

War Song 541

Chapter 541

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When Rafael saw them, his heart jumped into his throat.

Where had these people suddenly come from? Also, some of them seemed to have average martial arts skills, needing hooks and ropes to scale the high wall. Who were they? What were their intentions for infiltrating the garrison in the dead of night? If these people made a commotion, Rafael's rescue plan would be ruined.

Though the place where Rafael, Everett, and Jacob had landed and hidden was in the shadows, they had to remain quiet, even as these new arrivals moved quickly along the wall and approached their hiding spot.

There wasn't anything Rafael and the others could do about it at this point. The guard change was nearly over, and they had to act swiftly.

Thomas and his group also noticed the three men hiding ahead. But since they were hiding in the shadows and dressed in black clothes, Thomas couldn't tell who they were, even though their faces were not covered.

It was unclear whether these people were friends or foes. However, seeing them move swiftly in the same direction, Thomas and his group were stunned.

Could they be here for the same reason?

But it was unlikely. Although they could no longer make contact with anyone from Starhaven, they knew the new marshal was Oliver.

Thomas knew Oliver well-he was his brother-in-law, a general who had not seen the battlefield for some time, adept at theoretical strategy. That didn't mean he was without skill, but his arrogance and self-interest meant he would choose the less troublesome path when faced with decisions.

When it came to choosing between negotiations and rescues, Oliver would undoubtedly select the former, not both.

Regaining his composure, Thomas gestured for his group to proceed with their infiltration.

The garrison was large, with twelve buildings in total. The dungeon was located between Building 11 and Building 12, in a hut that stood alone. From that hut, one could descend into the dungeon.

That place was surely heavily guarded. However, since every area was undergoing a guard change, they managed to make their way to Building 11 without incident.

They pressed against the wall of Building 11, planning to stealthily approach and assess the number of soldiers at the dungeon entrance. Just as they moved a few steps forward, they bumped into the three figures from earlier, who were also pressed against the same wall, hiding. One of them cautiously peeked out.

Since they were now close to the dungeon, lights had been set up around the area. The location where they hid was somewhat dim, as the shadow of a large tree nearby created a shaded spot. Still, the dim light now was better than the previous darkness. Thus, Thomas was able to recognize one of the figures-it was Rafael, the Hell Monarch.

He gasped, covering his mouth in disbelief that the prince himself had come. His heart raced with excitement. He knew Rafael was the marshal who had reclaimed the Southern Frontier but had been reassigned to the capital.

His presence here at this moment could only mean one thing-he was here to rescue Law.

As the other men were all concealed in the shadows with only their eyes visible, it was impossible for Rafael to identify them, though they were all pressed against the same wall. He noticed one figure's eyes were filled with tears, and that look of

emotion made him pand

cautiously move closer.

Thomas pulled down his black mask, revealing his face. Although he and the Hell Monarch had never fought side by side, they had met several times before. He hoped Rafael would recognize him, so he smiled joyfully at the prince.

However, Rafael scrutinized the scruffy, tanned-skinned face and was unable to place him. The sight of him smiling tearfully made the prince's mind race with a thought. Was it possible?

Thomas raised his fist and held it high three times a signature gesture of the Sinclair Army. Before every battle, the Sinclair Army soldiers performed this gesture and repeatedly shouted for victory.

When the rest of Thomas' group saw this gesture, they were moved to tears and mimicked the action. As they raised their fists high three times, they nearly shouted "Victory!" aloud.

Rafael watched their gestures with mounting excitement, his heart racing in his chest.

He silently mouthed, "Who are you?"

"Thomas Farrell," the man mouthed in return.

Rafael was stunned.

They were here to rescue Septimus, whom they had assumed was

Thomas. But if Thomas was

standing here in front of him, the pet

who was being held prisoner? It must still be one of their people, because Thomas and his group were clearly also here for a rescue mission.

There was no time for further questioning. Everett had already raised his hand to signal a swift advance.

Rafael placed a hand on Thomas' shoulder and whispered as quietly as possible, "Stay here and distract them at a critical moment."

Thomas nodded vigorously, tears of excitement nearly falling. With Rafael's presence, their chances of success had just increased significantly.

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Three shadowy figures flew out swiftly.

In truth, there was no opportune moment for their plan. The area around the small hut was lit, not bright as daylight, but sufficient to see any object or person's movement. With over a hundred pairs of eyes watching, it didn't matter how fast or skilled they were. They would eventually have to stand in front of the small hut, break the door down, and enter the dungeon.

Once they were in the dungeon, they would be trapped with no way out.

Having previously scouted the area, Rafael and Everett were aware of this situation. Their plan was to have Everett and Jacob engage the guards while Rafael rescued the prisoner from the dungeon.

After rescuing him, Rafael would quickly transfer him to Dylan, then return to help Everett and Jacob escape. With Thomas and his group joining in, there would be even more people to distract the guards.

Rafael darted straight for the small hut's iron door. Breaking through was no easy task, but the prince wielded his golden sword, Sunstrike, a blade so sharp it could slice through iron. The sword weighed twenty-eight pounds but was exceptionally sharp.

He infused his inner force into the blade and struck the door several times. The iron door was cleaved open, and with a powerful kick, Rafael forced it ajar. He glanced back to see Everett guarding the doorway with a long blade while Jacob had already engaged with the heavily armed guards.

Rafael wasn't worried about his master, but was concerned about Jacob. Though Jacob's martial arts skills weren't the best, his agility was exceptional. So, he simply needed to use his Lightfoot Skill to tire the enemies and wait for a chance to strike back. However, it was still a dangerous task.

One last glance revealed that Thomas and his group had also burst out. Rafael sighed with relief. With so many people involved, they could guard the iron door and prevent others from entering. This gave him confidence that he could rescue the prisoner from the dungeon.

The dungeon in this garrison was essentially an underground chamber and tunnel system, built strategically for emergencies. If the war between the kingdoms spread and Sandoria fell, it could serve as a refuge or hiding place for the commanding officers. Rafael had underestimated the complexity of these tunnels and chambers.

Down in the lower levels, the tunnels were a maze, with a single path containing at least a hundred secret chambers. The garrison itself wasn't this large, so it was clear they had dug into other areas to expand the area.

Despite the complexity, Rafael followed the scent of blood and found the prisoner in one of the chambers in the third tunnel. The distinct smell of blood was one reason, but another sign was the door. Unlike the others, which were wooden, this one was made of iron. The entire tunnel system was unguarded. With so many guards stationed outside, there was no need for additional sentries inside the tunnels. If someone had managed to breach through the heavy outer defenses, it would have been pointless to station guards further in. Rafael also detected a faint breath from within, confirming that someone was indeed inside.

Not knowing who had been

captured, he knocked on the iron door and called out, "The Sinclair

Army is

here to rescue you. If

anybody in there is from the Sinclair

Army, please respond."

After a moment of silence, the breathing inside grew rapid, and a weak voice eked out, "Yes... I am..."

Rafael hacked through the iron chains securing the door and kicked it open.

Inside the chamber, he saw a bloodied figure hanging by his hands, his feet not touching the ground. His body was a mess of bruises and wounds, with his

tattered clothes doing little to cover

the numerous marks and burns all over

him. His face was so swollen and battered it was impossible to tell who he was.

When Rafael cut through the chains

holding the man's hands, he collapsed to the ground. As the prince helped him up, he noticed the man's knees were bleeding. It clearly was a serious injury that made it difficult for him to move.

"I'm Rafael. What's your name?" Rafael asked, observing the man's cracked, blistered lips.

Despite being of similar height as the prince, the man was incredibly light, a testament to the severe torment he had endured.

"Law..." he choked out in a raspy and strained voice, as if he had a fire burning in his throat.

He gripped Rafael's sleeve tightly, his eyes wide with concern. "Are they... safe?"

Rafael felt a lump in his throat. "They're safe. We're here to rescue you." "That's... good..."

The man's words trailed off as his hands fell limp and his eyes slowly closed.

Alarmed, Rafael quickly checked the man's pulse and breathing. He was relieved to find that he was still alive. After hoisting him onto his back, Rafael hurried to get them both out.

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During the negotiations at Fangridge Mountain earlier in the day, Oliver's stance was exceptionally resolute.

Before the talks began, both Timothy and Louis had urged him not to mention the Hell Monarch in front of Victor. However, Oliver believed that since they had once served under the prince, they would undoubtedly favor him. So, he agreed to keep quiet while plotting his own strategy.

In previous negotiations, Oliver had been bargaining persistently. He had offered gold, food, and textiles in exchange for Septimus. Each time, Victor had rejected the terms, leading to a deadlock in the negotiations.

This time, Oliver had truly lost patience. He had already made significant concessions for Septimus' sake. He had increased his offer from 5,000 gold coins to 10,000 gold coins, 400,000 pounds of grain, and 2,000 bolts of silk.

If Sandoria still refused, it would be due to sheer greed.

Giving them Simonton City, which had been recaptured by the Hell Monarch, was out of the question. If it were lost again, it would be a severe blow to Oliver.

At the start of this round of negotiations, Oliver had again raised the grain offer, this time to 660,000 pounds.

However, Victor still rejected it.

Fuming, Oliver slammed his hand on the table. "I see that you're not sincere about this at all. I've made the greatest concessions, yet you demand even more. This is utterly unreasonable. If this is how it's going to be, then the negotiations are over."

The statement was translated, and Victor sneered after hearing it. "Are you certain you want to end the negotiations? Are you willing to sacrifice your spies?"

"It is you who lacks sincerity. If you are unwilling to negotiate in good faith, then we have nothing more to discuss. Do as you will. This is the Hell Monarch's decision," Oliver replied.

Timothy and Louis' faces went pale.

Hadn't they already said not to mention Rafael?!

The name "Hell Monarch" needed no translation-Victor understood immediately. His demeanor turned alert.

"The Hell Monarch? Are you saying he's here? Why isn't he negotiating instead?"

Victor's translator conveyed this message, and Oliver was about to respond when Louis interjected, "The Hell Monarch issued the order, but was unable to come in person. He recently got married and can't leave the capital at this time." Louis spoke in Sandorian, so no translation was needed. Not understanding the language, Oliver shot a suspicious glance at Louis.

Victor looked at him with suspicion. "The Hell Monarch is here, isn't he?"

"If His Highness were here, he would certainly want to meet you, Marshal Crow. The war between our two kingdoms has ended, and we in Starhaven have a saying: 'You don't know someone until you've fought them His Highness has great respect for you, Marshal Crow. If he were in Simonton City, he would certainly be eager to befriend you,'" Louis replied with a smile.

"What nonsense is that? Even if the war is over, we're still not friends. The Hell Monarch is as terrifying as General Sinclair. We Sandorians do not wish to befriend such a fearsome person," Victor countered. Hector had once recaptured the Southern Frontier, but unfortunately, Sandoria sent reinforcements to launch a counterattack. He didn't receive the support he needed in time because his request for help was delayed. This was due to the fact that the dying king had been gravely ill then, and Hector's call for aid was buried under paperwork. As a result, his forces were defeated, and the enemy retook the Southern Frontier. Victor had never interacted with Hector personally, having taken the battlefield only after the latter's death. Even so, Hector was a formidable and fearsome general to him. "What did Louis say?" Oliver asked the translator.

Louis shot a warning glance at the

translator, but he was just a local

merchant who spoke both languages. Having been Oliver's

interpreter throughout the

negotiations, he hadn't had much contact with Louis. So, he relayed Louis' words to Oliver exactly as they were.

Oliver glared sharply at Louis, then said to Victor "Yes, the Hell Monarch has been in Simonton City for a few days. However, he hasn't come to negotiate himself and sent me to convey his message. If you agree to these terms, the

negotiations are over. Do whatever you need to do."

"That is the Hell Monarch's decision," Oliver reiterated.

Victor immediately grasped the situation and ordered, "We're leaving. Now."

Timothy quickly nudged Louis, who hastened to say, "Marshal Crow, there's no need to rush. We can continue discussing things. Is Simonton City really your only goal?"

Timothy hurried over and intercepted Victor.

Victor coldly glared at him. "Get out of my way!"

Louis ran over and performed a formal salute. "Marshal Crow, let's continue our discussion calmly. What's the rush? You want Simonton City, correct? We can talk it over. Let's sit down and continue the negotiation."

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Seeing the unusual behavior of the two men, Oliver grew suspicious.

He was the one in charge of the negotiations, and he had already stated that there was no need for further discussion. So, why were the two of them trying to intercept Victor? Was there a reason behind it?

Since Oliver had only assumed command after the recapture of the Southern Frontier, his subordinates were already unwilling to accept his authority. If negotiations were taken out of his

hands, it would diminish his authority, which he absolutely could not accept. "Both of you, come back here," he said sharply.

He then instructed the translator, "Tell Marshal Crow that if he's not sincere about it, the negotiations will end. If he still has a desire to negotiate, then the terms I set must be accepted."

After the translator conveyed the message, Victor turned to look at Oliver. The former's face showed clear signs of impatience, though he did not appear entirely assured. Nonetheless, he did not let his guard down.

"Return to the city!" Victor ordered.

Louis and Timothy rushed forward, continuing to stand in Victor's way.

Louis bowed deeply. "Marshal Crow, Marshal Prince doesn't know Septimus personally and has no emotional attachment to him. So, he is unwilling to exchange Simonton City for him. However, we place great importance on Septimus, as he was once our comrade in arms. Please wait a little longer while we persuade our marshal."

"If you could persuade him, you would have done so by now," Victor said coldly. "And didn't the Hell Monarch already make it clear? If you don't agree to exchange Septimus for Simonton City, then there is nothing more to discuss."

"No, that's not it," Louis insisted. "His Highness is already on his way to Simonton City and should arrive in a few days. He values Septimus greatly, so things should take a turn for the better once he arrives."

"The Hell Monarch is on his way?" Victor scrutinized Louis, not missing any subtle expressions on his face.

Louis nodded earnestly. "Yes, that's right. He will arrive in a few days."

Timothy retreated to apologize to Oliver, "Marshal Prince, please be patient. Even though we have decided to end the negotiations, it is important to maintain a facade of prolonged discussion. Otherwise, if news spreads that we gave up hastily, it could damage our reputation."

Growing increasingly suspicious of the two men, Oliver pulled Timothy aside and asked, "Tell me the truth. Where is the Hell Monarch now?"

Timothy hesitated. If he spoke candidly, Oliver might hold a grudge, especially since Rafael's mission to rescue Septimus had only been shared with Louis and him, and not with Oliver.

Timothy could only say, "I'm not

sure, but having followed His Highness for three years, I have some understanding of him. He may have gone to Sandoria to rescue Septimus, but he didn't inform us to avoid leaks."

Oliver's anger flared. "If you had such suspicions, why didn't you inform me?"

Timothy thought to himself that Oliver's emotions were always on display. If he knew, it would be easy for Victor to sense it.

Victor had grown suspicious of Oliver's decisiveness, especially with the mention of Rafael. Timothy wondered if Louis could hold him off.

Regardless, even if they could delay for an hour or half an hour, it would at least buy Rafael more time. Today's negotiation was the best chance for carrying out the rescue mission.

"It's just a guess. How could we dare to inform you of something so uncertain?" Timothy said.

Oliver glared at him, his expression severe. He pondered for a moment, fearing that it wasn't just a guess and that the Hell Monarch was indeed on a rescue mission.

If Rafael succeeded, Starhaven

wouldn't need to trade anything with Sandoria or spend a single coin. Then, the Hell Monarch would gain even more prestige in the military.. Thus, Oliver couldn't do something that would go against Rafael's plans. Even if Oliver couldn't get a substantial reward, he should at least benefit in some way.

Softening his tone, Oliver said, "Regardless of whether your guess is correct, we can't take risks. We should delay as much as possible. Let's go. We need to keep Marshal Crow occupied with Simonton City."

Timothy breathed a sigh of relief and followed him.

However, they couldn't delay for long. Victor's suspicion had grown too strong. The moment Oliver mentioned the Hell Monarch, Victor had sensed something was off.

Victor kept his doubts to himself and continued talking for a while. But when he saw that Oliver didn't seem too concerned and was just dragging things out, he decided to stop the discussion immediately. "We're done here. Let's head back to the city," said Victor, having been driven to his breaking point by Oliver's superficial demeanor.

If the Hell Monarch was indeed attempting a rescue, it would likely occur when the guards changed shifts, which was around midnight. They should still have time to return to the city now.

He grabbed his cloak and marched out, followed by his men. They quickly mounted their horses and left.

Oliver turned to Timothy. "We've done all we can. The rest depends on the Hell Monarch's abilities. If the rescue is successful, he will have achieved a great feat. If not, we cannot be blamed."

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Louis and Timothy were both frustrated.

How could they possibly have kept Victor at bay with such a lack of sincerity in the negotiations? Now, they could only hope that Rafael would complete the rescue mission before Victor returned. If not, the consequences would be dire.

Meanwhile, Rafael had successfully rescued Law.

Upon exiting, he discovered that a fierce battle raged outside. Several of Thomas' group were already injured, but they hadn't suffered too much with Everett present. However, the enemy's numbers were increasing rapidly. They needed to retreat quickly.

As Rafael dashed out, a dozen enemies closed in on him. With a swift leap into the air, he handed Law off to Dylan, who carried the injured man on his back and quickly disappeared into the night.

Rafael used his Lightfoot Skill to return and assist the others in their escape. If they managed to rescue one person only to have several others captured, the mission would be considered a failure.

With Sunstrike in his hand, Rafael flew straight to Jacob's side. He cut through the soldiers surrounding Jacob with a powerful swing, driving them back with sheer force.

Everett was facing off against the enemy's elite forces. Even though Victor had taken many of his top fighters to the negotiations, a dozen had stayed behind. Seeing that Rafael had already rescued Law and they no longer needed to guard the iron door, Everett unleashed his full strength and fought in earnest.

His and Rafael's combined skills were nearly unstoppable. However, the sheer number of enemies made it difficult for everyone to escape. They could only help one person at a time, rescuing each in turn.

Rafael knew they couldn't afford to delay any longer.

Worried about Victor's return and the possibility of enemy reinforcements arriving, he held nothing back. Using his golden sword, he unleashed a whirlwind attack, cutting down several enemies with a single powerful swing. It consumed much of his energy, but he had to push the attackers back quickly to buy them a chance to escape.

Seeing Rafael's determination, Everett spared no effort himself. The two of them worked seamlessly together, gradually retreating to the platform atop the surrounding walls.

The surrounding walls were high. Thomas could barely manage to climb up with his Lightfoot Skill, but the others had to use iron hooks and chains to scale them. That made them vulnerable to being struck by enemy blades.

Rafael and Everett exchanged a glance. Everett held the line while Rafael guided the others to safety. After getting three people out, they heard the ground shaking from the sound of horse hooves.

Rafael's heart sank.

Victor was back.

Ignoring the exhaustion from overusing his inner force, Rafael swung his golden sword to create an opening. He grabbed one person in each hand and soared out, carrying them with him.

Seeing Rafael's actions, Thomas

also attempted to carry someone to safety, but his own injuries made it difficult. He was barely able to lift off on his own, and carrying someone further slowed him down. As a

result, the enemy's blades struck his back.

The intense pain only fueled his determination further, and he managed to get Ben safely out.

With only three people left, Rafael took two of them. After covering their retreat, Everett quickly scooped up Felix and soared into the air before vanishing from sight.

Victor charged in on horseback, taking in the sight of the blood-soaked ground. His men were either dead or wounded. Septimus had already been rescued, and he hadn't even caught a glimpse of Rafael.

In a fit of rage, he roared, "Pursue them! Send word to the garrison. Conduct a city-wide search-leave no corner unchecked!"

Under the cover of night, Rafael led their escape. Having been wounded in the back, Thomas collapsed after running only a short distance. Rafael helped him, staunching his bleeding, and then carried him while leading the way with his Lightfoot Skill. They had to reach the safe location Jacob had chosen and reunite with Dylan as quickly as possible.

The location was one Victor wouldn't think of searching immediately. If they could evade the city-wide search, they would have a way to leave.

After an hour, they arrived at a cemetery for Sandorian soldiers.

It was a location carefully selected

by Jacob. The cemetery was located near a mountain. If everyone was unharmed, they could cross several mountain ranges from here to reach the grasslands, where a path led directly to the mountain where Liam had previously captured Aurora.

Once they reached that place, they would be safe.

The other reason for choosing this location was that Victor wouldn't immediately think to look here. Without his orders, no one would dare to search the cemetery.

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The cemetery was vast, with most of the fallen soldiers buried here. A large gravestone stood prominently at the entrance of the cemetery.

As they moved further in, they passed several small buildings where the cemetery guards lived. These guards had been captured and confined in one of the buildings. They were bound and gagged, unable to call for help.

Before Rafael and his team began their rescue mission, they had prepared supplies of food and water. The reason for this was mainly due to the anticipation that Septimus would be tortured. After all, the Sandorians had suffered a great defeat, so they would seek vengeance. Assuming Septimus would have severe injuries, they would not be able to travel immediately.

However, Rafael and his team hadn't anticipated that there would be so many injured, so the amount of supplies they had prepared was insufficient.

When they returned, Dylan was already tending to Law's wounds.

Rafael set Thomas down. Without pausing to take a breath, Rafael handed the medicinal supplies and bandages to Everett and Jacob. "Treat the wounded first."

Thomas had been injured on his back and had staggered for a while. But by the time they reached the cemetery, he had already lost consciousness.

Rafael crushed the pills and gave them to Thomas with water, then tore open the back of his shirt. A gaping wound extended from his shoulder blade to his waist, nearly exposing the bone.

Fortunately, they had performed acupressure to stop the bleeding in time. Otherwise, Thomas would have bled to death. However, keeping the acupressure points closed for too long could also cause damage. Rafael hoped the damage would not be too severe. After attending to the wounds, Rafael looked at the group of men before him. Besides Thomas, he didn't recognize any of them. Lawrence was still unconscious from severe torture, and Rafael scrutinized him for a long time but still could not determine his identity. Thomas was barely able to hold himself up, but he raised his hand. "Thomas Farrell, reporting in!"

After a moment of stunned silence, everyone began to report in.

"Felix Quinton reporting in!"

"Joshua Cooper reporting in!"

"Benson Cooper reporting in!"

"Scott Prince reporting in!" "Wilfred Prince reporting in!" "Tobias Jensen reporting in!" "Homer Larkin reporting in!" "Ivan Lewis reporting in!"

"Bruce Stone reporting in!"

Rafael turned his face away, tears he had held back for so long sliding down his cheeks. After a while, he managed to regain his composure and said, "On behalf of the Sinclair Army, welcome back to the team."

Eleven of them had survived. Eleven of them were alive. No one could know how deeply moved Rafael felt at that moment.

The ten men covered their faces,

tears seeping through their fingers. They didn't dare to cry out loud. The Sinclair Army- they would never forget they were part of it, even though their marshal had sacrificed his life in battle.

They could finally boldly declare themselves as part of the Sinclair Army.

A weak voice came from the ground. "Lawrence... Zielger...reporting in!"

Rafael held tightly onto the hand that Lawrence struggled to raise. He couldn't lift it high like the others but managed a weak gesture.

Lawrence opened his eyes, but only

one was open. The other was so

swollen he couldn't pry it open. His

his

face was a mass of bruises, with mouth split and his nose crooked. The left side was more swollen than the right, but the right eye was even more grotesquely swollen. He barely resembled a human being.

He was thin, and his bones were jutting out. The injuries from the torture were heart-wrenching. Dylan wept as he tended to him.

Burns, whipping, fingernail

extraction, and steel needles had

been pierced through his fingers,

leaving numerous small holes. After such prolonged suffering, all his fingers were swollen, red, and

inflamed with pus-filled blisters.

Lawrence forced a smile through gritted teeth, his once handsome face now unrecognizable.

Rafael couldn't bear to look at his smile or his face. It felt as if a heavy pressure was pressing down on his heart, making it hard to breathe.

One could only imagine what Lawrence had endured.

Rafael stepped outside, sitting by the door and gazing at the moon. The road home was still a long way off, but he was determined to bring them all back.

As he composed himself, he heard Thomas ask Jacob, "Sir, how are my parents and my wife? And what about Timothy? Are they well?"

Jacob paused for a moment before replying, "They are all well. However, they thought you were dead, so they let your wife return to her natal family. She is now married to another man."

Jacob didn't want to deceive Thomas, to avoid giving him false hope. He had to prepare Thomas for this reality, so the latter could face it calmly when he returned.

Thomas fell silent for a long time. He lay on the ground and wrapped his arm around his head, burying his face in them.

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Everyone looked at him with sympathetic eyes, but at the same time, they were also reminded that their own wives might have married someone else in their absence. Among the group, only Ivan was unmarried. He was the maternal nephew of Thomas' mother, a young soldier on his first battlefield experience.

Scott and Wilfred were from Stonebrook District. Like Ivan and Tobias, they were just ordinary soldiers.

Felix was Logan's elder brother. He had been adopted by Audrey, and was not her biological son. Lacking success in his studies and with a passion for martial arts, he had ended up on the battlefield. After several years of service, he had become a centurion before being captured.

Before Felix went to war, he was engaged. But with news of his death reaching home, it was likely that his fiancée had found another suitor. The head of the Quinton family was kind and virtuous. He would never ask someone to remain a widow and condemn her to a lifetime of misery.

Felix also hoped his fiancée would find happiness.

Still, he felt for Thomas. Over the years, Thomas had often mentioned his wife and shared stories about their life together.

Lawrence would also talk about his own wife. He mentioned she was timid and couldn't handle such a loss well. If she knew of his death, she would surely grieve for a long time. Lawrence had hoped she could return to her natal family home rather than stay in the Marquis of Elderglen's family, as there was a good chance he and the others might never return.

These years had been truly perilous, with the constant risk of capture. If they were caught, there would be no way out.

They had chosen loyalty, forsaking trust, and it was their fault for not being there for their wives.

Joshua and Benson were the sons of the Minister of Protocol, Richard Cooper. Joshua was the legitimate son, while Benson was a son of a concubine. Above them were three older brothers who were scholars and officials, leaving only the two of them to take up arms and fight on the battlefield.

When they "died", Richard was still a deputy minister. It could be said that the military achievements of his two sons, combined with his own diligence, had elevated him to the position of Minister of Protocol.

Richard had also been the one to officiate Rafael and Carissa's wedding.

After a long while, Thomas finally raised his head and smiled bitterly. Tears welled in his eyes, though he fought to keep them from falling.

"It's for the best. She's married now,

and she won't have to endure the loneliness of these years. She's a lively person and deserves more than to be left alone in an empty house. It's my fault she had to

suffer. If she has found a good

match, I wish her happiness."

Everett disregarded the

conversation. He went outside, and sat down with Rafael. His usually stern face was even more solemn now. "Both of them are severely injured. It seems it will take a few days before we can set off

"We can't delay for too long. Our food supplies are running low." Rafael sighed heavily, looking up at the moon as it wove in and out of the clouds, its light shifting between bright and dim. "We'll have to depart within three days at most. We'll carry those who can't walk."

Returning to Simonton City was the only safe option.

Everett sighed. "Then we'll do as you say. I'll do everything in my power to help. I also want to return to the Pathfinders Guild as soon as possible. Without my supervision, those monkeys might run amok." He glanced back at the room. "I can't bear to listen to this any longer. I'll go out and patrol."

"Be careful, sir," Rafael advised.

Everett scoffed. Alone as he was, who could spot him flying around the border city?

Dylan was already distributing food-sausages, cured meat, flatbread, buns, and water.

Lawrence couldn't eat the meat. He could barely chew. He could only eat the buns after they were soaked in water, which Dylan fed to him.

The night was silent, and the wind had ceased. Even in the sweltering heat of early July, the Sandoria border city, which would soon be frozen for the winter, was uncomfortably warm.

Aside from the sounds of chewing, there was no other noise.

After a long time, Thomas finally asked Jacob, "Sir, could you tell me... Who did she marry? Is her new family treating her well?" Jacob patted his shoulder. "Now that she's married, you don't have to worry whether her new family treats her well or poorly." Thomas stared blankly for a long time, understanding the implication of Jacob's words.

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The weather grew hotter, and the people in Hell Monarch Estate had already begun using ice on a daily basis to keep the place cool.

Rafael still hadn't sent any letters back, and Carissa was growing worried. Although he had gone with her martial uncle, the mission to rescue the hostages in the Sandoria border city was extremely dangerous, especially with Sandorian soldiers stationed there. According to the information Claire had gathered, there were plainclothes guards stationed around Valor Estate. They changed shifts day and night. It seemed the king was aware that someone intended to harm Aurora.

The situation in Westhaven remained unclear. However, the special investigator, Patrick, had returned to report on the case in Brightmoor District. The massacre of Lola's family had been clarified-someone had used a Soulgrasp Threadworm on Lola, causing her to lose her sanity and murder her entire family. The culprit was a local small merchant named Mason.

The murderer had already confessed, and faced justice. The motive behind the crime was that both families were engaged in the same business, but the deceased's family had built a reputation for philanthropy, which allowed them to seize Mason's business. Enraged by this, Mason bribed James to use the parasitic worm on Lola, driving her mad and leading to the murder.

The special investigator had the authority to act first and report later. After the murderer confessed, Patrick ordered the Brightmoor District authorities to execute Mason and his wife to avenge the victims.

As a result, the case didn't need to be reviewed by the Supreme Court.

Carissa learned about this from Ivy when she returned.

Ivy said that in court, the murderer had wept bitterly. He claimed that his actions had been a momentary lapse in judgment, and expressed deep regret. Seeing his remorse, Patrick spared Mason's children and only executed the couple to close the case. Carissa felt something was off.

In business, conflicts and killings can happen in the heat of the moment. However, this was clearly a premeditated plot, and it involved the use of a rare parasitic worm that few knew about.

Even if Mason and his wife knew about the threadworm, the plan required several precise steps. First, they had to bribe James to poison Lola. Then, they needed to control the threadworm in Lola to commit murder. Each step had to be executed flawlessly.

It wasn't that Carissa underestimated small merchants, but the case involved a deliberate massacre. Once Lola was convicted, she would definitely be sentenced to death.

If it were a crime of passion, Carissa would have fewer doubts, but this case was still fraught with discrepancies.

"Ivy, what do you think?" Carissa asked.

Ivy appeared very composed. "I don't know much about the case, but Mason did indeed confess."

Violet was sitting nearby. "Even if you find the case suspicious, it's of no use. The man's been executed. Besides, you can't interfere in the case."

Carissa frowned, worried that it might be a miscarriage of justice. But as Violet had said, the case was beyond her control.

"Let's not discuss that. You know Samuel has returned to Gracehold Estate, right?" Violet said.

"Yes," Carissa replied, fanning herself with her hand-held fan. The weather was unbearably hot, and her silk gown was sticking to her back, making her uncomfortable.

"I also heard that he's blaming Ruby's departure on Leona and me. There's been chaos in the household. A person as arrogant as him can't believe he's been abandoned. He needs to believe his own lies before he can effectively manipulate others," she added.

Violet spat dismissively. "Alana said.

he's been making indirect remarks in

the household, accusing you of

instigating the duchess. He only et

dares to make a scene in the house and doesn't have the courage to

come after you. If he did, I'd actually respect him as a man."

"Leona must be having difficult days during her pregnancy," Carissa said, her heart aching for her cousin. "Fortunately, she's managed to hold her ground."

"Yeah. Samuel has caused trouble

for her a few times, but she's remained resolute. As for Leona's

parents, don't know what's wrong don't know what's with them. They visit frequently urging her to tolerate Samuel. They

said that since Ruby is gone, making Samuel happy will improve their future."

Carissa propped her chin on her hand, deep in thought. "I might understand if ordinary people are weak and afraid. But he's a prince He's so scared of being sent to his own fief that he hides away and lets his daughter suffer. Do you think that's reasonable?"

Violet considered this. "It's not very reasonable, but that's how he is. Do you think there's something wrong with him?"

"It's hard to say," Carissa said, unwilling to suspect any ulterior motives.

Still, unreasonable things often had underlying reasons, though what those reasons were was hard to determine.

"Even if a person doesn't seem special, they still have some fundamental traits that can't be ignored."

No one in the capital paid much attention to Harvey and Heather. Their presence was too insignificant, and their public reputation was so weak that paying too much attention to them would only make one seem foolish.

Chapter 549

When Carissa indicated that something was wrong, Violet naturally sought confirmation.

Violet approached Claire, asking her to assign someone to keep an eye on Harvey. Violet also instructed Claire repeatedly to avoid leaving any traces, and to ensure that no one discovered she was monitoring the people in Hartstone Estate. When assassins had infiltrated Valor Estate, Carissa had stepped in to help and had been summoned to the palace to explain the situation. Salvador had grown suspicious of Rafael, so everything must be done carefully. On the day Serena was to enter the Marquis of Ironridge's family, a sudden downpour arrived unexpectedly.

Through the heavy rain, a small carriage entered through the side gate of Ironridge Estate. Serena had brought no noteworthy dowry, and cast a resentful glance at Barrett before stepping into the carriage.

Once inside the estate, Serena greeted Jessica respectfully and served her a glass of wine, as was customary. However, Serena didn't even get to see the Marquis of Ironridge.

She didn't meet Margaret, either. The older woman merely sent her a pair of ordinary emerald bracelets as a token gift, and assigned her to Autumn Hall.

Originally, Serena had brought two maids with her. But within half an hour of arriving, the maids were sent back to Valor Estate. Jessica arranged for a few others to attend to Serena, but their attitude was far from respectful.

Serena was a concubine, but she received even less consideration than a typical concubine would, leaving her feeling deeply wronged. Yet, she understood that this was Ironridge Estate, and she had

to endure. She could no longer behave as she had at Valor Estate, where she had been able to express her anger freely.

That evening, she bathed and dressed up elegantly, hoping Leopold would come to her room. After all, it was her first night in the household, and it was expected of him to make an appearance. She waited until midnight, but he still didn't come.

She took off her hairpins, crawled into bed, and finally cried out of frustration.

The next day, she learned that Leopold had spent the night in Emma's quarters.

Emma was Leopold's only secondary wife. She had borne children, and was now pregnant again. Given her condition, it was inappropriate for her to serve Leopold at night, yet he preferred to stay with Emma rather than visit Serena in Autumn Hall. After Serena's marriage, the Warren family seemed to have settled into a calm state.

Barrett noticed the presence of the Capital Guards outside the estate and understood the reason they were tasked with discreetly monitoring Aurora while also preventing any further assassination attempts.

He felt a growing sense of foreboding, as if a storm was about to break.

He knew the situation was serious. If it was investigated, Valor Estate might be raided or the Warren family might even face execution.

It wasn't just Aurora's problem. As the commanding officer who had led the reinforcements, he bore an unforgivable responsibility for not controlling Aurora.

The mental burden, coupled with the trivialities of daily life, left him feeling utterly exhausted.

After work ended one day, he found himself standing at Northwatch Estate's gate.

He couldn't help but recall his first visit to the Sinclair family. He had been nervous, yet hopeful. He remembered making a powerful promise in front of Melanie-to never take a concubine in his lifetime. At that time, Melanie slowly smiled in satisfaction and said, "A man should keep his promises."

He had sworn, "If I don't keep my promise, I'm willing to be struck by lightning."

And so, the noble daughter of the then Marquis of Northwatch had married him.

Yet, in the end, he had failed to keep his promise. He had let Carissa down, and betrayed Melanie's trust.

"Why are you here?" Frederick emerged from the gate and stood on the steps, looking at him coldly.

Barrett pulled himself together, and strode off after giving Frederick a respectful nod.

Frederick frowned.

Had Barrett regretted his actions? He had seen how mad the people in the Warren family could be. He hoped Barrett and his family wouldn't drag that madness to ruin Carissa's peace and happiness.

Frederick sent someone to Hell

Monarch Estate to inform Carissa of

Barrett's visit to Northwatch Estate

He also advised her to be cautious and avoid any association with Barrett to prevent damaging her own reputation.

Upon hearing the report, Carissa called for Travis. If Barrett was spotted near the Hell Monarch Estate, Travis was to drive him away.

Travis said, "If he dares to come, I'll break his legs."

Violet said, "Just drive him away! We don't need to get involved with him. Things in this capital aren't like in Meadow Ridge, where you just have a fight if you don't like someone."

"Come on, I was just speaking metaphorically. We're not actually going to fight," Travis replied, somewhat frustrated.

Violet said, "That man has no backbone. He hides whenever trouble arises, and can't make a clear decision. Fortunately, during the Southern Frontier siege, he didn't retreat and hide. Otherwise, he would have been the cause of our

downfall. He's just a bad Lomen."

Carissa was fanning herself, and suddenly remarked, "At this point, he should actually give Viola a letter of divorce. It will show whether he

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plans to rely on Oliver to get through this, or if he truly has the courage to be a man."

Chapter 550

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Violet and Travis both understood the implication of Carissa's words.

The situation in Westhaven was bound to change drastically. Once the current crown prince, Edmund, ascends the throne, the first order of business would be a thorough investigation of Fawnrun City. There were three reasons for that-revenge, consolidating his own

political power, and redrawing the borderlines.

If Barrett still had any sympathy for Viola, he should let her return to her family.

But if he kept Viola with him to force Oliver to stand up for the Warrens, then he and Aurora were essentially the same utterly selfish.

Feeling playful, Violet said, "Let's make a bet. Will Barrett give Viola a divorce letter? I think he won't."

Though he held Barrett in low regard, Travis still remembered the man's bravery on the battlefield and was willing to give him a small measure of support. "He might. At least he showed responsibility on the battlefield."

The two looked at Carissa. "What will you bet on?"

Carissa tilted her head. "Actually, I don't know Barrett very well."

Violet pulled out a banknote worth a thousand silver coins. "You still have to choose. Let's bet a thousand silver coins."

Seeing the large sum, Travis immediately shook his head. "No way. I'm not betting on that."

Winning would be fine, but losing a thousand silver coins meant he would surely be punished by his master.

Carissa laughed and said, "Let's do it for fun. Don't bet so much-let's make it ten silver coins."

"Then which option do you choose?" Violet put away the banknotes. Money shouldn't be flaunted. She saw the way Travis looked at the notes, as if he wanted to steal them.

Carissa thought for a moment. "I think he'll probably go through the motions of asking Viola about it, just to ease his own conscience. But he won't be completely honest with her. If Viola chooses not to divorce, he'll accept it without any guilt."

Violet chuckled. "It seems you know him quite well. But the problem is, there's no way to verify your option. The Capital Guard is keeping a close eye on Valor Estate. We can't sneak in to eavesdrop."

Carissa shrugged. "So, I can only choose that he won't divorce."

Violet laughed. "You and I are betting against Travis. If Travis loses to us, it'll be twenty silver coins."

Travis sighed. "I hope Barrett doesn't make me lose money. Man, just be a decent person."

On June 21st, Rafael and the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team departed from the cemetery. Over the course of three days, Victor had thoroughly searched the entire city and would soon think of the cemetery. So, despite Lawrence's severe injuries, they had no choice but to carry him and leave. As they had to traverse two large mountains, Everett had bought enough dried food and water before setting out.

The rain had made the mountain paths treacherous, but for soldiers, it was manageable. They needed to increase their speed. Otherwise, if Victor discovered they had been at the cemetery, he would be able to infer their route.

Dylan carried Lawrence on his back, and everyone else carried provisions and water. Once they entered the mountains, they encountered many snakes, insects, rodents, and even wild animals. Dense vines and weeds obstructed their path, so Everett and Rafael took the lead, clearing a path with their blades.

Halfway up the mountain, Rafael cut

some branches and brush on the

other side and ran back and forth several times to make it look like

someone had been there. Then net

about fifty paces from the end of the path, they set up some rudimentary traps. With Sunstrike in hand and the thick vines around them, these traps were not difficult to set.

As expected, Victor and his troops stormed into the cemetery two hours after Rafael and the others

had left. They found evidence that Rafael and the others had been there, and discovered several guards who had been tied up. When questioned, the guards revealed that Rafael and his team had been there for seven or eight days.

"Rafael is cunning-pursue them!" Victor roared.

The skilled fighters led the way, followed by the main group as they ascended the mountain, pursuing along the path the enemy had fled. With Victor in the lead, he and his elite forces quickly reached the halfway point. Seeing the two newly cut paths, Victor sneered, "A mere trick. Split up and pursue them on both paths!"

He only sent ten martial experts with a couple of ordinary soldiers to the left, while he and the rest went on the path straight ahead.

But not long after, they heard screams coming from the left.

Victor's heart tightened—had they encountered Rafael and his group?

"Traps! There are traps!"

The cries of alarm continued. Victor leaped up a tall tree and saw wooden stakes wrapped in vines flying towards them.

Having already lost six or seven men to these crude wooden traps, Victor was furious.

"Pursue them! This is my territory. No need for idle chatter when you see the Hell Monarch—kill them! Anyone who brings me the Hell Monarch's head will be rewarded with ten thousand silver coins!"