew that absolute safety was impossible, but she also knew that caution was crucial.

Lately, Violet had been accompanying her whenever she ventured out, never allowing her to be alone. Carissa had stopped going to both the workshop and the women's academy, fearing that her presence might attract trouble.

For safety's sake, Cynthia and Bun took on the task of overseeing the academy. It wasn't only to teach the students martial arts but also to keep an eye out for any disturbances.

As for the workshop, with Alana and Leah there, there were no major concerns.

On the other hand, Michael had been watching the city gates closely, scrutinizing everyone who entered. Recently, there had been some forged documents circulating, and once the gate guards slack off, it was easy for people to slip past.

In the past few days, Michael had

noticed several martial artists entering the city. While this wasn't unusual, they typically avoided confrontation with the gate guards. So, a simple document check was all that was needed to allow them entry. But now, he would personally question anyone dressed as a

martial artist.

Just today, for example, there had been a group with an air of arrogance. To be precise, only one person was arrogant—a middle-aged scholar, with a silk scarf. His beard was meticulously groomed, each strand combed with care, and his demeanor was cold and aloof. When asked for his papers, he ignored the question. He didn't even bother to meet Michael's gaze, as if Michael wasn't even worth a glance.

Fortunately, one of the men with him quickly explained that they were from a household registered in the capital, presenting their residence papers as proof. He kept apologizing and bowing, trying to smooth over the situation.

The group didn't look like typical

martial artists, nor did they seem to be merchants. They resembled wealthy travelers, more likely aristocrats on a journey. Michael felt they looked familiar, but he couldn't place their names.

Looking at their address, which was in one of the wealthier districts of the capital, he guessed his suspicion was probably right.

After checking their documents and confirming there were no issues, Michael allowed them to pass.

Chapter 1354

After the group entered the city, Michael was momentarily distracted by another merchant caravan arriving at the gates. He made sure to inspect them thoroughly, confirming that there were no issues before allowing them to pass.

As he turned back, he noticed the merchant caravan was following closely behind the group he had just checked. Among them, a familiar figure caught his eye-a figure whose silhouette seemed unmistakable. It resembled Carissa's martial uncle from the Pathfinders Guild.

The man's name was Everett, if Michael recalled correctly. But then again, the face didn't match. He thought about it for a moment, but the resemblance was only in the figure. The features-absolutely not. Still, Michael felt uneasy and decided it was worth investigating further.

He instructed a few men to follow the caravan and watch for any unusual activity. An hour later, they reported back that the group had settled in a manor on Eastland Avenue. That area was known for being home to powerful lords and nobility. Even a wealthy merchant couldn't easily buy property there. After having his men check, Michael discovered that the house had once belonged to a distant royal relative, an honorary prince from a different family. The place had been vacant for some time, with no one living there. It was rumored that the former owner had moved away years ago.

Though nothing seemed to connect them directly to anything suspicious, Michael couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. He tried to put it out of his mind, but found himself unable to. His thoughts felt muddled, and he realized how exhausted he was. Days of endless checks and duties had left him with a foggy mind, crammed with information he could hardly keep track of anymore.

"That manor is next to Willowbrook Estate," one of his men mentioned.

Michael's eyes narrowed immediately. "Keep an eye on it. Or better yet, pay them a visit."

He recalled Carissa's advice anyone connected to Willowbrook Estate should be watched carefully.

Later that evening, after further inquiry, it was confirmed that the manor did indeed belong to the distant royal family's heir. After losing the hereditary title, he had been doing business outside. With the chaos in the outside world, he decided to return to the capital for a while to hide.

Michael recalled the goods he had seen when checking the merchant caravan earlier-rich silks and jewels. It seemed they were returning with their treasures to seek refuge in the city.

A quiet sigh escaped him. The outside world was in chaos, and while the capital appeared safe, it was hardly peaceful. Only the outsiders remained unaware of the brewing trouble.

Given that nothing alarming had come up, Michael didn't report the matter to Carissa.

Meanwhile, inside Russell Estate, the caravan unloaded their goods. Beneath the silks and treasures, hidden in secret compartments within each chest, lay their true cargo-hidden weapons.

The estate had been abandoned for

so long that weeds had overtaken the yard, and the furniture was covered layers of dust. They hadn't yet removed their disguises, their faces still hidden beneath the false beards they wore to blend in.

They weren't hiding from Michael, but Nicholas' men.

SV

The apprentices moved around, clearing the place out, while Adrian and Everett took a seat.

Everett spoke first. "Why not just stay at Hell Monarch Estate? This place is a ruin-everything needs to be replaced, from food to furnishings."

Adrian's fingers brushed over his false beard as he settled into his seat with an air of quiet dignity. "One's doghouse is still better than someone else's gilded palace," he replied smoothly. "Besides, we're here to stay hidden in the capital. Staying at Hell Monarch Estate would make us too obvious, don't you think?"

Nicholas must have a hidden, mysterious force working behind the scenes. If he had one, then Carissa needed one too. She might lose in other ways, but she couldn't afford to lose her imposing presence in the capital.

"But the city's gate guards seem utterly incompetent," Adrian muttered, a frown creasing his brow. "We have so many chests with secret compartments, yet he couldn't find them. His name's Michael Brown, right?"

Everett nodded. "Yes, that's him. He's with the Capital Guard."

"This is dangerous," Adrian continued, still displeased. "One small slip-up could mean disaster for all of us. He's inexperienced. Does she have anyone competent around her?"

Everett gave him a side glance. "It depends on your standard. By your measure, there's no one fit for the task. Even Kyle wouldn't be good enough."

Adrian's expression soured. "You can't be serious. Kyle's capable enough. He's better than Rafael, at least."

"Nonsense! Who can compare to

Rafael?" Everett snapped, his temper flaring. "But this isn't about who's

stronger right now. Since she

doesn't have reliable people by her side, we'll just have to put in the extra effort. Once the guild leaders and clan heads arrive in the capital, we'll take turns keeping watch."

"Alright, we'll do it your way. They should all be arriving within the next day or two, Adrian said, pausing briefly before giving his orders. "Have the Skywing Spire members all entered the capital yet? Tell them to keep an eye on the riverworks and Willowbrook Estate. If there's the slightest sign of movement, report back immediately."

Chapter 1355

-

Adrian had also brought a cannon with him, though it had to remain outside the city for now. It couldn't be transported in just yet. This cannon, an improvement on the red canon of Nerathia, was the same one that had destroyed Everett's courtyard back then.

In a few days, nearly all the martial factions that had been invited to Adrian's birthday banquet would arrive, each disguised in various ways. Knowing that martial artists would be thoroughly questioned at the city gates, they all decided to change their appearances completely.

Adrian had specifically chosen people from Coldmoon Guild to keep watch at the Capital Guard headquarters and Hell Monarch Estate in shifts.

There was a reason for this. The people from Coldmoon Guild rarely moved within the martial world, and they seldom visited the capital. Nicholas' men likely had never encountered them, which made them perfect for keeping Carissa safe without drawing suspicion.

Adrian was certain that Nicholas' next move would be to target Carissa's life. His predictions had always been accurate-aside from the rare misstep.

At the Glimmering Tower, Adrian hosted a banquet, offering food and drink to all. The serious discussions, of course, would take place privately.

"We won't concern ourselves with anything else for now," he began, addressing those at the table. "First, we must ensure the safety of my apprentice. As for what happens next, we'll just have to wait and see." He knew the martial world had little interest in getting involved with the royal court's affairs. He wasn't eager to do so either, but when he had taken on such a restless apprentice, he had no choice but to deal with it.

Carissa had no idea that she was being carefully protected by her mentor's people. She moved daily between the Hell Monarch Estate and the Capital Guard, occasionally visiting the palace.

The issue of the crown prince still stirred unrest in the court. Salvador had already issued orders to punish several individuals, even reprimanding the Quinton family. Despite these efforts, there were still those who repeatedly brought up the matter.

At this critical juncture, Salvador and the court ministers were inevitably distracted, especially as some ministers, influenced by the situation, began to emphasize the importance of the kingdom's succession. A few irrational individuals even stepped forward in support of naming Connor the crown prince.

Davis was frantic and agitated, stomping all the way to the Capital Guard headquarters and shouting at Carissa, "The kingdom's succession is important, but isn't the current crisis even more pressing?!" Carissa understood his frustration and responded calmly, "We've been discussing it for so long without resolution. Let them continue arguing among themselves. Let them shout all they want. We should stay steady in our resolve."

Davis sighed. "I worry, though. His Majesty's health is poor. If he gets angry now and is forced to name Crown Prince, there will

Connor as

be whispers about his incompetence and arrogance. Those who plot against us will claim that His Majesty is senile, and then they will have a reason to act."

"His Majesty won't name a crown prince at this time," Carissa said. "His health is failing, and if he rushes to name one, it would be

tantamount to admitting... Well, net

won't speak those treasonous words. Regardless, you

On't need to

be too concerned, Mr. Lloyd."

Davis was a man of action. After venting his frustrations, he headed straight to the armory to oversee the progress.

Isaac had taken to living and working at the Ministry of Defense. He often said he didn't know much, yet when it came time to roll up his sleeves, he seemed to know just what to do.

The afternoons had been marked by sudden downpours lately, with floodwaters rising. The riverworks project was nearing completion. The reservoir was finished, and the last stretch of the foundation dam was almost done.

This was the most crucial part, as the final section of the dam had been badly damaged for some time. During an inspection, the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Waterworks Department had agreed that the dam could break under the pressure if the waters rose too much.

Edwin had originally planned to begin repairs here, but given the extent of the damage across the entire dam, it had been decided to overhaul the entire structure from the ground up.

The riverworks project was nearing its conclusion, but the rain made it difficult to work, and the workers were growing restless. Cameron had spent the last few days calming their spirits, and he had reported the situation to Edwin.

Edwin had come out in person, umbrella in hand, to reassure the workers that the project would wrap up in less than ten days. A quick finish meant they could return home sooner.

Among the workers were actual conscripted laborers and hired hands, and it was them who were causing the real trouble-though, of course, there were people behind the scenes stirring things up.

Thanks to Cameron's efforts, the actual conscripted laborers were filled with resentment toward the court as well.

Edwin's presence had done little to ease the tension. That was because someone had already told the workers that the court would send someone to say a few empty words, all to get them to work through the rain.

As a result, rather than calming the workers, Edwin's visit only fueled their anger.

Chapter 1356

By evening, tensions finally erupted.

The Waterworks Department had stationed soldiers to oversee the workers, ensuring work continued on schedule. Yesterday's heavy rain had halted all progress, but with today's rare overcast skies and no rain, Cameron ordered the workers to make up for lost time. In fact, he demanded they finish the project three days ahead of schedule.

The workers were already agitated, and they refused. Tempers flared, and heated arguments broke out between them and the Waterworks Department officials.

In a fit of rage, Cameron picked up a club and struck one of the workers.

That single blow ignited an uncontrollable fury among the workers. Over a hundred men turned on the officials, attacking them in a chaotic melee.

Fortunately, Carissa had already stationed people nearby to keep an eye on the situation. Word was immediately sent to Max.

Max was wary, suspecting this might be a calculated ploy by Nicholas. However, based on their investigation, not all the workers were connected to Nicholas. The group causing trouble appeared to be ordinary workers who had been provoked.

Balancing caution with urgency, Max led a group to intervene and break up the fight while also sending someone to report the situation to Carissa.

Carissa watched the daylight wane and knew the city would soon enforce the nighttime curfew. If the unrest continued into the night, it would be the perfect opportunity for Nicholas' people to exploit the chaos.

Without hesitation, she ordered Michael to lead the Capital Guard to the site and sent a message to Edwin, instructing him to recall Cameron immediately and place him under temporary custody.

"This is clearly Cameron's doing," Violet said with a frown. "I can't imagine what he's trying to achieve." Carissa's expression darkened. "Perhaps Prince Nicholas is growing impatient. Or maybe this is a trap to draw me out."

Violet glanced at her, worry etched in her features. "Then let's stay at the Capital Guard headquarters tonight. We won't return to the estate."

Carissa's mind worked quickly. "If they fail to draw me out, they might come here instead. With all these workers causing trouble, we need to send people out. We can't pull guards from every checkpoint, so we'll have to send those nearby or from the Capital Guard."

She had anticipated this possibility and had discussed it at length with Jacob and Kyle.

But the reality remained: skilled fighters were in short supply, and there were too many critical locations to protect. Hiding in Hell Monarch Estate forever wasn't an option. Whatever would come, Carissa was ready to face it.

Violet's grip tightened on her sword hilt, her eyes steeling. "Then let them come. At least we'll stop wondering when they'll make their move. It's just a shame Cynthia, Bun, and Rod aren't here-we could've fought them together."

Carissa held her Rose Spear and ran a cloth over its sharpened tip. "It's just speculation for now. Don't let your guard down. But if something does happen, your first priority is to leave and get reinforcements. Don't try to fight them off on your own."

Violet glanced at the dimming sky, her expression uneasy. She turned back to Carissa and said firmly, "I'll stay and fight. You should go and find reinforcements. It's the same either way."

The wind howled through the city, and the darkened sky seemed poised to burst into a storm. It was hard to tell if it was the approaching twilight or the prelude to torrential rain.

Suddenly, the distant thunder of hoofbeats broke through the gloom, growing louder and more chaotic by the second.

The two women exchanged a quick glance and stepped outside. A Capital Guard officer hurried toward them. "Commander Sinclair, it's Mr. York and Mr. Spencer."

Carissa and Violet exhaled in relief and strode to the gate to greet them.

Three figures dismounted at the

cel.ne

entrance, handing off their reins and riding crops to a waiting guard. Jacob, Kyle, and Travis entered briskly, their clothes fitted for movement, ideal for combat. Each carried weapons, their attire dusty and windswept from a hard ride.

Jacob's hair was slightly disheveled, evidence of the speed with which they had traveled. He looked at Carissa and said, "We heard about the unrest at the riverbank. We feared those causing trouble might have ulterior motives, so we came to meet you."

Kyle stepped forward, his tone calm and reassuring. "Don't worry. The five of us together can handle anything. No matter how difficult it gets, we'll fight our way out."

Carissa felt a wave of warmth rise in her chest.

They must have been worried about her lately, huh?

She nodded firmly and smiled at them. "All right. If no assassins come tonight, we'll drink and feast. But if they do show up, we'll give them the fight of their lives."

They moved into the main hall. The Capital Guard headquarters had its own kitchen, and Carissa ordered the cooks to prepare a meal as it was about time for dinner.

By about 11 in the evening, rain began to fall.

It wasn't heavy, just a persistent

drizzle that seeped into everything and grated on the nerves. A messenger arrived from Michael, reporting that the unrest at the river

was escalating. The number of rioters had grown, and they were becoming harder to control. Michael had already sent requests for reinforcements to the Royal Citadel and the Supreme Court.

Violet was restless and frustrated. She wanted to go out and check. But the thought of assassins potentially targeting Carissa stopped her, and she sank back into her chair.

"Do you think they'll act tonight?" she asked.

Jacob shook his head. "No. If they act tonight, it'll be a wasted effort. They wouldn't stand a chance."

The Mystic Army had fortified every critical checkpoint in the city. Even if Nicholas' forces attempted a coup, they wouldn't make it past Royal Street.

So tonight, they were likely just trying to stir up more conflict-either to create an excuse for future action or perhaps to target Carissa.

Chapter 1357

The damp, oppressive heat of summer seemed to weigh heavily on the spirit, stoking an inexplicable irritation in the air.

Hayden, clearly affected by the weather, barely touched his dinner. After a few cursory bites, he set his cutlery down and announced that he was heading back to the study to practice his calligraphy to clear his mind. He gestured for Chaya to follow, and the two left the room.

Before departing, Chaya made sure to take two heaping plates of snacks with her. After all, she wasn't about to let herself go hungry.

Nicholas, still in his Gordon disguise, watched Hayden leave but made no move to stop him. It didn't matter where Hayden went-his every step was being monitored. Besides, Nicholas had far more pressing matters to attend to tonight.

Back in his room, Nicholas locked the door behind him and methodically prepared for the night's mission. He changed into his stealth attire, then sat before a mirror. Opening a small wooden box on the table, he revealed an array of lifelike facial masks.

Carefully, he peeled off the current disguise from his face and selected a new one from the box. The masks were marvels of craftsmanship, fitting so seamlessly that even close inspection wouldn't reveal their artificiality.

Though he would later conceal his face with a black cloth, Nicholas meticulously blended the edges of the mask at his jaw and neck with pigments that matched the mask's tone. Even if the cloth were removed in a struggle, no one would detect his true identity.

A knock at the door broke the silence. Nicholas covered his face with the black cloth and called out, "Come in."

The door opened and a shadowy figure slipped inside, his movements silent and ghost-like.

The figure whispered, "Your Highness, Kyle and Jacob have taken Travis to the Capital Guard headquarters. It seems they're aware that we plan to act tonight."

"It's fine." Nicholas' voice had changed-it was no longer Gordon's voice. Though he spoke softly, his words were full of confidence and authority.

"Understood. When shall we depart? And how many men will you need?"

"Not yet," Nicholas said, closing the wooden box with deliberate care and rising to his feet.

He selected a sword from a rack near the wall, its blade gleaming faintly in the dim light.

"Even if Adrian himself shows up, he's no match for me. A handful of minor players are nothing but a nuisance."

As he adjusted his weapon, a thought occurred to him. He turned to the figure. "What about the people staying in Russell Estate next door? Have they been thoroughly investigated?"

The shadowy figure nodded.

ieu?

que

"Yes, Your Highness. They're indeed descendants of the Russell family, but they're a collateral branch, not direct heirs. They've been living in Jinshire, trading goods. They returned to the capital recently to disturbances caused by bandits. When they arrived, they had to break the lock on the door to enter the residence. Over the past few days, they've rarely left the property. When they do, it's only to purchase food and basic supplies."

Russell Estate was right next door, so investigating was easy. When the door to the estate opened, Nicholas felt a weight in his chest and ordered someone to inquire.

Nicholas nodded. "Even if Adrian were to return in person, he certainly wouldn't choose to stay in Russell Estate.

The Russell family, once held in high regard, had suffered setbacks years ago and grown disillusioned with the court. Adrian, in particular, had long avoided associating with the children of nobles or officials, with Carissa being the lone exception.

Now, the Russell family's glory days were a distant memory. They were no longer considered royal kin, and the once-proud plaque declaring their residence a royal estate had been removed. What remained was a dilapidated property, a shadow of its former grandeur.

When Nicholas had returned to the capital, curiosity led him to sneak into the estate. Inside, he found nothing but overgrown weeds and neglect. The desolation was telling Adrian loathed the place so deeply that he hadn't even bothered to assign anyone to maintain it.

If Adrian were in the city, Nicholas surmised, he would sooner stay at the Glimmering Tower or the Hell

Monarch Estate than set foot in that decaying estate.

One of his Shadow Guards interrupted his thoughts, asking when they should strike.

Nicholas replied, "With so much

chaos tonight, they'll be on high

alert. The early hours of the morning is when even the strongest willpower falters and they're most likely to feel drowsy-some time between three to five. That will be

the ideal time for the assassination."

He waved a hand. "Get some rest for now."

As the shadow guard bowed and left, Nicholas added, "Keep eyes on those staying in Russell Estate. Report any movement."

Even though he felt confident in his plans, Nicholas wasn't one to take chances.

Killing Carissa was a critical step. She might not have been a tactical genius on the battlefield, but she was Hector's daughter, Rafael's princess consort, and the commander of the Mystic Army. She was the backbone of the army.

If Carissa fell, the Mystic Army would lose its anchor. Even if a new leader stepped in immediately, the disruption would buy Nicholas the crucial days he needed.

At the Capital Guard headquarters, the atmosphere was far more relaxed. In the main hall, several mats were laid out on the floor for the group to rest. One person stood watch while the others sprawled out, snoring softly.

The watch shifts rotated every hour. It was unwise for anyone to stay awake the entire night, especially when the timing of the assassins' arrival-if they came at all-remained uncertain.

Still, the group was well-trained. Having mastered inner force techniques, their senses were finely attuned to danger. Even in the deepest sleep, the slightest hint of a threat-be it the whisper of footsteps or a draft from an opened door-would jolt them awake.

Chapter 1358

By the early hours of the morning, the rain had lessened to a gentle drizzle, leaving the air cooler and the night more serene. The quiet respite lulled many into a deeper, more peaceful sleep.

Seven or eight shadowy figures darted through the curfewed city, their movements light and swift. They barely left a trace as they touched down on rooftops, their steps silent.

They arrived at the Capital Guard headquarters. The outer guards had already retreated for the night, leaving only Carissa and her companions waiting in the main hall, tense and alert.

With a quick exchange of glances, the group gripped their weapons.

The assassins had arrived!

The dim light of the hall flickered, and as the black-clad figures descended, a gust of wind extinguished the lamps. Darkness enveloped the room, plunging it into an impenetrable black where even an outstretched hand became invisible.

Amid the darkness, the faint sound of breathing and the subtle rhythm of movements became the only clues to the assassins' positions.

Nicholas led the charge, his inner force leagues ahead of the others. His sword moved with deadly precision, cutting through the air in a sharp arc toward Carissa's neck.

Carissa leaped, her foot landing on the flat of the blade as she evaded the attack. Twisting midair, she landed gracefully, her Rose Spear sweeping forward to clear the immediate danger. Guided by instinct and the faint scent of Violet's presence, she moved to stand back-to-back with her, their weapons raised to meet the incoming assault.

The battle in the pitch-black night was intense, with only the sounds of blades, spears, and swords clashing.

Carissa and the others felt a heavy weight in their hearts. When experts fought, just a few moves could reveal each other's skill level. These people were highly skilled, especially the one who kept attacking Carissa, whose abilities seemed to be beyond measure.

The realization struck the group like a cold wind: Nicholas himself was likely among the attackers. If they could take him down, it would be a monumental victory.

However, before the battle reached its peak, they had already taken turns getting injured, and they hadn't even exchanged a hundred moves yet. Everyone was shocked.

Forget capturing Nicholas just surviving the fight would already be considered a blessing!

Thankfully, they had strong resolve. Any other group would have crumbled by now.

Huddled together, they fought as a unit, minimizing the risk of being separated in the chaotic darkness. Their eyes began to adjust, faintly discerning shadows. The occasional glint of the sword guided their movements, helping them narrowly avoid lethal blows.

Carissa's Rose Spear, a custom-made weapon, had an adjustable length. She retracted it, ready to extend it in a sudden thrust aimed at her opponent's heart if an opening presented itself.

Yet, the opportunity never came. Her opponent's strikes were relentless and airtight, forcing her into a desperate defense. Every move she made was a struggle, leaving no room to counterattack.

Compared to their struggles, Nicholas and his group moved with ease. However, they didn't slow their attack or mock them-their only goal was to quickly take them down.

In fact, Nicholas was somewhat surprised. He had expected Carissa to fall within fifty moves. Yet here e they were, over a hundred moves in, and she had sustained only minor injuries. It seemed Adrian's training had been more thorough than he had anticipated.

-

Still, taking them down wouldn't be difficult. Nicholas had chosen to lead this mission personally to ensure there would be no unforeseen complications.

Refocusing his efforts, he aimed all

his strikes at Carissa's vital points, seeking to end her with one decisive blow. His relentless targeting of her neck and heart, while ignoring her limbs, allowed her to move more freely in defense. She used this to her advantage, narrowly escaping several deadly attacks.

What was already a difficult defense became even harder. Among everyone present, Carissa and Kyle had the best martial skills. With several people already wounded, continuing the fight would only lead to certain death.

But the enemy's attacks were relentless, leaving them no room to escape, forcing them to face the battle head-on.

Just as Nicholas and his men headed towards the Capital Guard headquarters, someone from the nearby Russell Estate had already infiltrated Willowbrook Estate. They pushed open the door to Hayden's room. The Shadow Guard swiftly appeared, and the tip of a sword pierced through the guard's flesh. After a muffled grunt, blood began to pour out.

A small brocade box flew over and landed in front of Hayden.

In return, Hayden threw his emblem towards the man. "Go. Quickly!"

Adrian nodded. "Thank you!"

Without further delay, Adrian disappeared into the night. The token was entrusted to Everett, who was to head for Nerovia at first light. Adrian himself, armed with a six-barreled matchlock, set off for the Capital Guard headquarters.

Hayden glanced down at the body, now sprawled lifeless on his floor. The man was one of the Shadow Guards who had monitored his every move.

Chaya stepped forward, pulling a cloth over the corpse. She picked up the fallen sword and looked at Hayden, her voice low and steady. "Is it time?"

Hayden shook his head. "Not yet."

"They'll act tonight," Chaya said,

resting the blade against her neck, testing for the spot where it would cut quickest. "If we don't die now, it's only a matter of time before we're tortured to death-or worse, paraded as a puppet king, carrying the infamy of a traitor and usurper."

Chapter 1359

Hayden gestured for her to lower the sword. "Not tonight. Neither side is ready."

Chaya frowned, confused. "Why? Didn't you say Mr. Russell was formidable? If he's taking action, surely he can capture Prince Nicholas?"

"He won't capture him," Hayden replied, rubbing his temples. "General Farrell has Valken surrounded, but he hasn't launched an attack because he knows Mr. Murphy has already undermined Prince Yuvan's authority.

"A portion of Valken's population has joined the so-called rebel forces. If the capital falls now, the officials

in Valken and Nerovia will find an excuse, under the court's banner, to slaughter the townsfolk. That would spark even larger uprisings. That's why Lady Carissa can't act prematurely.

Chaya hastily tossed the sword aside. "And why isn't it the right time for Prince Nicholas, then?"

"It's simple," Hayden said. "He needs Mr. Murphy to first defeat General Farrell in a decisive victory. Once General Farrell is dealt with, he'll move on to General Murray, ensuring he can't return to the capital to defend the king. Once that's done, Nicholas will be able to solidify control over the capital."

Hayden knew Nicholas' plan.

"After that, he'll send assassins to eliminate the Hell Monarch, General Sullivan, and the young men of the Sullivan family. He won't concern himself with the wars at the Southern Frontier or Victory Pass-those can be managed. He'll even cede a few cities and pull back 15 miles along the Victory Pass border to force a truce. That's all it'll take to secure peace."

Hayden smiled bitterly.

"He sounds like a gentle, virtuous man, right? But his heart is more ruthless than anyone's. Those who follow him live, while those who oppose him die. If anyone speaks against him, he'll use my name to carry out a bloody purge, then get rid of me and ascend the throne. He'll lower taxes, show kindness to the people, and earn the reputation of a benevolent ruler, all without any fault on his part."

Chaya had thought Nicholas only wanted Hayden as a puppet king, to bear the weight of the people's hatred. But now, it seemed he was also a tool for carrying out unspeakable atrocities.

"Then what are you waiting for?" Chaya didn't understand. Either way, it was death.

Hayden's gaze turned steely, his grip tightening around the ornate box Adrian had given him earlier. "Because I want to see him fail. I want to look him in the eye and ask if he regrets it."

"And if he succeeds?" Chaya asked softly.

He lifted the small brocade box in his hand and opened it with a snap. Inside was a pill. "If he succeeds, I won't become a puppet king. He'll have to ascend the throne himself. That way, he won't be able to threaten me again with the massacre of Nerovia's people."

Chaya looked at the pill in the box, then smiled as she pulled out her hairpin. "This hairpin is quite sharp. If you go, I'll go with you."

Hayden sighed and didn't try to persuade her anymore. Fortunately, he had been able to make contact with Adrian. It was Adrian who had kidnapped Sonny and then disguised himself to appear as Sonny before him.

When he went to relieve himself,

they reached a mutual

understanding. Adrian gave him poison, and in return, he gave Adrian his emblem. The emblem was Hayden's, and it allowed whoever held it to act in his name. They could seal off Nerovia and dismiss or imprison corrupt officials.

This authority had been a privilege granted by Augustus himself. In his territory, Hayden had the right to appoint or dismiss officials as he pleased. It was this power that Nicholas once wielded to replace all the officials in Nerovia with his own men.

At that time, it was also because of this that Salvador ordered Hayden to return to the capital, which worked out since he also wanted to go back.

-

Hayden called for Sonny to bury the Shadow Guard's body under a tree in the backyard.

Tonight, all these ghostly figures were active. Of course, the capital wasn't the only place with them; there were others stationed elsewhere.

At the Capital Guard headquarters, Carissa and her group were riddled with injuries. Thankfully, the hidden weapon in her wrist bracelet had saved her from two fatal strikes.

Just as it seemed they couldn't hold on any longer, a figure darted into the courtyard. Moving with the speed of a phantom, the newcomer's six-barreled matchlock deflected Nicholas' blade that was about to pierce Carissa's chest.

With a loud clang, sparks flew.

Nicholas felt a sharp numbness in

his palm. In the darkness, he

couldn't

make out who the newcomer was, but the ferocity of the newcomer's attack was undeniable. The newcomer's swift and forceful strikes left him barely able to catch his breath after just a few moves.

Carissa seized the chance to break free and quickly moved to aid her comrades. With Nicholas no longer

focusing on her, their group's situation shifted dramatically.

Kyle and Carissa both recognized who had arrived, and their confidence soared. What had been a desperate struggle to stay alive now became an even match.

Their movements became fluid, their attacks more decisive. The tide turned, and the black-clad assailants began to falter under the relentless counterattack.

Nicholas and his men had initially

fought with the intent to end it in one decisive strike, but now, the tables had turned. Worse still, they couldn't predict who else might arrive if they prolonged the fight. The prospect of losing not only Carissa's head but also their own lives became increasingly likely.

Reluctant as he was, Nicholas had no choice but to grit his teeth and order, "Retreat!"

Chapter 1360

The black-clad assailants' Lightfoot Skills were extraordinary, and they scattered in all directions. Adrian could have pursued one of them, but catching all of them was impossible.

However, he chose not to pursue anyone at all. Emerging from the shadows, his hand darted out and grabbed Carissa by the ear, twisting it until she yelped in pain.

"So bold of you, wasn't it? To engage without proper defenses? Do you think you're invincible? Haven't you heard the saying that there's always someone stronger out there?"

Carissa shrieked and flailed in protest as the lamps were lit by Jacob, illuminating the courtyard and revealing the bloodstains on everyone's bodies.

Only then did Adrian notice the wounds on Carissa. Yet instead of softening, his grip on her ear tightened, and he hissed, "You couldn't guess what Nicholas was planning? And you didn't think to write for

reinforcements from Meadow Ridge? Are you so arrogant now that you've forgotten basic caution? Just wait until your martial uncle arrives-you'll regret it!"

It was the first time Adrian had ever been so furious with Carissa. No matter how much trouble she caused when she was younger, he would always bow, offer gifts, and apologize on her behalf. Now, it was Carissa's turn to bow and beg for forgiveness.

"I know I was wrong! I know I was wrong! Please forgive me, Sage Adrian!"

Adrian kicked her on a spot with no blood-right on the knee. He didn't use much force, but to Kyle and the others, it looked harsh.

None of them dared to speak up. It was Jacob who finally stepped forward, bowing as he tried to mediate. "Sage Adrian, perhaps we should tend to their injuries first? There will be time to reprimand her later." Seeing the injuries on Carissa and Kyle, Adrian's heart softened, and he set aside his anger. "Go treat your injuries! Don't tell me the Capital Guard headquarters doesn't even have basic medical supplies stocked."

"We do! We do!" Carissa hurried to assure him, her eyes still shimmering with a wet, puppy-like gaze. She had clearly missed her mentor dearly.

The group dispersed to tend to their injuries. As Violet helped Carissa wrap her wounds, she whispered, "I've never seen your mentor scold you like that before."

Carissa stretched out her arm to reveal two sword cuts. Thankfully, neither had reached the bone. She smiled and said, "He's only strict because he cares about me."

Violet tightened a bandage. "If my mentor cared about me like that, I'd cry."

Once Violet had finished with Carissa's bandages, it was Carissa's turn to help Violet. The latter had taken a sword to her shoulder and a shallow cut to her waist, but the most serious injury was to her calf. Fortunately, her soft armor had shielded her torso from any deadly blows.

"How'd you end up with a cut on your calf?" Carissa asked.

"I kicked one of those thugs away, but I wasn't expecting another one to swing at me. I couldn't dodge in time, so I got nicked. It's just a flesh wound, nothing serious," Violet explained.

She paused, then added, "Oh, and I got hit on the back. Probably with a metal rod-it hurt, but it didn't leave a cut. Just bruised me good."

Meanwhile, Kyle, Jacob, and Travis were gathered in another corner, tending to their wounds.

For Jacob, it was his first time witnessing Adrian's martial prowess, and he was completely stunned. If not for Travis applying the bandages with excessive force, Jacob might still have been lost in his awe.

All three were injured to varying

degrees, though Travis seemed to have fared the worst. For some reason, whenever a fight broke out, he became a magnet for

elmet

aggression-everyone seemed eager to land a hit on him.

Once their wounds were treated, Carissa leaned against her mentor. Though she wasn't as playful as usual, she still acted more sweet and carefree than compared to her usual self as Commander Sinclair. "When did you get here, Sage Adrian? How come I didn't know? I've had people stationed at the city gates every day."

By now, Adrian had already removed his disguise. But even if he hadn't, both Kyle and Carissa would've recognized his voice.

"The guards at your city gates couldn't even detect the weapons I smuggled in. Is this the caliber of soldiers under your command?"

Carissa's eyes widened. "No way! They didn't catch the weapons?"

She had issued strict orders prohibiting the transport of weapons into the city. Even martial artists were required to leave their weapons at the gates for safekeeping.

What was Michael doing? Hadn't he enforced the inspections?

Adrian shook his head and sighed deeply. "If I hadn't come, do you really think you'd have succeeded in this?"

"Thank goodness you showed up

when you did! Otherwise, we

Care

wouldn't have escaped unscathed, Carissa shivered at the thought tonight's brutal battle. She had known their opponents were skilled, but hadn't anticipated just how formidable they were.

"I've been here for a while," Adrian said casually, sipping the coffee Jacob had brewed despite his injuries. "I've been keeping an eye on them. How else do you think I knew they were making a move tonight?"

He set his cup down and added, "It's not entirely your fault. Nicholas has hidden himself well. Over the years, he's probably sought guidance from countless masters and combined the best of their teachings. For all we know, he may have disguised himself and joined our guild at some point."

"The one who came tonight-it was him, wasn't it?" Kyle asked.

"Yes, it was him." Adrian frowned and glanced at him. "I was counting on you to protect your martial sister, yet look at you-so useless."

Kyle immediately lowered his head, feeling embarrassed. "I lack skill and couldn't protect Cari well. Please don't tell Sage Everett."

Adrian waved a hand dismissively. "Actually, I was about to say, don't mention any of this to your martial uncle. The last thing we need is him finding out you fought like a bunch of amateurs."

Everyone looked pale and embarrassed.