

War Song 1361

Chapter 1361

As dawn broke, Adrian led them to the Glimmering Tower.

It was then that Carissa realized they weren't the only ones who had arrived many guild leaders and elders were present as well. Even Violet and Bun's mentor had come.

When Violet spotted her mentor Conrad, she gasped in surprise and rushed toward him. "Sage Conrad, what brings you here? You didn't even send word beforehand!"

Conrad smiled warmly as he looked at his beloved apprentice, indulgence in his voice. "I heard you were guarding the capital. Naturally, I had to come and lend you a hand."

"Sage Conrad, you're too kind. I'll get another villa for you once we're done here," Violet said, linking her arm with his, grinning widely.

Conrad scowled lightly, feigning annoyance. "Why would I need more villas from you? No more, I tell you. However, I did hear about a hot spring at Solitude Peak. I thought of buying it, so your fellow apprentices can soak and strengthen their bodies."

Violet nodded enthusiastically. "I'll buy it!"

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Everyone looked at Conrad with envious eyes. Most mentors fed and clothed their apprentices, sometimes even providing them with fine weapons.

But Conrad? He was living a life off his apprentice's generosity.

And he was doing so with such shameless ease!

As the morning light filtered through the windows, Hayden stepped out of his study. Having stayed up all night, his face looked worn and tired-after all, he was getting older and couldn't handle

sleepless nights. Seeing "Gordon" still standing guard at the door, he let out a short laugh. "Returned defeated, I see." Gordon lowered his gaze. "Your Highness, will you be heading out today?"

"No, go back to your duties," Hayden replied flatly.

Yet, Nicholas didn't leave. He stood steadfastly beside him.

Hayden's gaze turned cold. "If you have questions, ask them."

Nicholas lifted his head. "Did you already know that Adrian and the others have come to the capital? Who

passed on the news? It doesn't matter if you don't speak-it'll come out in the end."

The Shadow Guard who had been watching over Hayden last night had vanished, and the faint scent of blood still lingered in the study. There were no signs of a struggle, suggesting a quick, fatal blow. Nicholas had a good idea of who might be behind it.

Hayden's eyes flared with fury. "Go ahead and kill them. If they don't die now, they'll die later. It's better to kill them all, so you won't use them to threaten me again. I might as well die right along with them."

Nicholas sighed. "Must you speak that way, Dad? I meant no harm. I only wanted to ask-if you say it, won't everything be settled? That way, no one below you will have to suffer."

Without warning, Hayden swung his

palm and struck Nicholas across the face. His voice thundered with

anger. "How dare you speak to me like this? What kind of

this?

shamelessness is this? How could your mom and I have raised such a wretch?"

Nicholas didn't dodge or flinch from the slap. His expression remained unchanged. "You've struck me and cursed me, Dad. Now, please go ahead and say what you must."

As he spoke, he raised his hand, and two people dragged in Sonny.

Sonny was unconscious, his face badly swollen and disfigured. Blood trickled from his mouth, and his legs were twisted in unnatural angles, both clearly broken.

Hayden's breath caught, his fury deepening, and the slap he delivered to Nicholas' face became even more forceful. "You ungrateful child! You grew up on Sonny's shoulders! How dare you do this to him?!"

Despite the bruise swelling on his

cheek, Nicholas maintained his calm demeanor. That's why I didn't kill him. Perhaps death is the best release, but Sonny should be alive.

Whether he lives in peace or agony depends on your decision, Dad."

Hayden closed his eyes, his heart filled with a mix of rage and sorrow.

After a long silence, he swallowed the bitter taste of blood rising in his throat and said woodenly, "Adrian came to me when I was relieving myself."

Nicholas furrowed his brow. Could Adrian really come and go so freely, even with the Shadow Guards present?

He had clearly underestimated the guild leader.

"What did he say?" Nicholas asked.

Hayden's tone turned icy. "He wanted to know your plans. I told him you were likely planning to assassinate Lady Carissa."

"That's all?" Nicholas' disbelief was evident. "Where is your emblem, Dad? Hand it over. I'll keep it safe for you."

Hayden's expression flickered with surprise. "What would you do with my emblem?"

"I won't do anything," Nicholas replied. "I just wish to keep it for you. After all, your emblem is as good as mine."

He moved toward Sonny, gently wiping away the blood on his lips with his sleeve. His gaze darkened. "Sonny needs a physician. He should receive proper treatment."

Hayden took the emblem out from his chest pocket and threw it harshly on the ground. "Take it, and get lost!"

Nicholas picked it up, inspecting it carefully to confirm it was the real thing. Satisfied, he gestured with his hand. "Well then, hurry up and get Sonny the help he needs."

Chapter 1362

Hayden clenched his fists, his anger and helplessness tightening his chest as he followed behind.

The physician worked quickly, examining Sonny's injuries. Both of his legs were broken, three of his teeth were knocked out, and his face was riddled with fractures. Despite the pain that twisted his expression, he still grinned at Hayden, forcing a smile through gritted teeth.

He tried to assure Hayden with a look that said he would be fine.

Hayden turned away, his heart aching. The man who had stood by his side for so many years now lay in such a state. Fury surged within him, but there was nothing he could do.

Back in Nerovia, he had ordered an extra emblem to be made, just in case the day ever came when Nicholas stole the original to mobilize Hayden's forces. If Hayden noticed in time, someone could use the duplicate emblem to stop Nicholas.

Hayden hadn't expected it to serve its purpose this way, though.

The chaos of the riverworks project was swiftly quelled. Cameron was arrested and imprisoned in Astral Prison for negligence in oversight. Edwin himself took over the oversight of the riverworks, and all other officials from the Waterworks Department involved were dismissed for negligence.

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However, both Salvador and Carissa knew the truth-on the surface, Cameron appeared to be the one in charge, but in reality, the true mastermind had long been in control. Even with Cameron's death, nothing would change.

Nicholas remained unconcerned. He was waiting for good news from Clifford.

In Valken, Yuvan was growing restless. For over half a month, Thomas had been laying siege to the city without making a single move or showing any signs of an attack. This left Yuvan deeply uneasy. The siege meant that no news from the outside could reach him.

He had no idea how the bandit uprisings he had orchestrated in various regions were progressing, whether Chester had managed to send reinforcements to join Thomas, or what the situation in the capital

was.

Even with Valken under siege, it wasn't entirely impossible to get in. By taking the mountain paths and crossing through dense forests, one could still reach the city-though it would take considerable time. In other words, even if any news did make it back, it would likely reflect the situation as it had been ten days prior.

"How goes the recruitment progress?" Yuvan asked, summoning Wayne.

Ever since word had spread that the court intended to impose heavy taxes, Wayne had started recruiting soldiers, stirring up the people of Valken to rebel.

Wayne reported, "Your Highness, only 300 have joined. Since the siege began, General Farrell has been calling out daily, denying the rumors of unjust taxation. Since then, no one else has come

forward." Yuvan's voice was sharp with anger. "If they're shouting, why aren't you shouting back? Keep spreading the word!"

"Your Highness, when the royal army arrives, we will be labeled as traitors and rebels. Who would willingly take on that title? If the rebellion fails, they will execute us."

Yuvan's face darkened. The words "traitors" and "rebels" were among the things he hated hearing most. His expression turned a deep shade of red as he bellowed, "Corrupt officials dominate the court, leading to widespread chaos and suffering among the people. I am acting under Heaven's will to cleanse the court!"

"Your Highness, please remain calm," Wayne said. "Mr. Judd has already discovered that a scout has entered through Asterpeak Mountain. At the latest, we will have news by tonight."

Yuvan clicked his tongue. "Now that Thomas has laid siege to the city, those who once conspired with us have all withdrawn. They're too afraid to risk their lives. Even if news comes through, it's unlikely to be good. We must prepare early."

A dark glint flashed in Wayne's eyes. "Your Highness, I do have an idea. It's risky, but it depends on whether you dare to take the chance."

Yuvan's gaze sharpened as he fixed his eyes on Wayne. "Given the circumstances, speak freely- whatever the plan may be.

Wayne stepped closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Feign surrender."

Yuvan's expression changed. "Feign surrender? How would that even work?"

"Your Highness," Wayne replied, "if Prince Harvey and I escort you to open the city gates and announce our surrender, we can lure them into the city and then capture them in one fell swoop. They are unfamiliar with Valken's terrain. In

no

close-quarter street battles, we have the upper hand."

Yuvan's brow furrowed. "That's too risky. What if they capture me and head straight back to the capital?"

Wayne shook his head. "Impossible.

Our private army has not shown themselves. General Farrell wouldn't just take you back to the capital. He must be planning to enter the city to flush us out. We don't have the luxury of time. If we wait toodong, General Murray will return with his forces after suppressing the bandits, and we will have no chance of winning."

Yuvan hesitated. It was a dangerous plan, but it was a plan nonetheless.

He thought for a moment before responding, "We don't have many soldiers in Nerovia. The private army in Stonebridge County is scattered Saul has been gone for some time, recruiting reinforcements, and we haven't heard from him. If he brings back any news, we can coordinate our efforts from the inside. In that case, this plan could work."

"Then we'll wait for Mr. Judd's message," Wayne said, relieved that the plan had been considered.

Saul's success in rallying reinforcements was a certainty. The soldiers who had been dispersed were already under the control of Clifford, who controlled them.

Chapter 1363

That evening, Samson returned with a scout and hastily reported, "Your Highness, Mr. Harper has successfully rallied our scattered troops and secured 500 warhorses from the Spencer family. He is making his way back now. If the pace holds, he will arrive in three days."

Yuvan sprang to his feet, his heart pounding with excitement. "Is that true?"

"Absolutely, Your Highness. The scout is waiting outside. You may call him in to confirm."

"Bring him in!" Yuvan sat back down, his pulse racing.

At last, he had gathered all the forces-but the news of the Spencer family providing 500 warhorses caught him off guard. Since the fallout over Violet's incident, he had severed ties with the Spencer

family. The scout entered, kneeling before Yuvan. "Your Highness, Mr. Harper sends word that the private army has assembled. Also, Mr. Murphy, one of Prince Nicholas' advisors, is leading 5,000 men and 500 warhorses in support. Prince Nicholas has one request-he wants the rescue of Prince Hayden." Yuvan froze at the mention of Nicholas' name. He had courted Nicholas' favor before, but the man's intentions had always been unclear. Thus, Yuvan had long since distanced himself from him.

Now, it seemed the people who had once been his allies had all backed out, while Nicholas-whom he had ruled out-was the one stepping forward.

It made sense. Nicholas' dad, Hayden, was still trapped in the capital. Officially, he was in the capital, but in reality, he was being held as a hostage. It was clear that Nicholas must be furious about this. Nicholas' character was well-known-refined, gentlemanly, and deeply devoted to his family. His reputation for devotion toward his parent was famous throughout the southern provinces. His elderly father, alone and trapped in the capital, must have left him with no choice but to reach out for help. Hence, Yuvan immediately summoned his advisors to discuss their next steps for three days.

He had agreed to the feigned surrender plan. When Wayne had first suggested it, Yuvan had considered

it far too risky. Now, with the pieces falling into place, the plan might just work. If they could lure Thomas into the city and trap him, it would be the perfect opportunity.

Chester's forces were scattered, preoccupied with quelling the bandit uprisings. He would be unable to lend aid. Once Thomas and his army were eliminated, Yuvan would no longer need to worry about Chester. Then, it would be time to march straight into the capital.

The Mystic Army wouldn't be enough to stop him.

The scout returned with a carrier pigeon, making it possible to contact Saul.

Yuvan wrote a letter, and within four hours, the pigeon returned.

Yuvan examined the letter

carefully-it was indeed in Saul's handwriting. The message instructed him to release the pigeon and begin the feigned surrender at noon two days later, on the third of July. By nightfall, Thomas and his

forces were to be drawn into the city.

The plan was for Harvey to pretend that he had captured Yuwan and escort him out of the city, then invite Thomas into the city for negotiations.

The plan, though it seemed feasible,

was inherently risky. Yuwan felt a knot of unease tightening in his chest. He called for Wayne privately to join him in the study, asking him to perform a divination to see if this course of action would prove successful.

Wayne's reading turned out to be overwhelmingly positive.

He immediately knelt and said, "Your Majesty, the signs point to victory and divine favor. The path ahead

is bright, and you will be aided by powerful allies-as though heaven itself is intervening on your behalf."

The title of "Your Majesty" seemed

to seal Yuwan's fate. He could

almost see the throne, the symbol of

power, just an arm's reach away, within his grasp. At that moment, he felt as though he were standing at the pinnacle, gazing down upon all those beneath him.

All these years of planning, wasn't it all for this moment? The waiting, the enduring of insults, the humiliation, the cold treatment-he had gone through it all just for this final, desperate strike.

What was a mountain of fire or a sea of blood in the face of his goal?

"Your words give me confidence, Wayne," Yuvan replied, settling into his grand chair. He gazed at the reading Wayne had written down, feeling the heat rush to his head. At that moment, the arrogance of his youth flared up again.

He needed this fire within him, and he knew that. Recently, he'd been too cautious and hesitant, and it had caused the people around him to lose faith.

Outside the city, Thomas had been stationed with his troops for over half a month, with plenty of supplies and weapons. He appeared calm, but in reality, the agents had already infiltrated Valken, spreading rumors about Yuvan's treason.

The hearts of the people in Valken could not be lost, or they would become a support for Yuvan.

Chapter 1364

Thomas had already received word from his scouts. Several mysterious groups had gathered outside Nerovia and were now heading toward Valken.

Long before this, he had received a report from Jacob. Jacob had warned him that Yuvan might feign surrender to lure them into the city for a trap, and then spring an ambush from within.

Thomas knew well that Yuvan was nothing more than a pawn in Nicholas' game.

With years of experience in intelligence and espionage, Thomas could piece together the situation with just a few key bits of information and devise a strategy accordingly.

Homer and Felix had initially remained in the capital, but yesterday they had suddenly moved to join him outside Valken. Thomas had been surprised at first-after all, the capital should have been the most dangerous place. Why would the two of them be sent here?

Felix explained that Carissa's mentor, Adrian, the leader of the Pathfinders Guild, had come to the capital, bringing with him many martial artists to aid their cause. After hearing that, Thomas felt relieved. Typically, martial artists stayed out of political affairs, but if rebels threatened the peace, they would intervene. This had happened before.

Thomas didn't know much about others, but he was familiar with Adrian. The man was wise and brave, and highly skilled in the ways of the Ingenium Order-a faction renowned for their mastery of mechanical devices, traps, and innovative weaponry. He was particularly adept with mechanical weapons and contraptions, and he was the one who had improved the six-barreled matchlock.

With Adrian in the capital, Nicholas' plans were bound to fail.

Two days later, just as Jacob had predicted, someone from the city walls of Valken called out to Thomas and his troops.

"General Farrell, we have captured the traitors Prince Yuvan and Prince Harvey. Many officials and soldiers were misled by them, and they never intended to rebel. They have admitted their mistakes and only wish to atone and contribute. We ask that you come into the city and discuss terms, General Farrell." The speaker was Samson, Fiona's older brother.

Through his long-range telescope, Thomas saw Wayne standing next to Samson.

Both Yuvan and Harvey were bound, with a large blade at their necks. Behind them stood several formidable soldiers. The two of them looked utterly disheveled, their hair tangled, clothes askew, as

though they had just endured a struggle. Harvey's face bore clear finger marks, while Yuvan's face had a few bruises.

However, through his telescope, Thomas could see clearly that these injuries were faked. He was a master of disguising injuries himself, and he could easily see through such a ruse.

He handed the telescope to Felix, who glanced through it and smiled faintly. "It couldn't be more fake." "Mr. York was right," Homer muttered. "How is he so sharp?"

Thomas chuckled. "Mr. York's certainly clever, but the real issue is that their internal unity is crumbling. Prince Nicholas wants to absorb Prince Yuvan's power."

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"Despicable," Felix sneered. "Trying to take advantage without lifting a finger. Are we really going to enter the city? Even if it's a feigned surrender, we can't do nothing. If we do, it look like we reject their surrender entirely."

"General Murray has already sent some troops to lie in wait near the main road. If they think they can pull

off an attack from both inside and outside, they're dreaming," Homer added.

Thomas took a deep breath, raising his voice for them to hear. "If they surrender, then bring them out of the city. We'll detain them for now. His Majesty's orders are clear-those who surrender will be treated with leniency."

Entering the city was necessary, but not just yet.

By now, Yuvan and his group probably believed reinforcements would arrive soon. What they didn't know was that the fighting had likely already begun elsewhere.

Samson naturally wouldn't agree to

hand over the prisoners right away. He shouted back, "We'll hold the traitors here until you receive an official royal edict from His Majesty, General Farrell. Once you have the edict, we'll hand them over. To show our sincerity, we'll open the gates. You may lead your army into the city."

"I'll send someone for the royal edict, but first, you must hand Prince Yuvan over to us. We'll take custody of him. How can I trust you won't trap us inside the city and lock the gates once we've entered? The traitor must be in our hands before we move forward," Thomas replied.

On the city tower, Yuvan frowned. He turned to Wayne and whispered, "He's not falling for it. What's our next move?"

"I'll talk to him and try to convince him," Wayne replied.

"Can you persuade him?" Yuvan studied Wayne, a strange unease creeping over him. His absolute trust

in Wayne from the past now seemed to waver just a little.

He couldn't put his finger on why, but something felt off.

Yet, as he thought it over, there was no way Wayne would betray him. They had been planning this together for years. Now, with Nicholas and the Spencer family's support, their chances were at least higher than they had been before.

"Fine. Find a neutral location, one that feels safe for both sides, and convince him." Yuvan finally agreed. "But it has to be quick. We must trap them in Valken City for a fight. If they scatter outside, we'll face endless trouble."

Chapter 1365

Yuvan was unaware that this so-called negotiation was merely a ruse. He was to be handed over and used as bait to lure Thomas' army into the city.

Thomas agreed to the negotiations and went alone. Wayne also went alone, though he had his men trailing him from a distance of about 30 feet.

Wayne began his plea, explaining that most of Valken's officials, himself included, had no idea Yuvan was planning rebellion. Some were aware, but out of fear of Yuvan's power, they dared not speak out. Thomas expressed his distrust. He insisted they had been plotting for a long time.

Thomas' stance was firm, which led Wayne to realize that Thomas had no knowledge that Nicholas was involved in this matter. He also couldn't possibly know about the reinforcement that was on the way.

In addition to confirming this fact through Thomas' attitude, Wayne also placed a lot of trust in Clifford. This trust and respect came from Clifford's ability to convince the Spencer family. Wayne and Yuvan had been trying to gain the Spencer family's cooperation for a long time, but they couldn't get Eustace to budge.

When they first chose to betray Yuvan, it was because they could see Nicholas' strength when he had managed this feat with Clifford.

As a strategist, Wayne aligned himself with those who seemed poised to win. Yuvan had already been sidelined remaining loyal to him was a path to ruin.

At this point, the negotiation was no longer the main issue. Both sides wanted to enter the city, each with their own schemes.

Wayne glanced at the sky, noting the time. Clifford had insisted they lure Thomas' forces into the city before nightfall, and there was still a little over two hours to go.

So, the negotiation didn't drag on for too long. Wayne agreed to hand over Yuvan, but only on the condition that Thomas kept his word-once back in the capital, he must request leniency for those who had surrendered.

In reality, they had no choice but to hand Yuvan over. Doing so would weaken Thomas' vigilance. With no leader, Thomas would assume that Valken's forces were fractured. After all, they had been surrounded for so many days, and Yuvan's forces were likely beginning to lose morale.

Once inside, Wayne and the others could mount a coordinated attack and eliminate Thomas and his men. It wouldn't take more than two days to wipe them all out.

After the negotiations, Wayne returned to the city tower.

Yuvan and Harvey were still being held captive. The troops outside, using long-range binoculars, were watching closely. If the captives were released too soon, their deception would be exposed.

Upon seeing Wayne return, Yuvan quickly asked, "Well? Did he agree?"

Wayne lifted his calm, unflinching gaze and replied, "I've agreed to temporarily hand you over to them."

Yuvan froze for a moment. "Hand me over to them? What's the next move?"

At this point, Yuvan still thought Wayne might be trying to deceive their enemies. He hadn't considered that Wayne might actually intend to surrender him.

Yuvan glanced at Harvey, thinking that if he was to be handed over, Harvey would surely go with him.

Harvey's eyes betrayed a flicker of

hesitation. He knew the plan. His moment of doubt, however, wasn't born from brotherly affection. What bothered him was the idea of

someone who had spent their entire life planning, only to be brought down in the end by their own people.

That kind of defeat was a harsh blow to anyone's pride.

Yet, when Harvey considered that no one would be there to claim a share of his victory, his spirits lifted. When he had pledged allegiance to Nicholas, the promise had been clear: five cities in Ebonflow, a hereditary princely title, and a lifetime of ease.

If Yuvan didn't die, Harvey knew he would've been forced to compromise. Nicholas would have been eager to pacify Yuvan and would've given more-but there was only so much to go around. The more Yuvan received, the less Harvey could claim.

So, when the suggestion was made to hand Yuvan over to Thomas, Harvey didn't hesitate to agree.

"You needn't worry, Your Highness,"

Wayne said. They won't harm you. They will escort you into the city. Once inside, we'll be able to rescue you. Our private soldiers will arrive tonight, and you'll only be in their hands for a few hours. Prince Harvey will accompany you."

Harvey nodded. "I'll go with you, Yuvan."

Harvey thought that what Wayne said was just to persuade Yuvan. He didn't realize that there was no benefit in keeping Yuvan here that keeping him around would only cause trouble.

Hearing Harvey's agreement, Yuvan realized that sometimes risks had to be taken. Thomas wasn't easy

to deceive-if Yuvan didn't fall into his hands, he wouldn't be fooled.

Thomas' army would either breach the walls or tighten the siege. If they opened the gates to let his army in, they would definitely have to consider whether there was a trap involved.

"Your Highness, the decision must be made quickly. We need them inside the city before nightfall," Wayne pressed. "Once inside, it will be beyond General Farrell's control. We'll have our men ready. If you're worried, we'll rescue you as soon as we get inside."

Yuvan finally nodded.

"Very well. Let's go with this plan."

Chapter 1366

Yuvan and Harvey were escorted out of the city gates, with Wayne personally seeing them off.

Harvey had expected that once they handed over Yuvan, Wayne would order his release. But when the soldiers from the Capital Army moved forward to seize them, Wayne didn't utter a word.

A wave of panic surged within Harvey. He struggled against his restraints and glanced at Wayne, his eyes screaming for an explanation.

Wayne gave him a small, reassuring nod, signaling for him to stay calm. Yet, something felt wrong. After all, Wayne had promised that only Yuvan would be handed over.

So, why was Harvey being turned over as well?

Could it be... Could it be that they are going to abandon him?!

A sense of dread tightened in Harvey's chest.

"I'm innocent!" he pleaded desperately. "I captured Yuvan. Release me!"

Thomas cast a cold, dismissive glance at him. "What a fool!"

"Wayne!" Harvey's heart plunged like it had fallen into an icy abyss. His expression shifted from anger to helplessness. "Wayne, you know I'm innocent! I never rebelled. Please, tell General Farrell the truth!" Wayne lowered his gaze, his voice calm but firm. "I trust that our king will see through everything, Your Highness. He will know who is guilty and who is innocent. You needn't worry."

He placed special emphasis on the words "our king", which gave Harvey a shred of hope for a fleeting moment.

Yes, once Clifford's forces arrived, they would turn the tables. The Capital Army would be trapped in Valken, and he would escape. But why hadn't Wayne warned him about this?

Despite his rising anxiety, Harvey tried to comfort himself. He knew that with everything they had done, if Wayne wanted to abandon him, Wayne could have just killed him. Why let him fall into Thomas' hands? Why take the risk of letting him talk about Clifford's plan to surround the city?

Harvey glanced at Wayne again, who gave him a brief, subtle nod. This small gesture eased Harvey's mind somewhat. After all, the Capital Army could never leave Valken. There was no reason to doubt Wayne.

After capturing them, Thomas quickly led his troops into the city.

Meanwhile, 18 miles from Valken, a fierce battle was already underway.

Clifford's forces had fallen into an ambush. The troops had been arriving in small, scattered groups. They had only recently come together and were now marching toward Valken, where they intended to trap the Capital Army and wipe them out.

Clifford knew that Thomas' army was stationed just outside the city, so he had sent scouts ahead to monitor the situation. The main road remained open, with regular traffic passing by-no soldiers in sight, and no signs of an ambush.

Little did he know, just beyond Wandale, Chester's forces seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. There had been no time to prepare, and the fighting began immediately.

Private soldiers were never as

disciplined as regular troops, and the

sudden onslaught shattered their morale. Chester gave them no time to recover. His forces had been on a successful campaign fighting

bandits, and had been riding high on victory. Now, faced with the prospect of ambushing the rebels, the opportunity to gain glory was too enticing for any soldier to resist.

As the fighting outside the city raged on, Thomas led his army into Valken.

Along the way, someone rode ahead and shouted, "By the king's orders, General Farrell is here to apprehend the rebels! All citizens should return home immediately and stay inside! The rebels are ruthless and e bloodthirsty! They will slaughter the innocent! All citizens, return home and remain indoors. Only after the rebellion is quashed should you come out."

For days, the city gates had been closed. With the Capital Army surrounding the city, the entire Valken City had been on edge. Many citizens had stayed indoors, fearing the consequences of stepping outside. Even merchants had closed their shops.

Now, as they heard the soldiers' commands, those few still outside scrambled to lock their doors and secure their homes. They were worried the city might be engulfed in flames if the situation worsened. This sudden shift took Wayne and the others by surprise.

He had thought that once they entered the city, they would sit down with Thomas and his men for a thorough discussion. They would clear up the matter about Yuvan being a traitor, gather evidence, and announce the truth to the world.

Although this seemed unnecessary, the court needed to gain the people's trust, and for that, such steps were required—even if there was no evidence, they would have to fabricate some.

Now, Thomas and his men could enter the city and search for immediate evidence, identify those involved, and then capture them all. Yet, instead of collecting evidence, they started fighting

directly? However, Wayne wasn't overly worried. Thomas' rush to take action wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Once Clifford's forces arrived, they would catch Thomas and his men off guard.

Chapter 1367

As the two sides clashed in battle, Everett had already arrived in Nerovia with a group of martial artists. The timing had been carefully calculated. At this moment, Nerovia was without capable leadership. While the officials were loyal to Nicholas, nearly all of the fighting men had been sent out to battle, leaving only a thousand men and a few city guards behind.

With Hayden's emblem in hand, Everett made his way directly to the government office. He first dismissed the governor and took control of the office.

At the same time, Eustace led several of his bodyguards and merchant convoys to Nerovia. The battle for Nerovia was one of the easiest to win. With Hayden's emblem in hand, Nicholas' residence, Riverton Estate, was now sealed off.

Now, Riverton Estate no longer had any of Hayden's people. All the former officials had been driven out to the countryside.

Once Everett had taken control of the government office, he led his men straight to Riverton Estate. They captured every aide and servant, subjecting them to intense interrogation. Under harsh questioning, they revealed all the secret codes they had used. Even the carrier pigeons that were raised by Clifford were seized.

Each pigeon had a specific flight route, and a few were used exclusively to communicate with Nicholas. If Clifford's forces were victorious, a red silk ribbon would be tied to the pigeon's leg. If they suffered a defeat, a white ribbon would replace it. In cases where the battle's outcome was unclear, the pigeons would simply be released with no markings.

For years, the pigeons had carried messages written in a secret code to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. The aides also handed over a coded ledger, where the meanings of the cryptic terms were explained.

Some of the terms included animals like pigs, dogs, cows, tigers, wolves, snakes, and foxes, which referred to specific people.

The pig referred to Yuvan, the dog to Harvey, the snake to Salvador, the wolf to Carissa, the leopard to Rafael, and the griffin referred to Nicholas. The prime ministers and the heads of the six ministries also had their own code names.

A large pile of letters was found, exchanged between Nicholas and the other rebels.

Many of the letters were written in veiled language, but one set of letters stood out. These were the letters between Nicholas and Eustace, where the threat of a life debt was used to coerce Eustace into forging weapons, supplying war horses, and using merchant caravans as cover for their operations.

Eustace also brought out identical letters, making it clear that each letter was written in duplicate—one kept as a record and the other sent out. However, none of Eustace's replies could be found among Nicholas' possessions.

Eustace explained that he had sent several letters back, stating that the war horses weren't his. He was raising them on behalf of the

government because the capital

lacked the necessary forage for the horses, while his ranch had an

ample supply.

However, Nicholas didn't keep any of those replies. Instead, there were a few letters in a well-hidden box,

in which it was written that the Spencer family would fully support him.

Everett handed the letter to Eustace. The latter sighed and said, "These were written by my third uncle.

He's stationed at the ranch. Losing 500 war horses this time forced me to come forward."

In other words, there were people in the Spencer family who supported Nicholas despite Eustace's

repeated orders that as royal merchants, they were not to associate with rebels.

However, the Spencer family had so many branches. Many of them coveted Eustace's position but couldn't achieve it through ordinary means. Their only hope was to back Nicholas-if he succeeded in uniting the kingdom, they would finally have their chance.

Everett said nothing. Instead, he tied a red ribbon to the leg of a pigeon, signaling that Clifford had triumphed and would march toward the capital.

-

But Everett didn't release the pigeon just yet. Instead, he would wait for Winona to join the battle on the main road. She needed to see Clifford in person and create a mask before Everett could let the carrier pigeon go.

It was already late at night In Valken City, but Wayne still hadn't seen any sign of Clifford's army. He felt an uneasy tightening in his chest.

It didn't make sense-by now, the army should have already arrived. Why hadn't they shown up yet?

He realized that after being surrounded for half a month, the news they had received was either delayed

or tampered with. Clifford's army may not have been anywhere near as close as he had thought. Without any help, it would be impossible for the troops within Valken to hold off the Capital Army.

Panic spread through him as he

retreated to Horizon Estate, ordering the suicide soldiers to protect it. He also sent the rebel army to face the enemy and attempted to send

someone out of the city to deliver a

message. However, he soon discovered that Thomas' men had already surrounded the gates.

Wayne realized he had fallen into a trap. Without reinforcements, luring the enemy into the city was like inviting disaster.

Furious, he roared at Samson, "Didn't you say Mr. Murphy's army would enter the city tonight? Why haven't we seen them yet?"

Chapter 1368

Samson was just as confused.

"I don't know, either. It was Mr. Murphy himself who told me," he said.

Wayne's heart tightened with fear. Clifford was known for his meticulous planning. If he said he would arrive by nightfall, he would never be late.

"Could there have been an ambush along the way? That can't be," Wayne muttered, his mind racing. "The scouts reported that General Murray's forces were scattered, busy suppressing bandits, and they've already moved into Nanyara. They wouldn't be able to return in time."

"If there had been an ambush, Mr. Murphy would've sent word. They have scouts," Samson said, his face pale. "Sir, what do we do now? We can't win against the Capital Army."

Wayne took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself. "Our only option is to survive. We need to find a way to escape and meet up with Mr. Murphy."

"But if we leave, Valken will fall," Samson said urgently. "What about all our families? How do we get them out? The gates are under guard. We can only escape through Asterpeak Mountain, but with so many elderly and children, how can we make it?"

Wayne gave quick orders to the servants and guards at Horizon Estate. "We don't have time to worry about that. We'll escape first. Your families will be safe-they're civilians. General Farrell won't harm them."

Samson hurried to the back courtyard. Fiona had already heard the news and was packing up their belongings. She didn't need Wayne to explain-she knew they had no choice but to flee.

Yuvan's children were in a panic, scrambling to gather valuables. However, the servants and attendants refused to listen to any of their orders, seizing gold and jewelry for themselves and fleeing through the back door.

Samson was enraged. He drew his sword and quickly struck down a few of the more unruly servants before the rest dared not act out further.

Fiona grabbed her brother's hand. "Samson, you must send someone to cover our escape. We cannot fall into the hands of the Capital Army!"

She knew Wayne and the others had betrayed Yuvan. Though she didn't want that, Yuvan lacked the resolve to make it happen. Seeing his lack of ambition and ungrateful nature, she realized he would never make her his queen once he rose to power.

It was better to defect to Nicholas and secure some rewards for herself. She was already too deeply involved to back out.

Samson's gaze hardened. "I'll send people to escort you out of Asterpeak Mountain. Once you've left, change your appearance and hide in a remote village. Don't let anyone know where you are."

"Live in a remote village? How can we?" Stephanie's face twisted with dismay. She added pitifully, "And Asterpeak Mountain is home to wild beasts, wolves, tigers, and snakes! I don't want to stay there!"

"If you don't leave, you'll die. Do you want to keep your life, or do you want comfort?" Samson's voice was sharp and commanding.

Stephanie opened her mouth to argue, but Sabrina tugged at her sleeve, a silent warning. Seeing the fierce look on Samson's face, they didn't dare say anything else.

It was clear that escaping was the most important thing.

Ignoring Wayne's protests, Samson insisted on dispatching a hundred guards to escort them out. But as soon as he made the decision, it became clear that the other officials in Valken were doing the same. With the city in disarray and leadership lacking, Wayne's authority no longer held any weight.

Many of the personal guards and private soldiers had never wanted to fight against the Capital Army, to begin with. Escaping was the best outcome for them.

This shift in allegiance reduced their forces by a third. Valken was already struggling to hold its ground against the Capital Army. With the weakened defenses now, it seemed almost certain that the city would fall apart completely.

Wayne's face turned ashen with despair. The truth was, they could fight-they knew the city like the back

of their hands. They could fight in the streets and take civilians hostage. In other words, they could still find a way out.

But the worst thing in a battle was a scattered and disorganized force. Without unity, how could they possibly stand against Thomas' disciplined army?

By the time the first light of dawn

crept over Valken, the city had already fallen under Thomas'

elet

control. For those who had fled, he didn't pursue them. He merely

ordered the road to Asterpeak

Mountain blocked and the city gates sealed.

After that, he set off with a group of his men to help Chester.

Winona was caught up in the chaos of battle as well, but her focus was not on the fighting. She was looking for a way to reach Clifford.

At first, Clifford's forces were losing

and couldn't defeat Chester. However, Clifford knew how to inspire his troops with words. After a rousing speech, his private soldiers became much fiercer, with a clear determination to fight to the death. As a result, the battle raged on throughout the night and Chester made little progress.

It wasn't until morning, when Thomas' reinforcements arrived, that the tide of battle finally began to turn.

Chapter 1369

In a battle fought in the open, there was always the possibility of retreat. As long as they retreated to a more advantageous position, the situation could easily be turned around.

So, Thomas needed to find a way to cut off the enemy's escape route and trap them here, until they were either defeated or surrendered.

Inside Valken, Wayne had been captured and was now imprisoned alongside Yuvan and the others. Seeing this, Harvey exclaimed in surprise, "Mr. Wayne, how did you get caught? Did Mr. Murphy lose?" Wayne's clothes were torn, his body covered in wounds, and blood was dried on the corner of his mouth. He looked utterly disheveled.

At this point, Yuvan still hadn't realized that he had been betrayed. He had spent the entire night worrying about why no one had come to rescue him. He began to suspect that perhaps they could no longer rely on Clifford's forces. Yet, in his mind, he still hoped that Saul would come, even if Clifford had failed. Seeing Wayne captured, however, crushed any remaining hope. His heart sank.

Yuvan had already considered the possibility of failure. He even prepared for the worst, knowing that his plan to lure the enemy into the city might not work.

But Harvey hadn't. Harvey had always believed that once Clifford and Saul's armies arrived, they would wipe out the Capital Army without leaving a trace.

Now, seeing Wayne's arrival, Harvey's panic took over.

He demanded desperately, "Tell me, what happened? Did Mr. Murphy lose, or didn't they come?" Wayne pursed his lips, his eyes still flashing with defiance.

In the end, he chose to escape through Asterpeak Mountain. He left because he saw that the situation was beyond saving. He planned to head straight to the capital to seek refuge with Nicholas,

but he was too late. Asterpeak Mountain had already been sealed off by the Capital Army, and he couldn't escape. Instead, he was now caught.

Harvey was beside himself with fury, his voice rising in anger.

"Why aren't you saying anything? Didn't Mr. Murphy come? If he had, there's no way his forces would have lost in a single night. They've been lying to us. Wayne, it was you! You told us to side with Prince Nicholas and to turn our backs on my brother! You and Prince Nicholas tricked us-you just wanted to use us to get to my brother's forces!"

Yuvan's eyes widened in disbelief. "What? You betrayed me? You've all betrayed me?"

Harvey collapsed to the ground, his face pale as he said, "Yuvan, we've been with Prince Nicholas all along, but I was tricked too! Both of us were sent to Thomas as prisoners, and they planned to sacrifice me from the start."

Yuvan slapped Harvey across the face, trembling with anger. "How dare you betray me? You're my brother, and you betrayed me?"

"It's your fault for being useless!"

Harvey covered his face, his eyes full of resentment. "I've worked with Eleanor for years, planning for you But you you're nothing but a pile of mud that can't even hold itself up! You've accomplished nothing! A wise person will align themselves With the best opportunities or people that will help them succeed. So naturally, I'll choose someone more capable!"

"You..." Yuvan was enraged. "If I'm useless, then isn't it because of your incompetence?" Wayne lifted his head, casting a cold, disdainful look at Yuvan.

"Our incompetence?" he snapped. "If it weren't for you repeatedly ignoring my advice, would we have ended up in this mess? I told you not to provoke Ms. Violet, but you insisted. You sacrificed so many suicide soldiers for nothing. All you've ever accomplished was provoking the Hell Monarch's household and offending the Spencer family. All these years, you've failed to gain their support. But Prince Nicholas? He managed it."

"We've been through so much together all these years, and this is how it ends?" Yuvan still couldn't believe it.

Harvey had betrayed him, which made him angry, but Harvey was just a useless fool.

But Wayne? Wayne's betrayal was truly a blow to his heart.

"There's just too much to say," Wayne said stiffly, a sense of helplessness washing over him.

He should have known he was on the wrong side. If he had joined Nicholas earlier, the world might have already been in Nicholas' hands now.

"In the end, you only cared about your so-called reputation. Those who truly accomplish great things don't care for such trivialities. If you had listened to me during the initial battle, we wouldn't be in this mess now," Wayne spat.

"Why bring up old grievances now? Didn't you agree to everything too?" Yuvan shot back, his anger now overshadowed by cold disappointment. He never imagined Wayne would betray him.

"Could I disagree? Did you ever give me the authority to make decisions?" Wayne dragged himself to lean against the bars, looking at Yuvan with deep disgust. "Your weakness is that so many people have betrayed you, and you haven't even noticed. It's not just others-Lady Fiona betrayed you too, and you didn't even know. How can you possibly think you'll ever accomplish anything?"

"Wretched woman!" Yuvan's fury reached its peak. "She betrayed me too? I'll kill her!"

Wayne's eyes glinted coldly. "She's already fled. If you want to kill her, you're too late. You have no power left to do so."

Chapter 1370

It wasn't until that moment that Yuvan fully realized the extent of his defeat.

His lips trembled, and his legs gave way as he collapsed to the ground. Panic and fear surged within him. He thought of the tragic fates of past traitors who tried to rebel, and was struck with a deep, bone-chilling coldness.

He had considered the consequences of failure before, but he always thought that if he failed, he would just face death bravely. At worst, he would end his own life to avoid further suffering.

But now, locked in a cold, iron-barred cell with no weapons in hand, he realized how grim things had become. The walls were strong, but he might not die right away even if he charged headfirst into them. There were guards outside the cell. If he didn't die, he might suffer even more than this.

However, it wasn't the fear of torture that pierced Yuvan the most-it was his unwillingness to accept this fate.

How had come to this? Even in defeat, he should've had a group of loyal men to stand by him. He had a group of men with him now, but it was clear none of them shared the same purpose. They weren't united in heart, and that realization dug into him like a knife.

His gaze turned to the two men beside him. His voice trembled, though it carried an edge of bitter laughter.

"You two betrayed me, and what good has it done you? Have you found any favor in your new alliance? Will Nicholas come to your rescue?"

Harvey had always feared death, and he now shook uncontrollably as he crawled toward Wayne. Desperation flooded his voice as he gripped Wayne's sleeve. "What's happening outside? Will anyone come to save us? Please tell me! I'd rather know the truth, even if it means my death." Wayne's voice, rough and hollow, carried the weariness of someone who had accepted defeat.

"No one is coming. Neither Clifford nor Saul arrived. They might have been ambushed before reaching the city. We've been trapped here for half a month, and news has been slow to reach us. General Murray might have already subdued the chaos and set up an ambush."

Harvey's eyes filled with despair. "How could this have happened? No wonder they surrounded the city without attacking-they were waiting for General Murray to arrive! How did we miscalculate so badly? We should never have relied on Nicholas!"

Wayne closed his eyes. "It's too late to say anything. A victor is a king, and the defeated are just men waiting for death. What's there to fear?"

Harvey buried his face in his hands, crying in anguish. "I don't want to die! I just want to live with some dignity-just not be sent to that wretched place!"

He suddenly looked up at Yuvan. "It's you and Eleanor! You pulled me into this! I never wanted to rebel! I didn't want to die..."

The only sounds echoing through the prison were Harvey's cries and his angry sobs.

From the capital to Ebonflow, the Capital Army had taken control of the relay stations. Along the way, skilled men intercepted the carrier pigeons. Only one carrier pigeon managed to reach the capital the one with a red ribbon tied to its leg.

When Clifford was forced to retreat, he sent out a pigeon with a small white ribbon tied to it.

Unfortunately for him, the carrier pigeon didn't get far before it was shot down by men from Skywing Spire.

On the night of the fifth of July, a light rain began to fall.

The rain washed away the

bloodstains on the ground, which flowed together to form a faintly red stream. Clifford's army didn't have time to tend to the fallen soldiers and fled westward, in the opposite direction from the capital

Chester could destroy their forces if he could, or at least hold his ground. But he chose not to hold, for the

battle had gone on too long and caused suffering for the people in the area.

In addition, he had received a royal edict to focus all efforts on wiping out Clifford and Yuvan's private soldiers without worrying about the capital. So, he and Thomas led their forces, pursuing them.

Once Nerovia and Valken had been secured, Everett and the others retreated to the capital.

He and Eustace, along with a group of martial artists and merchant guards, had all changed into the uniforms of the private soldiers. These garments had been found in Nerovia's storerooms.

As Eustace was about the same height and build as Clifford, he wore the mask of Clifford's face, which was freshly made by Winona. The mask didn't feel uncomfortable, even in the heat of July.

In the capital, Nicholas received the carrier pigeon. He tore the red ribbon off and held it tightly in his hand, his eyes burning with untamed fury.

He had always known Clifford would succeed. Over the years, not a single one of his plans had failed.