

War Song 651

Chapter 651

In Pathfinders Guild, Kyle held a letter in his hand as he approached Everett.

"Sage Everett, Rafael wrote to me and asked me to go to the capital. He said he needs my help."

Everett sat in meditation with his eyes closed and didn't respond. He had been angry for quite some time, and his temper showed no signs of cooling. He didn't want to deal with anyone, and wasn't letting anyone leave the mountain.

As a result, those who typically ventured out were now stuck here, while those who had gone out and hadn't returned didn't dare to come back. Winona was an example.

Before Everett left for the Southern Frontier, he had strictly ordered that no one was to construct residences in the northern part of the mountain. He had plans for that land. He wanted to build a five-story Starcatcher Tower. It would allow them to reach for the moon and practice martial arts, which would be very helpful for training their Lightfoot Skill.

More importantly, he had other reasons for wanting it.

Everett had intended to begin construction in the spring of next year. But upon returning, he found that they had already jumped the gun and started building residences in the northern part of the mountain.

The northern part of the mountain had a high elevation, and there was a waterfall across it. In other words, they wanted to build residences there so they could enjoy the beautiful scenery.

It was infuriating how little ambition they had, and how they prioritized enjoyment over practicality.

Did they expect him not to be angry? How could he not be angry by that?

And Adrian, his unreliable fellow apprentice, had publicly announced that he was in isolation training and wouldn't be coming out.

Fine. Adrian could hide away all he wanted. Everett held grudges, and he remembered things for a lifetime. This matter wasn't over.

If Starcatcher Tower wasn't built by next year, he wouldn't let it slide.

Everett stayed silent, so Kyle repeated carefully, "Sage Everett, it's Rafael. His letter was sent in such a hurry, so it must be important. I'll head out and find out what's going on, and return as soon as I can."

Though Everett was reluctant to acknowledge him, the mention of Rafael's name prompted a faint, barely audible hum from him.

Kyle knew that quiet acknowledgment was Everett's greatest concession. If it hadn't been for Rafael's sake, Kyle would have received a sharp rebuke instead.

Kyle quickly thanked Everett. "I'll head down the mountain right away. If there's anything important, I'll write back to you. If it's nothing major, I'll return as soon as I'm done."

After he finished speaking, Kyle hurriedly saluted and left. As soon as he stepped outside, his fellow apprentices surrounded him. Even Adrian, who had declared he was in isolation training, watched from a distance. "How did it go? Is Sage Everett still angry?"

"Do you think he's really going to make us tear down Orchid Enclave?"

"What are you talking about? Orchid Enclave? That's a training room! We need to present the same story to Sage Everett!"

"Yes, exactly! It's a training room!" Everyone nodded vigorously in agreement.

Kyle quickly said, "Sage Everett hasn't cooled off yet, but he's allowing me to head down the mountain. I'll lay low for a bit. Send me a letter once he's calmed down, and I'll return."

With envy and resentment present in their eyes, Kyle's fellow apprentices watched as he grabbed his sword. Then, he quickly mounted his horse and galloped away.

The rest of the apprentices turned to

look at Adrian, who had his hands on his hips and struck a rather dramatic pose. The wind tousled his hair, which he hadn't bothered to comb properly due to his frustration,

causing him to look like a ghastly

figure.

With a sharp turn, he said coolly, "Close the doors!"

The apprentices of Pathfinders Guild sighed. When would their mentor dare to confront Everett directly? Adrian always found a way to avoid it, and it was exasperating.

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As Kyle rode hard, he felt a wave of exhilaration.

Usually, he stayed in Meadow Ridge during the winter and spent most of his time wandering through the mountains and rivers. This time, he had helped his fellow apprentices hurriedly build the residential area, Orchid Enclave, while Everett was away.

However, they hadn't expected Everett to return so soon and catch them in the act.

Upon arriving at the capital, Kyle discovered he was called to paint for Jacob. Jacob kept apologizing and said he should have gone to Meadow Ridge instead, but he was swamped with trivial matters that kept him tied down.

Kyle chuckled softly, and there was a glimmer of amusement dancing in his eyes. "It's perfect timing. I've been meaning to check on Carissa."

He felt a deep gratitude for Jacob's request. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to leave Meadow Ridge at all. So, he felt obliged to fulfill Jacob's request.

When he heard the details, however, he frowned.

"The accuracy won't be high," he

said, "especially since you don't have

a painting of her when she was

young. I have to rely solely on your description to create an image of her current appearance. I'd consider it a win if I manage to capture even 75 percent of the details accurately."

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Jacob understood the difficulty of the situation. After a moment's thought, he suggested, "How about this? I'll sketch a rough outline, and you can fill in the details with my descriptions." Kyle regarded him, and asked, "You don't remember what she looks like, right?"

Jacob's expression twisted with pain. "I always thought I would remember her forever, but when I try to recall her face now, all I can see are flashes of her smile and her running toward me and calling out to me. But her actual features? No matter how hard I try, I can't conjure up a clear image."

"Then you won't be able to draw it yourself," Kyle said as he shook his head. "Don't beat yourself up over it. It's been over a decade. Forgetting is quite normal, especially with painful memories. Our minds tend to protect us from hurt. Remembering her brings you pain, so you'll slowly forget those memories." Kyle patted Jacob's shoulder.

"But if she were to stand before you again, you would recognize her instantly. People grow and change, especially girls. It's not a big deal. Just describe however much you remember. Focus on her basic shape and outline, which are the most important. Also, any distinct facial features, like whether she has moles, birthmarks, or if her eyebrows had any particular shape. You should also tell me if she was slim or plump."

Jacob turned to Rafael and Carissa. "You two should go out. You're both on leave today, so you should go and do what you feel like doing."

Rafael immediately took Carissa's hand and stood up, pulling her toward the door. "Let's go to Richspire Peak."

Carissa looked up at the gloomy sky. "But it looks like it's going to rain."

Rafael was annoyed. If it rained, they wouldn't be able to see the golden sun rays on Richspire Peak. He had been planning this for so long, and now, it seemed it might fall through again.

"Why don't we visit Leona instead?" Carissa suggested. "Rainy days tend to be a bit dreary. We can even liven things up a bit. Let's bring Mother along, and send someone to get Kiera. What do you think?"

Seeing the excitement in her eyes, Rafael stifled his impulse to complain about bringing Helen along. "Okay. As long as it makes you happy."

Helen rarely stepped out of her courtyard these days. Violet used to take her on outings whenever she had free time, but she was now mostly in Leona's courtyard. Helen was starting to feel a bit bored.

The prospect of visiting Leona filled Helen with delight. She instructed Gillian and Mindy to prepare an abundance of supplements, not caring whether Leona could even finish them. Helen's only thought was to bring as much as possible.

"To be honest, I'm not fond of Heather," Helen confessed, "but Leona is such a sweet girl. She's always been kind and lovable. After everything she's been through, it just breaks my heart. And that poor baby... With a father like that the baby didn't even get a chance to experience the world. It's truly heart-wrenching."

Her voice caught as she spoke. It was a mother's instinct to despise the cruelty of the world, and Helen couldn't understand how Heather could be so cold-hearted.

Gillian interjected gently, "Lady Helen, you mustn't mention such things in front of Lady Leona. We wouldn't want to upset her and make her cry."

Helen shot her a sharp glance. "Do you think I'm a fool? Why would I kick a puppy when it's down? What do you take me for? Do you think I don't have a sense of decency?"

Gillian chuckled, and offered a

flattering reply, "Of course not. You're always kind and

compassionate, especially towards Lady Leona. You'd never bring such painful memories or offer shallow comfort. You'd just chat

about everyday things to put her at

ease."

Helen nodded, but in her heart, she was disappointed. Didn't that mean she couldn't share those comforting words she had prepared? What a pity! Helen wanted nothing more than for Leona to move past her pain and look toward the future.

Sensing Helen's hesitation, Gillian

clarified, "Few people can

comprehend what Lady Leona has endured. Lady Carissa has also told

everyone to leave Lady Leona in no

peace so she could take her time to heal. Now that several days have passed, it's time for some happy times. Otherwise, it could suffocate her spirit."

"I understand. Let's go. They're getting into the carriage already," Helen said briskly.

Leona's condition had improved significantly. With Alana and Leah's company, Leona was able to take light walks in the courtyard.

Violet spent the majority of her days here. It wasn't out of worry since Alana and Leah were present, and no one could harm Leona now. It was simply because Violet felt helpless in her inability to support Leona. Violet's heart ached for Leona, and so she visited as much as possible.

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Leona had many visitors today, so she hurriedly changed her clothes before stepping out to greet them.

Helen noticed Leona's rosy complexion, and felt relieved. It seemed Leona was doing just fine, and her cheeks were even brighter than her own. After the formal greetings, Helen took a seat. Upon inquiring, she learned that Leona had just finished practicing martial arts with Alana.

Helen grumbled inwardly. It was true what people said-spend some time with martial artists, and even proper young women would be throwing punches.

Leona chuckled awkwardly. "I was feeling a bit bored and thought I'd join Alana for some training, but I don't think I can reach that level of elegance to show off at any events."

As usual, Helen was blunt and said, "Martial arts itself is hardly elegant and fit for high society, so you shouldn't worry about that. Just do what makes you happy."

Gillian cleared her throat loudly.

Didn't Helen feel awkward saying that? Most of the people present were martial artists!

Helen glared at Gillian. "Stop that. I didn't say anything wrong. It's true martial arts aren't really fit for refined settings, but not everything has to be. Martial arts is practical. It keeps one healthy and helps one protect oneself. Leona, I support you in practicing it." Leona blushed slightly, and said, "Thank you for your support, Aunt Helen. But honestly, I didn't do much. I just followed along and got a bit sweaty, which felt nice."

"Right. A good sweat can do wonders for your body," Helen said as she nodded sagely, trying to appear wise.

Yet the truth was, Helen disliked swearing and physical activities. She couldn't stand the sticky feeling, nor the way her clothes would cling and smell after a workout.

Rafael glanced at Alana, impressed by her method. No matter how heavy his heart felt, a good session of practicing martial arts could help him vent and feel better. He had experienced it firsthand.

"But you also need to take care of yourself. Your body still needs time to heal, so don't rush into any intense training," Carissa said.

Alana chimed in, "It's not like we really got into it. She just moved around according to her own ability. It hardly counts as real training."

Leona felt a bit embarrassed. "Yes, that's true. I just moved a little."

Violet leaned closer to Carissa, subtly distancing them from Rafael, and whispered, "Alana's really blunt in what she says. If I heard someone talking about my skills like that, it wouldn't matter if it was true or not. I'd be furious!" Carissa laughed, her eyes sparkling as she looked at Violet. "But you're still not as good as I am."

Violet grinned. "I concede to that."

Years ago, Carissa had proven that

fact. When they had both gone to the Southern Frontier, Violet had expected Carissa to have let her skills slip as she had focused on net

settling down. Violet had thought she would easily surpass Carissa then, but she realized there was still a noticeable gap between them in their very first battle.

It was only a narrow gap, but it was still there.

Before long, Kiera arrived with Logan in tow. Since her marriage, Kiera had only returned to Hell Monarch Estate twice, and both times it was only for a little while.

The young couple was deeply in

love. After tying the knot, Logan moved into Ivory Estate. They often went on trips together, and they would usually spend most of the month away from home. When they were home, they only visited Hell Monarch Estate to check in.

Kiera looked radiant. After a brief exchange of greetings, Rafael quickly whisked Logan away.

In their presence, Logan appeared refined and polite, the epitome of a talented young man on the verge of great achievement. It was hard to believe he was the same person known for his playful nature and disregard for studying. Rafael welcomed the chance to chat with another man, eager to escape the all-female company that left him with little to contribute in conversation.

Logan shuffled his feet, feeling like a timid mouse in front of his brother-in-law. Once they reached the main hall and sat down, he found himself waiting quietly for Rafael to ask something.

Rafael had initially planned to ask

where they had been exploring, but

seeing Logan's anxious demeanor

drained his desire for conversation.

They simply sat there, sipping their coffee and nibbling on snacks, their gazes drifting outside.

After a while, Logan stood up.

"Where are you going?" Rafael asked casually.

Feeling a bit awkward, Logan replied, "I need to...uh, relieve myself. Would you like to come along?"

"No, thanks!" Rafael said, shaking his head as he picked up another pastry.

Well, he did have the slightest urge to go, but what would it look like if two men went off together for that purpose?

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Time slipped away as they spent the day at Leona's side. After half the day had passed, Alana started ushering people out, insisting Leona needed her rest. Also, the rain had let up, so everyone returned to their own residence.

Logan visibly exhaled in relief as he took Kiera's hand and walked briskly ahead. As he moved, he suddenly realized he had been impolite. He quickly stepped aside to let Helen and Rafael pass first.

Helen watched her son-in-law, and sighed inwardly. Logan was such a clueless man. When he and Kiera got married, he looked clean and fair, but now he looked tanned and grimy. Even Kiera's skin tone had become darker. Those who didn't know them might think Kiera married a farmer.

Fortunately, Kiera liked Logan well enough, and being a member of the Quinton family gave him some redeeming points in Helen's eyes.

Carissa had been trailing behind, observing the couple hand in hand as they happily swayed along. Their affection for each other was undeniable. But when Kiera and Logan suddenly stopped, Carissa suddenly became aware that she was also holding Rafael's hand. However, it felt different.

Logan and Kiera's bond felt natural, filled with energy and playful swaying. It was a sweet, comfortable intimacy.

But she and Rafael... Carissa noticed that their hands hung there together without any movement. In fact, their hands were almost stiff, as if they were just two pieces of wood glued together.

Carissa sighed inwardly. Her guild junior really lacked a sense of romance.

Once they returned to Hell Monarch Estate and escorted Helen to her room, Carissa and Rafael made their way to the study to see how the painting was going.

Kyle had already painted the paintings, which were displayed nearby. Jacob stood beside one of them with reddened eyes.

Rafael and Carissa stepped forward for a closer look. The painting depicted a girl with twin ponytails on her head. She had a round face, big eyes, a small nose, and slightly fuller lips adorned with a red mole on her upper lip.

Next to that painting hung another featuring a couple whose features bore a resemblance to Jacob. It was likely his parents.

Kyle was still at work, but this time he was painting the likeness of an adult woman, presumably using the paintings of the seven-year-old girl and her parents to infer what she might look like when she grew up.

Another painting lay on a nearby

chair, and Carissa stepped over to take a look. The girl's face was still round, though not as plump as

before.

were much more defined. The features hadn't changed significantly, but the contrast

between childhood and adulthood

felt completely different.

The painting Kyle was working on was a version of the girl who looked slightly gaunt. Since they didn't know what she had gone through, her face might change based on her experiences. However, the painting wasn't done yet. Rafael turned to Jacob and asked, "Does it look like her? Is this how you remember her?"

Jacob opened his mouth, but nothing came out. After a long pause, he choked out, "It does. It looks just like her. Mr. Spencer is truly remarkable."

"How many paintings are you doing, Kyle?" Carissa asked.

"The more, the better," Kyle replied without looking up, his brush dancing across the canvas. "Fat, generally fat, very fat... Neither fat nor thin, thin, generally thin, extremely thin... The more I can paint, the better."

Carissa watched as Kyle deftly

painted the eyebrows and eyes with just a few strokes, noting how the brows weren't as dark as they had been in the girl's childhood picture. int Growing up often meant grooming one's features, and a child's eyebrows could be too bold.

"Jacob, what's your sister's name?"

"Jaina," Jacob replied softly.

After a moment's pause, Jacob gathered himself and continued, "My name is Jacob, and my sister's name is Jaina. Our grandfather named us both. When she was born, she was chubby and fair, so our grandfather hoped she would lead a pure life. He had to choose between Jaina and Joanna, but he ultimately settled on Jaina."

Carissa looked at the portrait of Jaina when she was young. She truly was adorable. Under Kyle's brushstrokes, Jaina's eyes sparkled like a gem.

Then, Carissa turned her attention to the painting Kyle was working on, and an odd sense of familiarity washed over her. But when she turned back to the other painting, the feeling vanished, leaving her puzzled.

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Kyle looked up and said, "You two should head out for now. We're not finishing anytime soon. There's still plenty I need to adjust, and we might end up painting a dozen or more portraits."

Rafael stared blankly at the completed painting of the adult woman on the chair. He felt the woman in the portrait resembled Carissa's mom. Not the Melanie he had seen before heading to the Southern Frontier, but the one he remembered from his teenage years. Back then, Melanie had a rounder face, and her smile was soft and gentle.

"Let's go," Carissa said as she tugged on his sleeves lightly.

Rafael glanced down at her. "Carissa, don't you think she resembled someone?"

"Who?" Carissa asked, her gaze drifting back to the painting. There was no sense of familiarity for her.

Seeing that she didn't share his thoughts, Rafael quickly amended his statement. "Perhaps I was just seeing things. Let's step out so we don't disturb them."

As they walked out, Rafael recalled his younger days of following Salvador to Northwatch Estate. Back then, Melanie was still quite young, and Carissa hadn't yet been sent to Meadow Ridge. Carissa was an adorable little girl, soft and sweet, with a lively and playful personality. Being the only daughter after six older brothers, she was greatly cherished, and her lively, gentle nature made her all the more endearing.

Yet, the portrait of Jaina as a child didn't resemble Carissa at all. Carissa had always been much prettier. That painting on the chair truly did remind him of his mother-in-law back then, though she was older than the woman depicted in the portrait.

He didn't dare mention this to Carissa, as he was afraid it would remind her of her family and sadden her.

Feeling it was still early and with the rain having stopped, he was about to ask Carissa if she wanted to go to Richspire Peak when she instructed Lulu, "I'm heading to the treasury. Have Rod come here. I need to talk to him."

Rafael swallowed the question he had been about to ask and instead inquired, "What do you need to see Travis for?"

Carissa replied, "It's about Alana and Leah. They refuse to take any pay for looking after Leona, claiming it's to atone for their mistakes. But Samuel's misdeeds shouldn't be something they bear alone. Their guild is indeed struggling, and we can't leave them in debt. What's due should be paid."

"Okay. I'll wait for you in the room," Rafael said with a nod.

The treasury consisted of three separate rooms. Carissa usually managed the accounts in her own private space, so she called Travis to that particular room.

As she entered, she noticed Travis now wore the embroidered tunic that showed he was the commander of the estate's household army. He looked much more impressive than before, with far less of his former rogue-like demeanor. It was clear that working in such a prestigious household had truly transformed him.

Just as the thought entered her mind, Travis plopped down on her desk, grabbed a quill and bit down on it. Then, he mumbled, "What's up?" Carissa propped her head on her hand, and silently retracted her earlier thoughts.

No, Travis hadn't changed at all.

"It's about Alana and Leah's wages. They say they don't want any pay, but they've worked so hard. So, I

want you to take their wages and et

send them back to your mentor Don't mention it's their pay, just say it's a reward for you doing a good job here in the estate," Carissa said.

"Can't I tell Alana and Leah?" Travis asked.

"No. Just say it's your reward." Carissa reached over and snatched the quill from his mouth, rubbing it against his tunic a couple of times. "Don't bite it. We shouldn't waste books or quills."

Travis stared at her, his eyes wide with surprise. "You've changed. You used to say weapons shouldn't be wasted, but you didn't mind ruining quills when you used them as little darts Sage Everett even gave you a beating for it, and you limped around for two weeks."

Carissa felt her face flush in embarrassment. "Let's not bring that up. That's all I called you here to discuss, so make sure you get someone to send the money to your master."

"Got it," Travis said. He understood that his guild seniors had indeed worked hard, and staying in a place like Gracehold Estate for so many months must have been tough. "But once I accept this, you can't tell Alana or Leah about it. Otherwise, I won't let you off."

"I won't say a word. Just don't get drunk and spill the beans in front of Vivi," Carissa replied as she unlocked the cabinet and pulled out a few banknotes that added up to three hundred silver coins. "Let's send back three hundred first..."

She counted out the banknotes, then kept one away. "Let's make it two hundred. Three hundred is a bit much, and your master will suspect something. We can send the rest of it at the end of the year."

Travis happily accepted the notes. "Actually, even two hundred would raise suspicion. My master thinks I can't accomplish anything on my own. She thinks you all helped me so much on the battlefield, and that's how I managed to get the hundred gold coins." He folded the notes neatly, and added, "By the way, Jacob's informant at Valor Estate reported that Harvey sent a note to Aurora, but they don't know what it says."

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Carissa was a bit surprised. "Jacob has spies inside Valor Estate?"

"Yep. He has quite a few in all the estates within the capital, though some aren't as deeply embedded."

"Then why don't you tell him directly? Why tell me?"

Travis replied, "Ever since Kyle arrived, Jacob's been holed up in the study. I figured he was doing something on Prince Rafael's orders. Wouldn't it be better if you went back and told Prince Rafael?"

Carissa was even more puzzled. "But why are the spies reporting to you? Are you in charge of this? Does Jacob trust you that much?"

Travis grinned with pride. "Of course! Did you really think I was just a drill instructor? Jacob said I might look rough around the edges, but I'm meticulous when it comes to details. That's why he put me in charge of the spy network." After speaking, he did a few midair flips and flipped his way right out of the room.

Carissa was left speechless. She had always thought Travis was like a wild monkey-sure, he could train troops, but how could Jacob have entrusted him with the careful, delicate task of handling the spy network?

If anything went wrong, the whole plan would fall apart!

She returned to the room to find Rafael, and mentioned what Travis had reported. Then, she asked, "Did you and Jacob plant a lot of spies in the big noble families?"

Rafael leaned back on the chaise lounge and pulled her onto his lap, settling her by his side. "That's right. We placed them wherever we could, but the roles they play vary. Some slipped in as servants, some managed to get close to the heads of the family, and others joined as guards."

"Things moved that fast?" Carissa was amazed as she glanced sideways at his handsome face. "So all this time, while things seemed quiet, you were busy setting up this network?"

Rafael didn't sound resigned, just calm as usual. "We've got plenty of skilled people, but we can't openly send them to spy or monitor others. So we had to use this clumsy method. But don't underestimate it our people are well-trained."

"I can see that. Isn't Grand Princess Eleanor also always slipping people into the noble families?"

"She's different. Those old noble

families have got some backbone. After all, their ancestors earned their titles through loyalty and service to the court. They've got family rules Unless they're truly desperate, they won't support a rebellion. Take the Earl of Gracehold's family, for example. Samuel might be rotten to the core, but the Earl of Gracehold family's loyalty to the crown isn't any less than the others. Families like that can't be bought. If you can't buy them, you have to destroy them."

Carissa nodded. "I figured as much. Ever since Samuel left with Celeste and earned the reputation of abandoning his rightful wife, the rising star in their family was ruined Without a proper successor, the Earl of Gracehold's family was half-destroyed. Then, when Samuel went mad and hurt Leona, it brought down the wrath of the king, and the family was blamed for failing to raise their sons properly. All their young men were demoted. Unless one of them rises as Samuel did, the Earl of Gracehold's family is done for."

"Exactly," Rafael said. His gaze was distant, and there was a smile on his lips.

"Do you know which families Eleanor's daughters have infiltrated?"

"I have some ideas. Even Uncle Hayden's household has someone, but he's incredibly sharp."

Carissa was shocked. "You're saying Eleanor sent someone to Uncle Hayden...to serve him?"

"The woman was probably aiming to become his bed companion. Uncle Hayden's wife has been gone for years, and his son is a county duke and is ruling quietly in the corner the realm. What Yuvan and the others want is the support of local powers. If they can control Uncle Hayden, they'll have his son under their thumb. After all, Unele Hayden returned to the capital alone without any of his children or grandchildren. Speaking of which, he mentioned last time that I should take you to visit him."

"What? Why didn't you tell me that? Let's go next time you have a day off." Rafael sighed.

His next day off? Again?

At this rate, would they ever make it to Richspire Peak before next year?

Chapter 657

The next day, Rafael returned to the Supreme Court, and Carissa checked in on the study. Kyle and Jacob still hadn't come out, so she had someone send in some food but didn't disturb them.

Violet came over to speak with her briefly, and Carissa nodded. "Let's go, and we'll drop Ryan off at the academy on the way."

Evan and Ryan had become the best of friends. Although Evan didn't qualify to attend the academy, he had learned quite a bit just by following Ryan around.

The carriage ride was filled with chatter, with Carissa smiling and occasionally joining in. After they dropped Ryan off at the academy, the carriage turned around and stopped at a well-known coffeehouse in the capital.

The two of them didn't sit down inside. Instead, they slipped out through a side door and walked a few streets over, arriving at Blueflower Alley.

Violet stopped in front of a residence, and knocked. After a moment, the door opened, and Carmen greeted them softly. "Lady Carissa, Ms. Spencer, my father is waiting inside."

Carissa asked, "How did you get out? Weren't you staying with the Lester family? Didn't Greta follow you?"

Carmen replied, "My dad isn't well, so I came to visit. Greta had to go see my sister, so she didn't come along."

Of course, Henry wasn't actually sick. He'd simply used the excuse to arrange this meeting with Carissa.

Carissa and Violet found Henry in the study. Though he wasn't ill, his hair was messy, and he looked pale-enough to convince an outsider. He sat slumped in his chair, his posture slightly hunched. Even when he raised his eyes, they lacked their usual energy. "Dad, Lady Carissa and Ms. Spencer are here," Carmen said.

"I see them," Henry replied flatly. He studied Carissa and Violet for a moment before saying, "Please, sit."

Neither Carissa nor Violet bothered with formalities, and sat down directly.

"I heard from Carmen that you're willing to help rescue her mom," Henry began, getting straight to the point. "What's the plan? I need to know."

However, Carissa countered with her own question. "Why don't you tell me first how many concubines has Grand Princess Eleanor arranged for you, Lord Henry? How many children have they borne? And how many concubines have died?"

Henry's eyes were cold. "There were a dozen or more concubines, maybe even more than twenty. As for how many children... I don't know. I lost count. The daughters I've actually seen have only just been a few."

"What do you mean by you lost count?" Carissa pressed.

"A lot of them died. I don't want to remember." Henry turned his face away. For a brief moment, there was a flicker of pain in his eyes. "Just like you probably don't want to recall the scene of your family being slaughtered, Lady Carissa." Carissa exchanged a look with Violet, and there was a shared understanding in their eyes.

"You don't have to doubt me," Henry said, glancing at the two women, his gaze suddenly filled with hatred. "I hate her more than either of you could. I'd like nothing more than to see her torn apart, but I won't take any risks without knowing your plan first."

His hatred was real and impossible to hide.

Seeing that Carissa and Violet

remained silent, Carmen quickly added, "Your Grace, believe in my dad. He will help us. He loves my

mom deeply, but he has no way met

rescue her on his own. And if the grand princess falls, our family-the Marquis of Grovehill's family-won't be under her control anymore. We truly want to work with you."

Carissa could tell that Carmen genuinely wanted to save her mom, and was sincere in her desire to oppose Eleanor. Carmen had a close relationship with the Lester family. Her family had been relying on Eleanor's protection, but at the same time, they had to make hefty tributes to her. Much of their earnings went straight into Eleanor's coffers, and no one could tolerate that indefinitely.

There was also the harsh treatment Melanie Lester had endured at Eleanor's hands.

Carissa turned to Henry. "I'm willing to tell you the whole plan, but first, I need to make something clear. If you betray us or reveal our plan to Grand Princess Eleanor, and our operation fails, I have the means to protect myself. But your daughter won't be so lucky. She'll die, and it won't be a peaceful death. You know how cruel Grand Princess Eleanor can be."

"Of course I know." He looked over at Carmen, a father's affection softening his gaze. "Even if it costs me my life, I won't endanger hers."

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Tears welled up in Carmen's eyes. "Dad, as long as we can save Mom and take down that venomous woman, I would give my life a thousand times over."

Henry reached out and motioned her closer, his tone full of warmth as he said, "I'm doing all this so we can live peacefully as a family, silly girl. No one needs to die."

"Dad!" Carmen knelt and rested her head on his knee, her eyes reddened with emotion. "I've been waiting for that day for so long! I just want you and Mom to be safe. I want my sister and I to be able to stay by your side."

Henry's eyes softened with a tinge of red as well. He gently stroked her hair. "Stand up, now. Don't embarrass yourself in front of the princess consort. You're too old to be acting like a child."

Carmen wiped away her tears and stood, a little embarrassed. "I apologize, Your Grace."

Carissa simply offered a faint smile, dismissing the scene. "Before I reveal my plan, perhaps you can tell me what the grand princess has been up to recently."

Henry replied, "I don't know much, but I do know she's trying to marry someone off to Thomas. The woman was originally part of a performing troupe from Stonebridge County. She's skilled in martial arts, but after the troupe disbanded, she was left to fend for herself. At some point, she was attacked by bandits.

"Grand Princess Eleanor rescued her and brought her to the capital. When I first saw her, I thought she was going to be forced on me as another concubine, but that wasn't the case. The grand princess kept her at the estate and taught her etiquette and manners." "How could the Farrell family agree to a marriage for Thomas with someone of unknown origin? So, she's going to fabricate an identity for this woman, right? What identity is she planning?" Carissa asked.

Henry nodded. "Exactly. I'm Grand Princess Eleanor's prince consort, so she'll pose as my distant cousin, a daughter of the Sanford family from Stonebridge County. She'll go by the name Lisette Sanford. If the Farrell family sends someone to investigate, they'll be able to confirm that her background is legitimate."

Stonebridge County was Eleanor's fiefdom, so it would be easy for her to create a false identity there.

"What was the woman's original name?" Carissa asked.

"Darin."

"Is she living at Grovehill Estate now, or is she still staying at Harmony Palace?"

"She's already moved into Grovehill Estate as my 'cousin', and my mom is the matchmaker for the marriage. Thomas' grandmother and my mom are cousins, so this marriage is practically set in stone."

Violet's eyes narrowed with cold disdain. "A woman with such an unclear background would never be able to marry into the Farrell family."

Carissa gently placed her hand on Violet's to calm her. "It's not a big deal. Grand Princess Eleanor's true goal is to control Thomas. As long as we can find a way to have Thomas stationed in some remote area, her control over him would be useless." There was a hint of mockery in Henry's eyes.

Typical women. They were so narrow-minded, yet they talked as if they were warriors.

Violet frowned, and thought for a moment. "But Prince Rafael saved Thomas. If we don't use him for our own ends, wouldn't that effort be wasted?"

"What do we need him for? We don't have any major plans that require his involvement. As long as Thomas remembers that debt, that's all that matters," Carissa explained.

Violet nodded reluctantly. "Alright. If that's the case, we won't interfere with this."

But Carmen was starting to get anxious. "How can we just let that happen? Thomas has endured so much for the kingdom, and he's the hero who reclaimed the Southern Frontier. We can't leave his marriage to be manipulated by others! What if we secretly tell Thomas the truth? We can warn him that her identity is fake, and make sure he thinks carefully before proceeding."

"That would only alert the enemy," Carissa replied, her gaze softening as she looked at Carmen. "I understand you don't want to see a loyal man be manipulated, but even if the marriage is finalized, we can reveal the truth to him once we've taken down Grand Princess Eleanor."

"Then we need to move quickly with our plans," Carmen urged.

Henry lifted his cup. "So, can you share your plan with me now?"

Carissa nodded. "Since we're committed to this alliance, I don't mind telling you. We've set the date for the fifteenth day of October, the Illumina Festival. I remember that every year, Grand Princess Eleanor invites Spirit Elders to her estate to set up an altar and pray to the heavens for blessings. She claims it's to ensure prosperity for the kingdom, and many noblewomen and wives of officials will attend."

Chapter 659

As they left Blueflower Alley, Violet immediately spoke up.

"You were right! Henry can't be trusted. Aside from spilling information about Darin, he wouldn't even give up anything about Harvey. Plus, he still calls himself 'the prince consort'. It's clear he's not ashamed of the title. But it's strange. Why would he tell us about Darin in the first place?"

"He wants us to stop the marriage because his mom is the matchmaker. He doesn't want to involve his mom, and he's trying to preserve the relationship between her and Thomas' mom. His heart is with his family. As for whether he has any genuine affection for Melanie Lester or fatherly love for his daughters, only he knows," Carissa explained.

"That bastard!" Violet cursed. Then, she paused and asked in confusion, "But you told him our plan. He's definitely going to run straight to Eleanor and spill everything."

A sharp glint flashed in Carissa's eyes. "That's because we aren't making our move during the Illumina Festival, but on the first day of October during the Emberfest Festival.

"On that day, Eleanor will invite high priests to her residence to perform rites for the souls of the dead. Many kind-hearted ladies will donate money, or personally bring scripture they've copied to burn at the altar. The people participating in that ceremony are truly compassionate."

She continued, "On the other hand, during the Illumina Festival, she'll have Spirit Elders praying for blessings, but not everyone attending will have kind hearts. Many will be there to network and make a show for the king. Eleanor has publicly declared that day to be for the kingdom's prosperity, so we can't act then."

Violet laughed. "Got it. So she'll think we'll strike on the fifteenth day, but won't expect anything during the Emberfest Festival. Do you have a plan?"

Carissa shook her head. "No need for a plan. We'll use the most direct method we know from our time in Meadow Ridge."

Violet grinned, clearly pleased. "A brute force approach-sounds perfect! How many people are you planning to send in?"

In Meadow Ridge, the different factions stuck together when facing outsiders, but they also had internal conflicts. When disputes arose, the solution was simple-storm the gates, fight it out. If they lost, they got beaten. If they won, they reclaimed their honor. Carissa shook her head. "We need to find a few skilled fighters to go in disguised as assassins. As for the rest, we'll leave that to the Capital Guard."

"Are we attacking in broad daylight?" Violet looked surprised.

"No, the Emberfest Festival

ceremonies at Harmony Palace

usually begin at sunset and last until

sunrise the next day. The high

priests chant prayers for the souls of the departed. Those with kind hearts will come to transcribe the

no

scriptures for the souls they wish to guide. They'll keep vigil at Harmony Palace all night long."

Violet's eyes sparkled with excitement. "And they would never suspect we'd choose such a day! After all, most people tend to avoid things like soul guiding."

Carissa nodded. "Actually, Rod's

master has always done this. Every night, she chants prayers to guide the souls of the wrongfully deceased or those who died far from home. When they hear the chants, they gather quietly to listen. This helps them release their grievances and enter the cycle of reincarnation more swiftly."

Violet shivered at the thought. "How do you know this? Did Rod tell you?"

Carissa smiled. "Yes, he did. He says it's all about compassion. Whether or not there are ghosts in this world, those who are willing to do such

things must possess a kind heart

and great love. That's why, despite their inability to pay rent for so many years, they've never been kicked

out."

Violet replied, "Rod's master definitely has a kind heart. Even though she can be fierce, the fact that she has taken in so many abandoned infants shows she's a good person at heart."

Carissa took Violet's hand and gave it a gentle shake as they walked forward. "Exactly! There are indeed more good people in this world."

"Right. I need to inform my godbrother about his marriage," Violet said.

"Are there bandits in Stonebridge County?" Carissa wondered, thinking about the bandits.

Nowadays, the kingdom was stable, and bandits only roam in more remote areas. Since Eleanor had stationed Yuvan's troops in Stonebridge County, there was no way they would allow bandits to thrive there. "It seems that the so-called life-saving debt that Darin wants to repay may hold some secrets even she doesn't know."

Chapter 660

After they returned to the coffeehouse, Violet and Carissa had a meal. After settling the bill, they exited through the main entrance and made their way back to the carriage.

On the way, Violet suddenly jumped down at a corner. She hid for a moment, then walked onto the main street and quickly blended in with the crowd.

These days, her attire was simple and unadorned. She wore only a silver hairpin in her updo. Of course, it wasn't easy for just anyone to track her, but it was always wise to be cautious.

Being a martial artist, she didn't find the walk to the Farrell family's residence tiring. After all, it wasn't that far.

When she arrived at the gates of the residence, she noticed a carriage parked on the right. Just then, Thomas was helping Alice down, followed by Opal and a maid.

Violet called out with a smile, "Well, I see that I've come at the perfect time! Are you all heading out?"

Opal smiled and replied, "Violet! It's been quite a while since we last saw you."

Violet smiled back and said, "I've been busy for days, and I finally found the time to visit today. But it seems you're all on your way out?"

Alice pulled her closer, and wrapped her arm around Violet's. "You arrived just in time! Come with us to Grovehill Estate and give your godbrother a hand."

"Give him a hand?" Violet thought for a moment and said, "Is the Kingsley family introducing a young lady to Thomas?"

Alice beamed. "Exactly! Yesterday, Gemma, that is, Madam Kingsley, visited and mentioned that the daughter of her cousin came to her for help. She's from the Sanford family in Stonebridge County. She has both good character and grace, but she's a bit older. Apparently, she was once engaged, but her fiancé passed away. In a small place like Stonebridge County, they have little understanding of the world. Since her fiancé died before they were married, they think she's a jinx. So, she's been putting off marriage until now. She came to see Gemma, and hoped to find a good match in the capital."

Violet clutched her hand. "A jinx? How could that be possible? She never even married, so how could she be a jinx? It doesn't make sense."

After helping Alice into the carriage, Violet turned to look at Thomas, who appeared somewhat helpless. After waiting for the driver to bring the horse forward, Thomas mounted his horse.

While in the carriage, Violet listened as Opal mentioned that several matchmakers had visited recently, but none had met Thomas's approval. This matter was dragging on without any resolution, and Gemma's mention of this suitable woman was fortuitous.

The woman was about 25 years old,

had a good character, and came from a respectable family. She was a promising match. Also, since she was willing to travel all the way to the capital for a marriage proposal, it was likely she would be willing to accompany Thomas if he were assigned a post elsewhere.

So, they decided to overlook Thomas' objections and meet her.

The Marquis of Grovehill's family had kept a low profile over the years, especially after Henry became a prince consort. Being a marquis family connected to the royal family, they had maintained a somewhat discreet reputation. Additionally, Eleanor had gained a lot of support before the miniature chastity belt sculpture incident. As time passed, the public began to forget the scandal, and it certainly didn't affect Henry's family's reputation.

So, Alice was genuinely excited about Gemma's personal endorsement of the match.

"Your godbrother is so difficult! He would say the woman wasn't good enough, and another looked like she couldn't handle the hardships of life. After all this time, he hasn't found a single one he likes. I'm getting anxious," she said, pulling Violet's hand anxiously.

"You know about that matter-that woman came over and confronted him directly! She's already married, yet she still acts so carelessly. Who knows if she'll come back again? This could ruin both our families' reputations!" Alice's concern was partly due to the fear of Viola showing up again. The only way to truly put an end to that was to secure a match for Thomas quickly.

Violet smiled reassuringly. "Well, let's go take a look. Even the best conditions won't matter if the two of them don't hit it off, right?"

"It would be fine if he wasn't so picky. Go with him to check her out. If she seems suitable, maybe you could persuade him a little," Alice urged earnestly. Violet was indeed curious to meet Darin, and she agreed, "Alright. If her character and everything else are in order, I'll definitely try to persuade Thomas."

