

Wrath 1001

Chapter 1001:

The Welch family held power, but only within Cloverhill. Their past alliances were nothing more than surface-level courtesy. Now that they had provoked the real ruler of Efrery, civility was off the table. The city's power players turned a blind eye, letting Janice and Aiden's forces move unchecked.

"Mateo..."

Gilmore was just about to speak when a deafening roar shattered the night, abruptly cutting off the video call.

Before anyone could react, another video feed forcibly took over the big screen.

"I am Queen, and today, I officially challenge the Welch family. Any of your companies connected to the Internet will be attacked by me."

On the screen, a woman wearing a clown mask appeared, her gaze cold and piercing.

"Queen? It's Queen! We're doomed! This is the end!"

"Queen, we had nothing to do with this! It's all Mateo's doing—we're about to remove him!"

"Queen, we're innocent!"

The same Welch family members who had fiercely supported Mateo now scrambled to shift the blame.

Queen wasn't just any hacker—she was the apex predator of the digital underworld. Every hacker worth their salt knew her name. The Welch family's recent catastrophic losses were undoubtedly her handiwork. In just fifteen minutes, she had led a team of top-tier hackers to inflict billions in damages. If she decided to continue targeting them, even their vast wealth wouldn't save them from financial ruin.

But Queen ignored their desperate pleas, her voice cold as death.

“Mateo, you struck a heavy blow against the White family today. So, I’ll return the favor.”

“What do you intend to do?” Mateo’s pupils shrank, a chill creeping down his spine.

“You’ll find out in a minute.” With that, the screen went black.

The conference room erupted into turmoil. Each Welch family member present was a powerhouse in their own right—successful, influential, and accustomed to wielding authority in major family matters. Yet a chilling realization struck them—staying aligned with Mateo could mean their downfall. If they didn’t cut ties now, they risked being dragged into total ruin alongside him.

“Mateo, just look at the disaster you’ve brought upon us! Our family’s entire legacy is hanging by a thread because of your actions.”

“This is the digital era, and nearly all our business depends on the internet. With Queen coming after us, we’re finished!”

“I’m with Mr. Dury and the others now. Mateo should be replaced. I no longer trust his ability to lead this family.”

Mateo’s expression darkened, his body quaking with a simmering rage. Just moments earlier, these same people had stood by him, yet when their own interests were at stake, they betrayed him without a second thought.

“Enough! All of you, shut up!!” Mateo pounded the table, his rage palpable, his glare cutting through the room like a blade.

Silence fell over the room, though the hostility in their eyes remained.

“Gilmore’s life is on the line, and all you care about is your own interests! Does your conscience not bother you at all?”

“Mateo, this is entirely your fault! If you hadn’t gone after Janice, would Gilmore be in this mess? You knew she was JE and MO—powerful, well-connected, and incredibly wealthy. Instead of making an ally out of her, you made her your enemy. Wasn’t that just inviting disaster?”

Chapter 1002:

“You really think they would have left me alone if I hadn’t made a move first?” Mateo scoffed. “She’s a White, driven by vengeance.”

“Why did you annihilate the entire White family in the first place?” Hughes sighed, his voice heavy. “You’re the one who doomed the Welch family.”

“Bullshit!! My only regret is not wiping them out entirely. I should’ve made sure those two never walked away!” Mateo’s face contorted with fury. “They think they can destroy the Welch family? Ridiculous! There’s no way she can bring down an empire we’ve built for decades.”

Just then, the butler burst into the room, looking shaken. “Mr. Welch, a package just arrived.”

“What is it?” Mateo’s brows furrowed as he shot the butler a questioning look.

“I have no idea! They left it and disappeared.”

Queen had mentioned a “gift” earlier. Could this be it?

“Let’s go. I want to see exactly what kind of ‘gift’ this is.” Mateo strode out of the room.

The others trailed behind, curiosity piqued.

Mateo stepped into the courtyard, his gaze landing on a black bag resting on the ground.

It was large—big enough to fit a person—and its damp surface added to the ominous atmosphere.

“Open it now!” Mateo demanded.

The butler hesitated, then carefully unzipped the black bag.

The moment it opened, a putrid stench assaulted his nose, making him gag. The foul odor made the others recoil, their hands instinctively covering their noses, but the creeping sense of dread was far worse than the smell.

“Harlan?” Fighting against the nausea, Mateo peered inside and froze at the sight of a corpse.

The corpse was swollen and grotesque, nearly unrecognizable, but the flashy clothing gave it away—this was his brother, Harlan.

“No, this can’t be real!” Mateo swayed on his feet, barely catching himself as his assistant rushed to steady him.

“Harlan was doing fine abroad, wasn’t he? How could this have happened?” Mateo’s mind raced, disbelief gripping him. Without hesitation, he fumbled for his phone, desperate to reach Harlan.

The call rang and connected.

A spark of hope flickered in his eyes—maybe the body was fake.

But the moment a taunting voice slithered through the phone, his last shred of hope crumbled, sending him spiraling into a pit of despair.

“Well, Mr. Welch, I hate to break it to you, but Harlan never made it past his departure. He died the same day. And as for me? I no longer have to use his phone and pretend he’s okay.”

“You monster! How dare you take Harlan’s life?! I’ll make sure you pay with your life.” Mateo’s face twisted in a mask of fury, his eyes burning red with anger, and his body shook with the raw force of his rage.

Even with their bitter rivalry over the position of family head, Harlan was still his brother.

But now, with his brother mercilessly slaughtered, that bond had ignited an inferno inside him—one that threatened to consume everything in its path.

Chapter 1003:

“Pay with my life? Mateo, you butchered over a hundred souls from the White family. Tell me, what price do you think is fair for that kind of bloodshed?” The words slithered into his ears like venom.

Like a serpent, and just like that, the raging fire inside him froze to ice. His skin turned clammy. His blood ran cold.

In that moment, the pride of leading the Welch family began to disintegrate slowly, piece by piece, like a crumbling monument.

At last, he grasped the sheer terror of the figure he had dared to challenge—an entity so formidable that even the mighty Welch family trembled in its shadow.

“Mateo, we’re just getting started. Hold on tight, because if you fall too soon, how will you ever repay the blood you spilled?”

“Ah!” Mateo let out a furious roar, his hand crashing the phone into the ground, shattering it into pieces.

Everyone stood frozen, unable to speak, gripped by the terror of Janice’s merciless cruelty.

In the blink of an eye, two members of the Welch family were either gone or lifeless, plunging the family into a nightmare of unimaginable horror.

The mighty Welch family, once feared by countless powerful clans, was now reduced to mere prey. Against Janice and the reborn White family, they were nothing more than helpless pawns in a deadly game.

“Now! Get Father on the line!” Mateo’s voice wavered, his desperation painfully clear. They were out of moves—only Orson had the power to salvage this disaster.

The White family’s grand banquet created waves throughout Cloverhill. Those familiar with the White family’s past tragedy recognized the significance of the occasion—it marked a bold challenge to the Welch family.

What they never expected was that, as soon as the White family returned to Cloverhill, they would go head-to-head with the Welch family—and not only that, but they would also come out on top, driving the Welch family out of the Eternity Building in utter humiliation.

Mateo’s birthday party became nothing more than a spectacle of embarrassment.

It was astonishing that the once-dominant Welch family faced such a dramatic downfall.

Even more astounding was Janice’s influence. Her connections extended to the royal families of Aerith and Cherriton, bolstering her formidable presence. Janice held multiple prestigious titles: founder of JE Consortium, globally acclaimed designer JE, and the esteemed surgeon MO. Her varied roles brought her respect from elites worldwide, placing her on a nearly untouchable level.

People couldn’t help but admire Minnie’s foresight in aligning herself with such a remarkable figure early on. It stirred both envy and a growing eagerness to win her favor.

In the days ahead, the White family was bound to become the most sought-after ally for the powerful forces in Cloverhill.

Tension hung thick in the Payne family's conference room as the core members convened.

"Minnie, your actions were too hasty," Walter said with a sigh, his gaze filled with worry as he addressed his daughter. "You never should have openly clashed with the Welch family. We've always walked a fine line with them, and now that balance is completely destroyed. So tell me, what's our next move?"

"Indeed!" said an elder, his voice grave as he tapped the table. "We've managed a quiet rivalry with the Welch family for years, an unspoken agreement of sorts. Your abrupt aggression places us in a difficult spot."

Chapter 1004:

"Exactly! We barely know anything about the White family. Rushing to side with them could leave us at a disadvantage. Minnie, you acted far too recklessly." The Payne family elders were united in their critique of Minnie's impulsive decision to confront the Welch family and partner with the White family.

Should the White family falter in this confrontation, the Payne family risked severe repercussions. A defeat could leave them vulnerable to the Welch family's retaliation.

Minnie scanned the room, respecting the elders but maintaining her dignity. Her composure seemed to command the space.

Silently, she tapped her fingernails on the table, the sound oddly soothing the tense atmosphere.

"Have you all said your piece?" Minnie finally broke her silence, her tone collected and steady. "I hear your concerns clearly. You've all pointed out that we've kept a certain equilibrium with the Welch family for years. Historically, you've been hesitant to disrupt this balance, fearing substantial losses, opting instead to tolerate the existing conditions. But Janice's arrival presents us with a perfect opportunity to turn the tables!"

Minnie's gaze sharpened. "Your apprehension about upsetting the balance stems from a perceived lack of strength. But with Janice on our side, we possess the means to assume control. Allying with Janice ensures we can dismantle the Welch family's influence."

The room fell silent as the elders looked at one another, their expressions a mix of consideration and uncertainty.

They seemed puzzled, not fully comprehending the depth of Minnie's strategy. With a slight exhale, Minnie turned to Walter.

"Dad, consider the losses we've sustained in our silent conflicts with the Welch family. While tolerable for now, these will accumulate into a substantial disadvantage over time. Janice's capabilities are undeniable. She ousted the Welch family from the Eternity Building with mere words—a feat previously unthinkable."

Walter paused, the memories of the Welch family's former dominance flashing through his mind, acknowledging their unprecedented downfall.

While the Payne family occasionally gained an advantage over the Welches, those victories were always costly and never definitive.

"Everyone, I understand your preference for stability, but failing to seize this opportunity means our progress will be stagnant, hindering not just local but also international expansion," Minnie said firmly. "Our struggles in foreign markets stem from our inability to transcend these limitations. Having placed your trust in me as your leader, I am committed to charting a bold new course for our family."

Minnie's passionate delivery, particularly her focus on potential gains, resonated with the elders, sparking their interest in the possibilities she outlined.

"Minnie, you've made a convincing case." The elder who had previously shown reservations now looked at her with a resigned smile. "We've been overly cautious and lacked innovative thinking. I trust in your dedication to our family's cause. You have my support."

With one elder's endorsement, the rest quickly aligned themselves.

"Minnie, you've won us over. We'll support your decisions wholeheartedly."

“Thank you, Dad,” Minnie said, her relief noticeable. She had feared these elders would stand against her. This was a pivotal moment for the Payne family—one misstep, and everything could come crashing down. “It’s essential we develop a strong alliance with the White family and lend them our full support. Together, we can dismantle the Welch family’s influence and elevate our own.”

Chapter 1005:

“I think your decision is still too impulsive.” Oliver, who had been silent, spoke up.

Heads turned towards him, their expressions a mixture of surprise and curiosity.

“Oliver, what’s on your mind?” Walter asked, looking puzzled.

Oliver offered Minnie a kind smile. “Minnie, I don’t doubt your intentions, but I do have some concerns.”

Minnie smiled at her brother. “Please, Oliver, share your thoughts. It’s important we consider all perspectives.”

“While the Welch family is certainly vulnerable now, and the opportunity to strike is tempting, aren’t you concerned that the White family might become the next Welch family?” Oliver asked, his question striking a chord.

Everyone was suddenly enlightened.

The White family’s rise to power was undeniable. Should they overpower the Welch family and then turn on the Payne family, the consequences could be disastrous.

“Indeed, how could we overlook such a crucial point? Once the Welch family is out, no one can keep the White family in check. They could very well target us next.”

“Exactly, the White family is reaching the zenith of their power. They could easily become the new Welch family. After years of conflict with the Welch family, suffering many losses, we can’t afford a betrayal now.” With just a single sentence, unease rippled through the room.

A moment ago, they stood firmly behind Minnie, but now, doubt crept in, forcing them to rethink their stance.

Despite this, Minnie remained composed, fixing her gaze on Oliver. "Oliver, your concerns are valid. But do we have to be the number one family? Should we not strive for supremacy?"

Oliver's voice deepened. "After all, our long-standing battle with the Welch family has always been about securing the top position in Cloverhill, right?"

Minnie exhaled slowly, her eyes reflecting a touch of sadness. "Oliver, haven't you realized? The higher you climb, the harder you fall. Often, the price of being at the top can far exceed its rewards. To me, it's more prudent for our family to continuously improve rather than chasing the position of number one."

Minnie looked around the room, her voice soft yet commanding. "Honestly, do you all prefer our family to prosper, or do you insist on battling relentlessly to be the best?"

Her words seemed to awaken something in everyone.

Suddenly, it became clear. Who wouldn't prefer a peaceful life?

The conflict with the Welch family had always left them anxious about potential attacks on their businesses or threats to their family members. They were all frankly tired.

Minnie continued, "If we become the White family's strongest allies, they won't have reasons to oppose us after becoming the top family in Cloverhill. If that happens, our family's wealth will grow immensely, and our lives will improve. That's why you need to be certain about the choice you make."

With that, Minnie fell silent, reaching for her coffee and taking a slow, deliberate sip.

She remained poised and unshaken, exuding an air of confidence as if the outcome didn't concern her in the slightest.

“Are we certain the White family won’t turn against us once they reach the top?” An elder finally voiced the lingering concern.

Chapter 1006:

Minnie placed her coffee down and met his gaze. “If we share mutual interests, why would they turn against us?”

Her unwavering confidence put everyone at ease, and a collective sigh of relief swept through the room.

“Very well, we will support your direction.”

“Minnie is indeed the most visionary leader our family has ever had. She embodies both foresight and intelligence.”

“With Minnie at the helm, I can retire with peace of mind.”

Walter gazed at his daughter, who exuded both confidence and wisdom, and a deep sense of pride swelled within him. It was normal for men to inherit the family’s leadership, but Minnie’s strength and capability were enough to challenge tradition.

“Minnie, proceed as you see fit. You have our complete support.”

Yet, as praise showered over Minnie, Oliver’s expression darkened slightly. Why should the Payne family yield? With centuries of prestige behind them, how could they accept being overshadowed by the White family?

“Minnie!” Just then, Tricia stormed into the meeting room, her urgency palpable. The room fell into a brief silence, startled by her abrupt entrance, before puzzled glances were exchanged.

“Tricia, why are you barging in like this? You’d better mind your manners.” Walter’s gaze darkened.

Tricia's face flushed with embarrassment, her lips parting for an apology, but Minnie spoke up first. "Dad, I told Tricia she could come straight in if it was important."

Walter's brows knitted together, skepticism lacing his tone. "Urgent? Just how important are we talking?"

"Yes!" Tricia nodded fervently. "I just got word—Harlan is dead! And Gilmore has gone missing."

"What? Are you sure about this?"

A wave of shock rippled through the room, leaving everyone stunned.

Harlan, feared for his ruthlessness and audacity, had always been a name that sent shivers down spines. And now? He was dead—just like that? Without so much as a whisper beforehand?

Walter leaned forward, urgency sharpening his voice. "How did it happen?"

"Apparently, he's been dead for some time. Someone dumped his body at the Welch family's home."

A sharp gasp rippled through the room. Who would dare not only take Harlan's life but also brazenly dump his body at the Welch family's estate? Such an act wasn't just ruthless—it was a direct challenge.

"And that's not all. Gilmore went to Efrery and was ambushed. He's gone missing. Calvin already left with a team overnight to track him down." Stunned silence settled over the crowd, disbelief written on every face.

Gilmore, famed for his sharp mind, had been handpicked by Orson to quell the Welch family's internal strife. And now, even he had vanished? It was unthinkable.

Every gaze shifted to Minnie.

Minnie's lips curved into a knowing smirk as she spoke, her voice eerily calm. "Yes, this is all Janice's handiwork."

"Minnie, you were right! We have to align with the White family. It's our only way forward."

Chapter 1007:

"Minnie, your foresight is incredible. I can't believe how ahead of the game you are. If we join forces with the White family, we'll secure our future."

The room buzzed with admiration for Minnie. Just moments ago, they had hesitated about forming an alliance with the White family, but after witnessing the Welch family's collapse, their doubts vanished entirely.

"Alright, that's enough for today. I have business to handle, so I'll be heading out now." Just as Minnie turned to leave, a thought crossed her mind. She glanced at Oliver, who had been quiet for some time. "Lowell, your surgery is in three days. Is that okay?"

"No problem." Oliver's lips curved into a faint smile.

"Before long, you'll be back on your feet, chasing your dreams again."

The others chimed in with congratulations. With his legs restored, Oliver could return to the military. Given time, he could climb the ranks, perhaps even make general—bringing glory to the Payne family.

With that, Minnie and Tricia left the meeting room and made their way to Minnie's quarters.

"Tricia, there's more, isn't there? Spill it."

"Minnie, how do you always know?" Tricia's eyes widened in disbelief. Minnie let out a soft chuckle and tapped Tricia's forehead. "We've known each other forever. You really think you can hide something from me?"

Tricia shrugged. "Minnie, you read me like an open book."

"Alright, out with it."

"Queen herself gave the Welch family a brutal warning."

Minnie's eyes narrowed slightly, as if she had expected this all along.

"Minnie, how is Janice this terrifying?" Tricia mused, her brows knotting. "I've never looked up to anyone—except you, of course. But now, even Janice has my respect. She's not just someone with a few impressive titles—she dismantled the Welch family like it was nothing. I heard Mateo tried to salvage the situation by seeking Orson's help, but Orson wouldn't even grant him an audience. Mateo was so furious, he nearly passed out."

Minnie fell silent, deep in thought.

"Minnie, why would Orson refuse to step in? The Welch family wouldn't even be standing without him. Is he really just going to watch it crumble? And who is Queen, really?"

"It's Janice," Minnie said abruptly, catching Tricia off guard.

"What did you just say?" Tricia's eyes widened in disbelief as she gawked at Minnie. "Minnie, don't mess with me! I may be a little reckless, but I'm not that gutsy."

"Relax, I'm not trying to scare you." Minnie let out a weary sigh, shaking her head. "I just miscalculated how powerful Janice really is. On top of being JE and MO, she's Queen too! Otherwise, what other reason would Queen have to join forces with Janice to bring down the Welch family?"

"In the past, I never would have imagined Janice could be Queen. But with her secret identities unraveling one after another—each more jaw-dropping than the last—Janice being Queen seems quite reasonable." Tricia took in the explanation and found it perfectly logical.

The revelation about JE and MO was already mind-blowing, and the idea that Janice could be Queen didn't seem too far-fetched.

"As to why Orson refused to intervene..." Minnie's forehead creased in thought. "I can't quite unravel it. Still, I have a sneaking suspicion that Orson might be tied to the old White family."

Chapter 1008:

"This is a real brain-twister, isn't it?" Tricia scratched her head, realizing she wasn't cut out for thinking and preferred fighting.

"Keep a sharp watch on the Welch family. Let me know the moment they so much as twitch."

"Very well."

In the blink of an eye, the Welch family found themselves plunged into a whirlwind of turmoil. Their enterprises, spanning a vast range of trades, came under relentless siege.

These assaults were bold and savage, striking with unrelenting force. The Welch family's enterprises faced a relentless barrage of cyberattacks that threw their operations into chaos and sent their stock prices tumbling. The immediate financial toll soared past billions, while the ripple effects likely ballooned into trillions.

Once-loyal allies and eager collaborators, who had previously sung the praises of the Welch family, now turned their backs in droves, cutting ties at the first sign of trouble.

This towering empire, which had long reigned supreme over Cloverhill, was teetering on the edge of collapse. No one could have foreseen such a fall.

"Leonidas, I need you to strike at every corner of JE Consortium's industries—no matter the cost."

Mateo's face was drawn, etched with exhaustion, and his bloodshot eyes betrayed a man who had aged a decade in a single night. Yet beneath the weariness burned a fiercer fire of bitterness and rage.

“Mr. Welch, why let anger consume you so?” Leonidas’s voice crackled through the phone, his casual tone like a spark to Mateo’s already frayed nerves.

“Harlan is dead, Gilmore has vanished, my eldest son lies in a coma, and my family’s legacy is under siege. How could I not be furious? How could I not lose my mind?”

“Oh, how tragic—quite the sob story.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mateo’s brow furrowed, a flicker of unease stirring within him. Something about Leonidas felt off today. “Don’t forget, Leonidas, you owe your place in this world to me. Betrayal isn’t an option.”

“Ha-ha!” Leonidas’ sharp, mocking laugh erupted from the other end. “Betrayal has been my calling card from the start.”

“What?”

“Apologies, Mr. Welch, but I’m afraid I won’t be targeting JE Consortium as you would like. You’ll need to find another lapdog for that job.”

“You treacherous snake, Leonidas!” Mateo roared, but before he could unleash the full torrent of his fury, the line went dead.

A wicked grin crept across Leonidas’ shadowed face. “How dull. I had intended to unveil your true selves one by one, savoring the thrill of the game, but you’ve gone and laid bare your own secrets, stealing much of the delight I’d anticipated. Still, the spectacle is only just unfolding. Janice, don’t let me down.”

Leonidas’ eyes gleamed with a cold, ruthless edge as he snatched a dagger and hurled it with precision, the blade sinking into the heart of a photograph. The face staring back from the punctured image was none other than Aiden’s.

When Janice stirred awake, the sun was already high in the sky. Who could have imagined that the mastermind behind the Welch family's downfall would rise so late, refreshed and nestled comfortably in Aiden's embrace?

Aiden?

Chapter 1009:

Janice's eyes snapped open, locking onto a gaze brimming with warmth and tenderness.

"Aiden, why are you here?"

"What's this? You spent the night with me, and now you're playing innocent?" Aiden teased, putting on a mock-wounded expression.

Janice's brow creased as she studied his face, her mind racing to piece together the hazy events of the night before. After issuing her bold ultimatum to the Welch family as Queen, her taut nerves had unraveled, and exhaustion had pulled her under.

"Did you bring me back?" she asked.

"Who else would've bothered?" Aiden shot back with a playful roll of his eyes, catching the flush creeping up Janice's cheeks as she tugged her collar tighter. "Oh, come off it—what's going through that head of yours? I was only pulling your leg."

Aiden chuckled, charmed by her sudden bashfulness. He couldn't resist tapping her forehead lightly with a finger. "Do I strike you as the type to lose my composure so easily?"

"So you didn't sleep with me?" Janice blinked, peering at Aiden in disbelief. "Wait, don't tell me you couldn't get it up?"

In that moment, Aiden realized that when words failed utterly, a burst of laughter was the only fitting reply. "If you're doubting my prowess, I'd be happy to prove you wrong this very instant."

With a swift, graceful motion, he rolled over, pinning Janice beneath him. Janice's heart skipped a beat as she caught the smoldering intensity in Aiden's eyes. A flush crept up her cheeks, her pulse quickening under his gaze. Aiden leaned closer, and Janice, startled, squeezed her eyes shut—only to feel the tender brush of his lips against her forehead.

"I promised to declare my feelings for you properly once you've settled matters with the Welch family," he murmured. "I'm not one to let a promise slip through my fingers."

Janice's eyes fluttered open, locking onto Aiden's, where warmth and devotion danced freely. Her heart thundered in her chest. He never missed an opportunity to deepen her affection for him.

Tranquility permeated the morning air in the house, creating a serene atmosphere.

Despite being located in the city center, this peaceful haven remained untouched by the hustle and bustle beyond its walls. No wonder so many affluent families coveted such residences.

The entrance now displayed a new sign, carefully inscribed by Herbert the previous night. Bold and powerful, the words "White Family" symbolized their impending prosperity in Cloverhill.

"Janice, you're awake! Come over for breakfast!" Wendy called out eagerly as she spotted Janice approaching while setting the table.

Blinking in surprise, Janice was still adjusting to the new Wendy. Once aloof and mighty, Wendy had become a housewife.

It was remarkable to witness this change. After spending years as Roger's wife, Wendy had never truly embraced the role of a wife until now. Finally, with Stephen officially in the picture, she had begun learning to be a caring partner.

"Wendy, my brother is so fortunate to have you as his partner," Janice said, chuckling while taking Wendy's hand. "You could have asked the servant to make breakfast."

Wendy's smile brightened even more. "Do you really think so? That your brother's fortunate to have me?"

Chapter 1010:

Janice nodded. "Absolutely."

Wendy beamed like a child receiving praise, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I just want to learn to be a good wife, so I prepared breakfast for you with my own hands."

Another love-struck person. Not merely smitten by love—but utterly, irrevocably captivated.

Janice caught Aiden's eye in a meaningful glance before they both made their way toward the dining table.

Stephen was already seated. The moment Janice came into view, warmth spread across his features in a genuine smile.

"Janice, did you sleep well last night?" He then shifted his attention to Aiden, sending him a look ripe with unspoken meaning.

Aiden coughed awkwardly, but Janice was unfazed and nodded calmly. "Quite well."

"That's good then." Relief washed over Stephen's expression. He had harbored concerns that news of last night's orphanage fire might have disturbed Janice's rest, but her calm demeanor eased his worries.

The fact that she had processed the incident suggested she had come to terms with it. Fortunately, the fire hadn't hurt anyone. Had there been injuries, he knew all too well that someone of Janice's nature wouldn't have dismissed the matter so readily.

"Janice, this is a local specialty. Give it a try," Wendy presented the traditional fermented beverage alongside a freshly baked baguette.

Janice's eyebrow arched with curious interest as she regarded the drink. She recalled whispers among travelers that one's journey to Cloverhill remained incomplete without sampling this renowned drink. Her previous visits had been too fleeting to savor Cloverhill's culinary treasures. Today, however, presented the perfect opportunity to immerse herself in local flavors.

"Wendy, be seated and join us for breakfast."

"Sure." Joy radiated from Wendy's countenance. The simple acknowledgment from Janice seemed to bring her more pleasure than even her relationship with Stephen.

Janice couldn't help but reflect on how they once despised each other, wishing the other would disappear. Yet now, here they were, sharing breakfast.

What a change!

Life's twists and turns were unpredictable.

"Stephen, you should try some too," Wendy urged, presenting the drink.

Stephen's gaze fell upon the offered drink, his lips forming an unconvincing smile that betrayed his hesitation. His eyes flickered toward Janice, conveying something.

Unaware of this wordless communication, Janice brought the rim of the cup to her lips and took a tentative sip. In an instant, her eyes widened with astonishment, and her body became momentarily still.

"Isn't it absolutely delightful?" Wendy inquired, her voice brimming with anticipation.

"Yes, it's quite unique. Truly a Cloverhill specialty," Janice lowered the cup to the table and subtly guided it in Aiden's direction. "You should try it. It's really something."

“If it has earned your approval, it must be worth trying,” Aiden replied, trusting Janice’s judgment completely. The moment the liquid touched his lips, he froze instantly, and his face contorted.