

War Song 661

Chapter 661

-

The Marquis of Grovehill's family had long been one of the prominent families in Starhaven. But the older the family got, the more they found themselves in a difficult position.

The main issue was that the family had grown rapidly, but there wasn't enough land or income to support everyone and maintain the wealth and status of the family.

The current marquis was Henry's father, Martin. Under his leadership, the family had gradually declined. After so many generations of wealth, the strict family rules had loosened, and the younger generation was less willing to endure the hardships of studying or practicing martial arts. Since they still had their noble status, they felt they would always have a comfortable life.

If it weren't for Henry marrying Eleanor, the Marquis of Grovehill's family might have already fallen into obscurity. Martin held no official position in the court, and very few members of the family held posts above the fifth rank.

As Violet stepped into Grovehill Estate, she noticed several intricately carved family crests-evidence of the Marquis of Grovehill's family's once-great prominence. They seemed fearful of being forgotten, with two crests prominently displayed in the main hall alone. The hall's decor showed signs of age, but the luxurious wooden furniture, seasoned by time, radiated a subtle, understated elegance.

When it came to matters of marriage proposals, it was best to avoid having too many people present as it could hinder the process. So, Gemma invited them to the side hall and sent for Lisette.

Violet noticed that Gemma had taken good care of her appearance. Despite her age, she still looked well. Henry also resembled her, especially in their brows and the way they spoke. "Please have some coffee," Gemma said with a warm smile.

She looked kind, but Violet knew Gemma was aware of the whole plan. Lisette wasn't really from the Gemma's family, and her name wasn't Lisette. Lisette Sanford was an identity Eleanor had fabricated. Creating a false identity for a Sanford family member surely required the cooperation of Gemma's own family, right?

As they sipped tea and exchanged pleasantries-polite flattery on both sides-Violet noticed Gemma eyeing Thomas several times. The rumors about him and Viola had circulated widely before finally settling down in recent days.

Gemma sipped her tea, and thought to herself that Thomas was indeed a striking young man. It was no wonder Viola was so persistent.

"Alice, you're truly blessed. Thomas is brave and capable, and he has accomplished much for the kingdom. Once he marries and starts a family, you will enjoy a life of comfort," she remarked.

Alice smiled and said, "Yes, we hope he will marry soon. I'd like to hold my grandchild soon!"

Alice's eagerness was evident, which prompted Gemma to summon a maid and instruct softly, "Please remind Lisette not to keep our guests waiting too long."

"Yes, Madam Gemma!" the maid replied, taking quick, light steps to the door before turning to leave.

In her chambers, Darin was already dressed, but she hesitated to leave.

As she gazed into the mirror, a wave of conflict washed over her. Eleanor had saved her life and brought her back to the palace, providing her with luxurious clothing and plenty of food. Though she wasn't

accustomed to such opulence, she knew it was Eleanor's kindness. The debt she owed Eleanor was

something she felt she could never repay.

Eleanor intended to marry her off, and Darin would have accepted any suitor-even one with a limp or blindness-so long as his intentions were honorable. Yet, the night before arriving at Grovehill Estate, Eleanor had a heart-to-heart with her. The first question Eleanor had asked was, "You said you wanted to repay your debt. Do you still mean that?"

Though Darin was just a young

woman, she believed in keeping her word. If she said she would repay her debt she intended to do so. But after affirming her commitment, she was taken aback by the shocking revelation-she was to marry Thomas, and draw him closer to Yuvan's side.

arry

If her efforts failed to sway Thomas, she was to find an opportunity to kill him.

The thought left her utterly flustered.

During her time at Harmony Palace, Darin had noticed some strange occurrences, but there were places she couldn't go. Though her suspicions nagged at her, she dared not investigate further.

One night, she had been jolted

awake by a woman's scream echoing through the halls. She

rushed to the door to see what had happened, only to be stopped by a guard who insisted she return to her room. He claimed a thief had been caught, and was being punished.

However, the scream she had heard was unmistakably female.

It was true that women could commit theft, but to sneak into a grand princess' residence? Did such a bold female thief exist? It was almost impossible to even imagine.

"Ms. Lisette, the people from the Farrell family have arrived," a maid said, entering her room and urging her to hurry. "Madam Gemma requests that you come out quickly."

Chapter 662

Darin composed her complex emotions, and said, "Let's go."

Now, she could only hope that the Farrell family would find her unsuitable. With Thomas' current status, he could marry anyone he wanted.

She was just someone with a fabricated identity.

As they entered the main hall, Darin covered her face with a fan and walked with delicate steps. Just learning to walk this way had taken her a lot of practice.

Gemma smiled brightly and said, "Lisette, greet Alice and Opal."

Darin curtsied respectfully to Alice and Opal. "Nice to meet you, Madam Alice, Madam Opal."

"And this is Major General Farrell," Gemma continued. "And this is Violet Spencer, Alice's goddaughter."

When Violet had entered earlier, Alice had already introduced her.

Darin lowered her fan and revealed her face, but she couldn't summon a shy demeanor. Instead, she greeted them like normal. "Nice to meet you, Major General Farrell, Ms. Spencer." Violet looked at her and returned the greeting. "Nice to meet you too, Ms. Sanford."

Thomas nodded politely. "Hello, Ms. Sanford."

Violet noticed Darin's well-defined features. She had wide eyes and moderately full lips that formed a beautiful curve. There was a small red mole on her upper lip, adding a playful touch to her otherwise dignified appearance. Darin was very attractive, but she didn't have the refined air of a noblewoman. Instead, she seemed more free-spirited, like someone used to life on the road.

There was nothing crude about her demeanor, and her manners were impeccable. Yet the essence of a woman who had lived by her wits in the world was hard to hide, especially to someone like Violet, who had seen her fair share. In fact, Darin shared a certain spirit-carefully masked by decorum-that occasionally surfaced, much like Carissa. This resemblance made Violet take a closer look at her.

An inexplicable sense of familiarity washed over Violet, although she couldn't pinpoint its source. Violet was certain she had never met Darin before, but the way Darin performed her greetings and settled into her seat felt oddly familiar. There was a sense of familiarity in the way Gemma and Henry moved. But since Gemma was Henry's mother, it wasn't surprising that they had similar expressions and gestures.

So, where did this feeling of familiarity with Darin come from?

Alice looked pleased. Darin's outfit was tastefully done, neither overly extravagant nor too plain. With clear, delicate features, she exuded a sense of grace and maturity that came with age.

Gemma noticed Alice's satisfied

expression, and sighed softly. "This

poor child has had a hard life. She

was engaged so young, yet she faced much criticism after her fiancé's untimely death. In a small place like Stonebridge County, the people are narrow-minded, and they blame her for everything.

"When Lisette came to the capital to find a match, I didn't plan to aim so high. But when I heard Major

General Farrell wasn't looking for a young woman and preferred someone older, I thought Lisette would be a good match. Now, it all depends on whether you and Major General Farrell mind that Lisette doesn't come from a prestigious

family. As for her character, I can

guarantee there's no problem about

it."

Alice was quite pleased with Lisette, but she didn't dare ask Thomas about his thoughts at that moment. Given his nature, he might flatly refuse. If that happened, the poor woman would have little hope of marriage after this! Gemma sensed Alice's thoughts. She turned to Darin, and said, "Lisette, you may return to your room now."

Darin stood and curtsied to Alice and everyone else before leaving. As she stepped outside, Violet continued to watch her.

Darin held herself upright, her steps far steadier than when she had first entered the main hall. It was clear that some habits were deeply ingrained and hard to shake.

Thomas had also noticed it. Darin clearly had martial arts training, though she hadn't revealed any signs of it earlier.

Thomas had been investigating

quite a bit lately. Though Rafael had advised him against looking into the Warren family, that didn't mean he wouldn't investigate other matters. The Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team was mostly back in the capital, except for Scott and Wilfred, who had returned to their hometown.

They had grown accustomed to digging into things, and not doing so gnawed at them. With Yuvan back in the capital and the peculiarities happening after Leona had married into the Earl of Gracehold's family, something felt off. However, much of their investigation was pointless. They were overly sensitive and ended up checking everything randomly. It seemed that if the king didn't assign them tasks soon, they would be stuck in this limbo.

He was there to meet a marriage candidate today, yet his thoughts were entangled in all the inconsistencies around him, leaving him no mind for romance.

"Alice, Major General Farrell, let's be frank-what do you think of Lisette?" Gemma asked.

Chapter 663

Alice was about to express her satisfaction when Opal chimed in with a bright smile.

"She's indeed a fine girl, and we are all quite pleased. However, marriage is a serious matter and shouldn't be rushed. Why don't we each go back and discuss this with our families? After all, Ms. Sanford hasn't said whether she likes Thomas, and they've only just met today. It's best to first understand her feelings."

Gemma replied, "That wouldn't be difficult. I can ask her right away."

Opal chuckled. "Let's not be too hasty. If you send someone in to ask her like this, it might offend us if she says she doesn't like him. If she says she does, it could make her seem eager, which wouldn't look good for a young lady. Since both our families have already met a couple of times, it wouldn't hurt to meet again. After all, her parents aren't in the capital, and her feelings are what truly matter. What do you think, Madam Gemma?"

With such reasonable arguments, Gemma found it hard to dispute Opal. After all, a match between their families shouldn't be rushed. Both were noble households. Still, the urgency was palpable.

Alice didn't fully understand Opal's reasoning. But on reflection, it made sense. If they asked Lisette now, would it be better if she rejected Thomas outright or merely hesitated? If she liked him, saying so would make her seem desperate to marry, and no woman wanted to come across that way. Conversely, if she liked him but claimed otherwise, that wouldn't be good either.

Violet admired Opal's carefulness. Her meticulous nature was truly commendable.

Alice smiled. "Opal is right. If there is truly a bond, it won't slip away. A couple of days won't make a difference."

With the matter settled for now, Gemma smiled and said, "That makes sense. You've thought this through quite well. I'll wait a couple of days before visiting again."

Though Gemma said that, Alice felt something was off.

Thomas' side of the family showed no objections. At least, they appeared satisfied. Now they were merely inquiring on Lisette's behalf. If she agreed, her family would send a matchmaker to formalize the engagement. That was how things were normally done.

So, why was someone from Lisette's side of the family personally coming to visit? The Kingsley family was known for their propriety, so why this deviation from the norm?

However, Alice kept her thoughts to herself. After all, she had trusted Gemma due to their familial ties. Now, the woman's eagerness to finalize the match made Alice feel somewhat uneasy.

They still needed to investigate Lisette's background to determine if she was truly a daughter of the Sanford family.

Violet had remained silent throughout their visit to Grovehill Estate. But once they left, Thomas turned to her. "Violet, do you sense something off?"

Violet replied, "Let's talk about it back at your place. There's definitely something suspicious going on."

All three members of the Farrell family immediately sobered at her words. Violet was not one to speak lightly. Though she loved to tease and have fun, she was particularly serious when it came to important matters. Her tone suggested that today's visit had something significant to do with the woman from the Sanford family.

Upon returning to the Farrell family's residence, Violet dismissed all the servants and said, "The girl's name is Darin, and she's not from the Sanford family. The Kingsley family has reasons for approaching Thomas regarding this match, We can't agree to this engagement, but we also can't outright refuse it right away. Since I accompanied you to Grovehill Estate today, a swift rejection would leave some things unclear, which wouldn't be good for Carissa and me moving forward."

Alice's heart sank a little, and sadness washed over her. "Gemma lied to me? I thought we were family! How could she use Thomas's marriage to deceive me?"

Violet replied. "Darin may not be a

bad girl. She could also be unaware of the truth. But we need to get to the bottom of this. For now, just

delay for a month or so. Whatevet you do don't commit to whateve

immediately. Otherwise, you risk tarnishing your reputation. And I doubt Darin will come out of this unscathed."

Alice frowned. "Why does this have to be so complicated?"

Opal stood up, linking her arm through Alice's. "Aunt Alice, let's step outside. We shouldn't listen to everything Violet has to say. Some things might be better left unheard. We might be able to stay silent if we hear everything."

Opal had a keen sense of propriety. She recognized that Violet was selectively sharing information, and there were topics they shouldn't overhear, so she quickly ushered Alice out.

Alice was not oblivious, and she realized that since Violet sensed something amiss, it likely meant the situation was more complex than just family matters. There were undoubtedly some discussions she meant to have privately with Thomas, and they needed to stay out of those conversations.

If they could avoid hearing anything, they should.

Chapter 664

Once Alice and Opal left, Violet shared details about Darin with Thomas, including some schemes involving Yuvan, Harvey, and Eleanor.

Violet chose her words carefully, omitting her and Carissa's plans for the Emberfest Festival. However, after listening, Thomas pieced together the information with what he had already investigated and came close to the truth. He understood that they would likely start their inquiries with Eleanor, as Yuvan's influence lay in Valken. In the capital, he relied solely on Eleanor and Harvey.

Eleanor's status as a grand princess allowed her to maneuver in ways others could not, and she had indeed been working behind the scenes on Yuvan's behalf. Without her assistance, Yuvan's power would have been weakened significantly.

Harvey was deeply embedded in the shadows, making it challenging to trace his connections.

It suddenly dawned on Thomas why Rafael had instructed them, the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team, to limit their dealings with Hell Monarch Estate. Initially, he thought it was merely a precaution against the king's suspicions. But now, he realized that avoiding contact allowed them to engage in many activities without raising flags.

Though Rafael had never stated this outright, and Violet hadn't mentioned it either, Thomas believed the Septimus Tetra reconnaissance team was the prince's safety net.

He meticulously reviewed the situation in his mind. "So, Henry doesn't really approve of my marrying Darin, does he?"

"He's worried about dragging his family into trouble. If Darin makes any mistakes, the Farrell family will surely blame the Marquis of Grovehill's family. He's just looking out for his own," Violet explained.

Thomas nodded. "I got it. I'll hold off on this marriage for now. I need to ensure the grand princess doesn't suspect anything, and I can't let Henry breathe too easily either."

Violet smiled and said, "I came today to tell you about this, but I didn't expect to see Darin as well. Henry mentioned that Darin originally belonged to a performance troupe, but when the troupe went under, she had to fend for herself. Eventually, she caught the eye of some bandits, and that's when Eleanor saved her.

"We can't trust Henry completely, and we still need to investigate Darin's background. Fortunately, Kyle is at Hell Monarch Estate right now. I can ask him to paint her portrait and find someone in Stonebridge County to inquire about her. Even though the performance troupe has disbanded, the performers should still be around trying to make a living, and many people must have seen their acts. It shouldn't be hard to dig up information."

"Sounds good. You should head back quickly," Thomas replied, feeling a sense of urgency. "And remember, if there's anything you need us to do, come find me right away."

Violet chuckled. "What's wrong with taking it easy for a while? Why do I have to rush around? I'd much prefer a few days of peace."

With a wave, she strode out. Thomas stood up to see her off. Then, he smiled bitterly.

Peace? They were all so restless, it was driving them mad. What was the king planning, anyway? It had been so long, and he hadn't given them any official appointment did he notice something amiss? Was he keeping them on hold, waiting to see who would come into contact with them?

Thomas felt that suspicion was justified. Rafael had likely seen through it, which was why he urged them not to engage too closely with him. After pondering for a while, Thomas decided to inform his mother and sister-in-law about the marriage proposal, playing for time without outright rejecting or agreeing to it.

Alice didn't quite grasp the nuances. But since her son said so, she decided to go along with it as she trusted his judgment.

Meanwhile, Violet returned to Hell Monarch Estate. Upon hearing the study door open, she dashed over. Once she finished Jacob's tasks, she intended to ask Kyle for help with her own work.

As she entered the study, she was greeted by walls adorned with portraits. Rafael and Carissa were also in the room.

Carissa stood still in front of one painting, her eyes fixed on it without blinking. Curious, Violet walked over and followed Carissa's gaze.

When Violet saw the beauty mark on

the woman's upper lip, she froze. Then she glanced at the other portraits, studying each one closely. The paintings varied in shape and size, showcasing a range of facial features.

Finally, Violet's gaze settled on a piece near the desk, and she was utterly stunned.

Chapter 665

It was too alike!

The similarities were too much!

From the face shape to the eyebrows, eyes, nose, and that beauty mark on her upper lips-everything about the woman in the portraits was identical to Darin, whom Violet had seen earlier that day.

Violet suddenly felt as if she couldn't breathe, and a sense of absurdity overwhelmed her. The person she had just met was now captured so vividly in a painting, and Kyle hadn't even seen Darin before. How could Kyle portray her in such a lifelike manner?

She turned to look at Kyle and Jacob, who stood in front of another portrait. "What about this one? If she lived a good life, with plenty of resources, she'd look like this-rounded and healthy."

Kyle continued, "As for this one, it's the same idea, but I changed her eyebrows and hairstyle. This next one shows her in a worse condition. I assumed she was unable to eat enough or stay warm, which is why she appears thinner..." Then, Kyle waved at Violet. "Violet, go on over there. Don't stand in our way."

Violet pointed at the painting before her, struggling to regain her voice. "I met this person today."

All eyes in the room turned toward her, including Jacob. Violet's arm was still shaking as she pointed at the painting. She swallowed hard, and looked at Kyle with trembling eyes.

"Kyle, did you follow me to Grovehill Estate today? Did you see her? If you didn't, how could you paint someone who looks so similar? Even her clothes are the same color!"

Jacob had never felt this impulsive in his life. Usually so composed, he forgot the boundaries between men and women. He grabbed Violet's shoulders, and shook her.

"What did you say? You saw someone identical to this...person in the painting at Grovehill Estate?!"

Violet was startled at seeing Jacob's eyes bulging in shock. She instinctively called out, "Cari!"

Rafael stepped in quickly and pulled Jacob back. "Jacob, don't be rude."

Carissa grasped Violet's hand tightly, and met her eyes with an intense gaze. "You went to Grovehill Estate today? Who did you see? Who in Grovehill Estate resembles this person in the painting?"

"Darin!" Violet blurted out, still in disbelief. "The similarities are too much! Her clothes are the same color, her eyebrows, her eyes, and even the beauty mark on her upper lips. Oh my god, if you saw her, you'd think they were one and the same."

"Darin? The woman Eleanor saved? The one who's supposed to marry Thomas?" Carissa's expression shifted dramatically.

"Yes!" Violet shivered as she touched the goosebumps on her arm. "Could Darin be Jacob's sister?"

Rafael had led Jacob to the side,

and poured him a cup of water. He needed to calm down before he could continue his questions. The forceful gulp of water nearly sent Jacob into a coughing fit, and he struggled to catch his breath. He narrowed his eyes and looked at Violet.

"Ms. Spencer, please... Tell me more."

Violet took down the painting and placed it on the table, studying it closely. Taking a deep breath, she felt more certain than ever. But now, she understood why Darin had struck her as oddly familiar.

She laid the painting flat and examined the features again. There was a hint of resemblance to Carissa's mother, Melanie Sullivan.

Violet looked back at the painting Carissa had been focused on, which would probably remind Carissa even more of Melanie, especially since the later years had left Melanie frail and dull-eyed from crying too much. Glancing around the study, Violet saw no one else present, and spoke bluntly.

"Two things-first, this painting bears a slight resemblance to Melanie, Carissa's mother. Second the person in this painting is named Darin, who currently goes by Lisette Sanford. Eleanor saved her, and she's getting prepared to marry Thomas so that she can manipulate him."

"What?" Jacob looked taken aback. "She's someone from Eleanor's side? What happened to her that required Eleanor's help?"

"Don't panic, Jacob. This so-called rescue might have more to it than we think. I was planning to have Kyle paint a portrait of Darin and send someone to inquire about her in Stonebridge County," Violet said.

Chapter 666

Carissa jumped in. "Did she resemble my mother when you saw her in person?"

Violet replied, "Honestly, I felt a sense of familiarity right away, but it didn't click at the time. Now that I look at these paintings, it's clear. Kyle has captured her likeness remarkably well, even her expressions. That's why I could tell there was some resemblance. Darin is a living person, but she has been trained to carry herself like a proper lady, which makes the similarity less obvious."

"Wait, Your Grace. Let me ask my questions first," Jacob interjected, feeling a tingle of unease wash over him from head to toe.

He couldn't explain why he felt that way, but the feeling that everything was unreal was overwhelming.

Just moments ago, he and Kyle were still trying to determine which painting best matched Jaina's current appearance. Before they had settled on anything, however, Violet returned and suddenly announced she had just seen his sister.

It felt so surreal, as if he was in a dream.

Jacob had thought he would have to traverse mountains and rivers and face countless dangers to find Jaina. He even entertained the thought that she might no longer be alive. He dared not dwell on it, though, as that thought alone caused his heart to ache painfully. But now, Jaina was right here in the capital, in Grovehill Estate-and a pawn of Eleanor at that.

Eleanor's pawns rarely had a good ending.

That was why he wanted to ask his questions first. He needed answers, so he pushed closer and looked at Violet intently. "You mentioned that there might be more to her being saved by Eleanor, Ms. Spencer. What's the story behind that? Please tell me." Jacob was obviously distressed. His eyes were bloodshot, and he was clearly struggling to hold back his tears. Violet felt a pang of sympathy at his state.

For the first time, she put Carissa second and chose to address Jacob's question.

"As we all know... Well, those of us present know that Eleanor has a fondness for collecting women who resemble Melanie to become concubines for Henry and bear children..." Thud!

Jacob collapsed to the floor, his face pale and slick with sweat. "What?"

"Jacob!" Violet called out. "Calm

down! If Henry had defiled her, how could she be promised to Thomas? Gemma-Madam Kingsley-claims Darin was engaged early on, but fiance died. The locals in Stonebridge County think she's a widow who brings misfortune, which is why her marriage has been delayed. She came to the capital to seek refuge with Gemma. So clearly, she is not Henry's concubine."

Violet spoke quickly and without pausing too much to prevent Jacob from feeling overwhelmed again.

Rafael helped Jacob to his feet, and pressed him back into a chair. "Sit still."

Carissa looked at the anxious and frightened Jacob, and added, "But you must be prepared. She merely resembles the person in the painting. Kyle painted her likeness based

er childhood appearance

and your parents' features. It's not necessarily accurate. So, Darin may not be your sister."

Jacob pressed his hands together, his voice carrying a tremor of fatigue after his earlier excitement. "I know, I understand that. But I need to see her. She was abducted when she was seven. She should have memories from before that time. It might be faint, but she might remember something."

Rafael replied, "I wouldn't advise

meeting her go soon. Right now, she sees Eleanor as her savior. She likely knows Eleanor is planning

something against us. If you

approach her, or if she suspect ne?

you

think of her as your sister, she might take advantage of that. We can only investigate indirectly."

"You have a point, Your Highness, but who should we ask to look into this?" Jacob asked, his frustration building.

Everyone fell silent for a moment until Kyle spoke up. "Why not ask Thomas? Isn't he currently courting her?"

Carissa shook her head. "During courtship, how can men and women meet privately? That only happens once an engagement is established. This isn't the same as the martial arts world, Kyle."

Chapter 667

Kyle shook his head, "Yes, sorry. I forgot about that. I've been locked up in the Pathfinders Guild for a while now, and it's making me a little loopy."

Carissa pointed at Violet. "Violet visited the Kingsley family today. They know she's Thomas' godsister. She can invite Darin out. I believe that even the Kingsley family knows Violet is connected to us. But if she brings along someone from the Farrell family, I think Madam Kingsley will agree."

Jacob looked at Violet with hopeful eyes. "I'm counting on you for everything, Ms. Spencer."

Violet was loyal and righteous, so she immediately agreed. "Sure! Tell me about her childhood, so I can bring it up when I see her. That way, I can gauge her reaction and at least get a rough idea of what she's like."

Jacob stood up, but Rafael quickly pushed him back down. "Stay seated."

Jacob tried to stand again. "No..."

He was met with another forceful shove from Rafael, accompanied by a sharp command, "Sit down!"

With a resigned sigh, Jacob explained, "I need to grab something-a toy from her childhood. I'll have Ms. Spencer take it with her."

Rafael withdrew his hand. "Go ahead."

Jacob stood up and turned to apologize to Violet. "I got a bit carried away earlier. I hope you can forgive me, Ms. Spencer." "It's fine. I got spooked myself."

Violet had just come back from seeing Darin, and then she found a portrait of the same woman hanging in the study. It was shocking. It was her lack of experience, really-she never expected that from Darin's parents' and her childhood portraits, Kyle could predict what Darin looked like now. While there were many paintings, this particular one was so accurate that it genuinely startled Violet.

It was truly shocking.

"Well, I'm counting on you, Ms. Spencer. I'll be right back." Jacob stepped outside, wobbling a bit as he walked. Once he was through the door, he bent over to rest his hands on his knees. He took a moment to straighten up and breathe slowly, reminding himself to stay calm.

Rafael watched Jacob's retreating

figure, and sighed softly. "I've known for a long time about his search for

his sister But in this vast sea of people, it's hard to find someone. Who would've thought they weren't separated by mountains and rivers, but were actually so close?"

Carissa said firmly, "We can't be sure that Darin is his sister, so it's too early to say anything definitive."

She turned to Violet and asked, "You met Darin-what do you think of her?"

Violet thought for a moment. "Well, her appearance is exactly like the paintings-no doubt about that. When we met, she barely spoke a couple of sentences, but I could tell she was a bit uncomfortable. She walked slowly when she arrived, and hurried off when she left. At the time, I thought it was just because she hadn't learned the proper etiquette and still had some of that old street behavior, but now I wonder if she wasn't really keen on the whole arrangement.

"Oh, and by the way, she has a really pleasant aura."

"A pleasant aura? What do you mean by that?" Carissa asked.

Violet tapped her chin, her gaze drifting upward. "It's hard to explain. It's like us there's a common trait among people like us that allows us to sense certain surface-level things about each other. Of course, I have no idea what she truly thinks."

"Do you think she's not entirely on board with this marriage?"

"Yeah, I get that feeling. She hardly even looked at Thomas." Violet struggled to articulate her intuition until she finally landed on a fitting word. "Conflicted! I feel like she's really conflicted."

Carissa considered this for a

moment. "I see what you mean.

She's lived a rough life, where swift justice and revenge are paramount, Eleanor saved her life, and she

wants to repay her. But she pronet

never imagined this would be how she would do it. And given what she likely knows about Thomas reputation, she's torn between honoring Eleanor's kindness and her own conscience. That's probably why you sense her inner conflict."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Carissa added, "But this analysis might not be accurate."

After all, no one truly knew what Darin was like. Judging her character based solely on a fleeting encounter wouldn't lead to the right conclusions.

Chapter 668

Jacob brought over a little rabbit figurine that looked like it had seen better days. It was rough around the edges and had one ear broken off, clearly not something bought from a shop.

"The year she went missing, I made this for her during the Starlight Harvest Festival. She got grounded that year for making a mistake, and couldn't go out to play. I was supposed to have the servants buy her one, but my dad didn't allow it as part of her punishment. "So, I secretly made this one out of clay and baked it at home. After it was baked, I painted it, but the colors have faded over time. When she got it, she seemed to dislike it and dropped it on the ground. That's when one of the ears broke off." Jacob's voice trembled, and his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

"She didn't like this figurine at all. She seemed almost offended by it, and cried. I thought if she felt that strongly about it, it must have left an impression."

Violet looked at the shabby rabbit figurine, its faded paint and broken ear making it quite the eyesore. "If someone gave me something like this, I'd cry too. It's something I'd never forget in my life."

"Exactly. Things are either deeply loved or utterly despised, and both kinds stick in your memory," Jacob said, reluctantly handing the rabbit figurine to Violet. "I have some other toys from her childhood, but they're all too ordinary-things anyone would have. This one is one of a kind."

"One of a kind? That would just make me cry even louder." Violet accepted it with some disdain.

Seriously, it really couldn't get any uglier. Even its features were all muddled.

Jacob shot her a hurt glance. "Don't say that. I hadn't learned how to make these before. It was my first attempt."

"And you burned the back of it." Violet turned it over in her hands. "Actually, the whole thing is black. You just covered it in paint, right? You must've had to touch it up later?"

Jacob shrugged, looking a bit embarrassed. "The colors kept fading, so I had to keep adding more. I haven't done it in two or three years. But if she sees it, I'm sure she'll recognize it."

"Okay then." Violet glanced at Carissa, who turned her face away just in time to catch Rafael's heated gaze.

He exclaimed cheerfully, "Just like your embroidery back then-it's unique!"

Violet couldn't help but laugh. "I was just thinking that her embroidery is ugly, and she doesn't even realize it."

Kyle stepped in and said firmly, "No one can do everything perfectly. Our junior guild member here has the

best martial arts talent in the Pathfinders Guild. If any of you have special skills or abilities, feel free to show them off so I can see what you're made of."

When he finished speaking, he shot a cold glance at Rafael.

Rafael was stunned. He hadn't called Carissa's embroidery ugly. That was Violet!

Violet quickly changed the subject. "Jacob, tell me some fun stories about you and your sister from when you were young. Something memorable."

Jacob had plenty to share as he reminisced about the past. His father was a seventh-ranked county chief in Cloud County, and his family had a long tradition of valuing both farming and education. His mother

and

was the daughter of able

the four of them lived a comfortable life.

However, Cloud County was plagued by poverty and chaos, with bandits and thieves causing unrest. His

father took it upon himself to lead

the local officials and guards to hunt down the bandits. After more than ten attempts, he finally drove th

them

away and restored po drove order

and

to Cloud County.

When Jacob was five, his mother gave birth to his sister. Their grandfather was overjoyed, declaring that the family was blessed with both a son and a daughter. Their grandfather taught at a local academy. Upon turning seven, Jacob joined the academy as well. However, he didn't live there. He traveled back and forth with his grandfather, so he spent a lot of time with his little sister.

They were a happy family until a storm of tragedy struck when his sister turned seven. On a sunny day, she was playing with the other children outside their alley when two strangers abducted her, along with the daughter of the county official. The men were quick. They grabbed the girls, and jumped into a carriage before the frightened children could react. The remaining children were terrified. They scattered and ran home, too scared to tell anyone what had happened.

It was only at nightfall, when the two girls didn't return home, that both families started searching frantically for them. They only found out the girls had been taken when they spoke to the children who had been playing with them. By then, hours had passed, and the two girls were long gone from Cloud County. Even if they sent someone to chase after the kidnappers, it would be futile. Furthermore, they had no idea which direction the kidnappers had fled.

Chapter 669

Jacob's voice cracked with sorrow.

"The loss of my sister hit our family hard. My mother cried day and night, and my father resigned from his post. He took two servants with him to search for her. He only returned home once every two years. My grandfather held everything together, and when my grandmother passed away, my father was still out looking for my sister. It wasn't until the second year after my grandmother's death that he finally returned. That was the tenth year he had been searching, and he finally gave up." The group listened and felt their heart ache. The pain and torment of losing a child was a wound too deep to contemplate.

"From the day my sister disappeared, joy was completely lost to us. For the first two years, I brought my grandfather and mother to the capital, since they were in poor health. My father was unwilling to leave Cloud County. He always held on to hope and believed that one day she would remember her home and come back, and there would be someone at home always waiting for her.

"Over the years, I haven't given up, either. I borrowed people from Hell Monarch Estate to help search. The reason I worked so hard for His Highness was because he let me borrow people to find my sister. Even though I knew the chances were slim, not searching made me feel worse. I just had to do something for her, even if it felt pointless, just to ease my mind."

Kyle had dozed off in his chair. He had rushed over from Meadow Ridge and started painting without even taking a sip of water, and he was completely worn out.

Even in his half-asleep state, he absorbed Jacob's story. He had traveled far and wide and witnessed countless tragedies. He wasn't numb to it. He just sensed that Darin was highly likely to be Jacob's sister.

He trusted that one of the many paintings he created must be very similar to the current Jaina, which allowed him to relax and sleep peacefully.

After listening to Jacob, Violet wiped her tears and sent someone to the Farrell family. She asked Opal to deliver an invitation to the Marquis of Grovehill's family. The following day, they would invite Lisette to Glimmering Tower for tea and to enjoy the riverside scenery. Gemma received the invitation, and went to see Darin. Thanks to Eleanor's instructions, the Kingsley family treated Darin with great courtesy. However, Gemma understood Darin was merely a pawn in their game, and her politeness held a hint of distance. "I believe the Farrell family wants to get to know you better," Gemma stated. "After all, you're not from the capital, and it's difficult for them to gauge your character without interacting with you. They can only consider this marriage if they understand what kind of person you are."

Darin showed little emotion on her face, and asked, "So, do you think I should go?"

Gemma replied coolly, "Why shouldn't you go? I'll send someone to accompany you and keep you on track. Just remember, don't speak out of turn. The more you say, the more mistakes you'll make. Keep your words few, and you won't go wrong. You absolutely mustn't give anyone a reason to find fault.

"The Farrell family is currently on the rise, and there are plenty of noble

ladies in the capital eager

into their family. If it weren't for Thomas wanting someone a

Qu

older, you wouldn't even have this chance. This is a fortune you need to seize for yourself."

Darin took the invitation, and smiled bitterly. "Fortune? You know very well why I'm marrying him. I'm not looking for a life of luxury."

Gemma frowned. "How could it not be a fortune? You'll be his real wife once you marry him. You just need to make sure he serves Grand Princess Eleanor."

Darin's tone turned sour. "But Grand Princess Eleanor has also said that if I can't win him over, I'll have to take his life."

Gemma replied, "With your

intelligence, you'll surely be able to persuade him. Always think in a positive direction. Don't fixate on the worst possible outcome. If he can serve Grand Princess Eleanor, won't you and your husband enjoy wealth and honor in the future?"

She patted Darin's shoulder. "It's settled, then. Tomorrow, I'll make sure you're dressed beautifully. Always remember your identity as a young lady from the Sandford family-don't let any hint of your rough background show." After finishing her speech, Gemma stood up and left. Outside, she pulled out a handkerchief to wipe her hands, then tossed it disdainfully to a maid.

"Tamara, you'll go with her tomorrow. Keep a close eye on her. Don't let her make any mistakes," Gemma ordered.

Tamara caught the handkerchief and held it up by pinching a corner. "Understood, Madam Gemma!"

Chapter 670

Glimmering Tower was one of the tallest buildings in the capital. From its highest point, visitors could gaze down at the southern river port and take in a breathtaking view of much of the city's beauty. The entire structure was imposing and magnificent, and it exuded a level of luxury that was truly extraordinary.

However, getting a seat in the private room on the top floor of Glimmering Tower didn't come cheap. Just the coffee alone cost five silver coins, and ordering a meal could easily run into dozens of silver coins for something simple. For a nicer dish, the price could soar into the hundreds or even thousands of silver coins.

As for who owned Glimmering Tower, not many could say. What everyone knew was that those who went to the tower were either rich or nobles, and the tower made a fortune every day. Those who knew the owner of Glimmering Tower kept it to themselves, as there aren't many left in the capital who have connections with that person in Meadow Ridge.

Violet and Opal arrived first. Violet was skilled at charming others, and she now referred to Opal as her sister-in-law. Opal was delighted by it, and frequently expressed how lucky she felt to have such a sister-in-law like Violet.

When they reached Glimmering Tower, Darin hadn't arrived yet. Violet scurried around, taking in the tower's opulence and satisfaction glowing on her face. "When I formalize my relationship with Alice, I'll host dozens of tables here and treat everyone to a feast." Opal chuckled. "How much money would that cost? It'd be more practical to host a banquet at home. Everyone in the neighborhood knows I have a knack for organizing events. Are you planning to deny me the chance to show off my skills?" Violet laughed. "That sounds wonderful, but I worry you might tire yourself out and Timothy would blame me."

"Timothy..." Opal's smile slowly faded, a wave of longing washing over her. "I can barely remember what he looks like now. I wonder when he can return to the capital again. It's been a long time since the fighting ended."

Violet comforted her. "We can't let our guard down just yet. Things are still chaotic over there, and it's risky if we don't station any strong troops there. Timothy has gained seniority and got promoted, so he should be able to return to the capital soon."

"It's hard to balance loyalty and devotion to one's family. I'm sure he's also having a hard time." Opal sighed. "If it weren't for our family in the capital, I would have really considered taking the children and running to his side."

Violet pulled her into a seat in the private room. "There's no need for that. Once things settle down over there, he'll be able to come back."

As they spoke, the coffee sommelier entered the room with Darin, and a maid followed behind him. Since Opal's maid was waiting outside, Tamara also sat down at a small table outside, enjoying some coffee that was provided for the private room. However, the door to the room was open, allowing anyone inside to see and hear everything going on.

Darin wore a light yellow top paired with a white embroidered pleated skirt. Tiny pearls adorned her earlobes, and a delicate blue hairpin decorated with droplets was in her hair. The accessories

complemented her overall elegant and serene appearance. She curtsied politely. "Hello, Madam Opal, Ms. Spencer."

The two women rose in return. "Hello, Ms. Sanford. Please have a seat."

"Ladies, please take your seats," Darin urged.

Opal smiled. "We're not in any formal setting, so no need for formalities. Just sit down."

Ever the bold one, Violet plopped down first, and the others followed suit.

The coffee sommelier served them, pouring a cup for each and making a gesture inviting them to drink before stepping back.

Violet waved him off. "You can go now. We just want to chat."

"Of course, I'll be outside. If you need anything, just call for me."

"Bring out some sweet snacks, maybe eight or ten kinds," Violet said, recalling Jacob's description of how much Jaina enjoyed sweets.

But then again, tastes could change as one grew up.

The coffee sommelier nodded and retreated. Violet turned her attention to Darin, and deliberately pulled out the little Rabbit figurine Jacob had given her. She placed it on the table to play with as she asked casually, "Ms, Sanford, what do you enjoy doing in your free time?"

Darin glanced at the rabbit figurine before looking away, smiling softly as she replied, "Not much. I mostly do some embroidery."

"Your embroidery skills must be exceptional, then. I admire that!" Violet remarked. Her fingers traced the spot where one of the rabbit's ears had broken off, feeling the smooth edges.

Darin's gaze returned to Violet's hand, studying it for quite a while before recalling her manners.

She spoke with a hint of humility, "It's nothing exceptional, really. Just something I do for fun."