

The Princess and the Pauper (Arabella)

Chapter 1461

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Darren asked with a twinkle in his eye, "Romeo, you a fan of the liquid courage? I've picked out a few light beers for ya."

Romeo glanced at Arabella instinctively before answering obediently, "No, I don't drink."

Catching Belinda's gaze, Darren chuckled and put the beer bottles back, "Well, I guess I'll pass too. Just didn't know if you had a taste for it, so I picked out a few. Good on ya, lad. Staying sober's a fine habit."

Swallowing, he looked longingly at the bottles. He'd been hoping for a cheeky pint.

Belinda knew he was itching for a drink but deliberately ignored it, smiling warmly at Romeo, "This is your first time over for dinner, We weren't sure what you like. If there's anything on the table that's not to your taste, just say the word and I won't have it made next time."

"He's not fussy at all. Eats everything," Arabella chimed in quickly.

Romeo looked at Arabella with an adoring gaze, "Bella's right. I'm not picky at all."

"You're such a catch." Belinda said as she got up to serve him more food, "Dig in, then. These dishes are the family favorites."

"Thanks, Grandma Belinda."

After serving Romeo, Belinda turned to Arabella, "Here you go, Bella. Eat up. You work so hard and I can't really share your burdens, but I hope this meal makes life feel a bit brighter, even if just for a moment."

Arabella softened, "Thank you, Grandma."

"Don't mention it, sweetie."

"This soup's killer, really hits the spot."

Darren also stood up, ladling some for Romeo and then for Arabella.

"Romeo, it's your first time here. Make yourself at home. Whatever you want to eat or drink, don't hold back." Bard clapped him on the back genially, "After we eat, I'd love to have a good chat with you."

"You're putting the boy on the spot. He'll lose his appetite." Eunice laughed as she served Romeo some

more food, "Don't mind him. He just wants to get to know you better."

Feeling their warmth and seeing them continually filling his plate, Romeo replied gratefully, "Thank you, Uncle Bard, Aunt Eunice."

Serena watched as the family fussed over Romeo and Arabella, and felt she was a fifth wheel, utterly invisible.

"So, Romeo, are you focusing more on domestic or international growth these days?" Bard asked with a grin, "I hear you came to Dawnstar just for Bella."

"Both fronts are moving at the same pace, but it's mainly about Bella. Wherever she is, that's where I'll be."

The family exchanged knowing smiles and teased, "Ohhh," as Arabella shot Romeo a look that said, 'Can

you stop?'

But Romeo just smiled at her indulgently. "Bella's parents wanted to come by today, but I told them we're planning to head to Reflections Villa with the grandparents for the celebration. It'll be a grand time, and you should join us." Upon Bard sent the invitation, Eunice interjected, "Romeo has his own family to be with. I heard his grandparents have just got back on their feet, and his parents are back in the country. Let him fulfill his family duties first. He can join us any time."

"Or he could have dinner twice on that day - one with his family and then with us! He's practically one of us anyway. We'd love to have him over." As soon as Darren said this, everyone burst into laughter.

"Pop, you're gonna stuff the poor boy before he's even your grandson-in-law," Eunice laughed as she ladled Darren some soup. Darren looked hopefully at Romeo, thinking how much livelier that day would be with him there. Romeo chuckled, "Actually, my parents also invited Bella over for dinner. Haven't asked her yet, but if Bella's up for it, we can come here first, then head over there."

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"No, no, no, we'll prioritize your side first, visit you guys, and then you're welcome to come over to ours,"

Belinda said, not minding the order of things.

"I'm just thrilled that Bella is willing to come home with me. Of course, we'll do whatever Bella prefers.

We'll have dinner at here first and then maybe grab a bite with my family." As Romeo spoke, he glanced at Arabella, "Is that okay?"

Arabella wanted to object, thinking, 'Have I even got a say in this anymore?'

All eyes were eagerly fixed on Arabella, as if her nod was the only thing they were waiting for.

"Sure."

Hearing her agreement, everyone was elated, especially Darren, "I'll have Kenneth and Louisa nail down the menu right away, and not to forget, the entertainment - it all needs to be planned in advance."

Just imagining the lively bustle of the day made him brim with joy, his eyes twinkling with anticipation.

Arabella was rather surprised - there was entertainment on the New Year?

Eunice, aware that this was Arabella's first New Year's at home, gently explained,

"Every New Year's Eve,

both families put together some entertainment to make the night more festive and heartwarming. It's even

grander than Christmas, especially since it's your first year back, we might have a few surprises in store for you."

"If you spill the beans now, Bella won't be surprised when the time comes." Belinda chuckled. "We'll have to keep our preparations under wraps."

"In the past, your parents would organize a family trip during the holidays.

Sometimes, if your uncle was too busy or your grandparents had already visited the destination, they wouldn't join, but I wonder if they have any plans this year."

As soon as Bard finished speaking, Eunice served him some food and added with a smile, "I think we should suggest that this year you get your work done early so the whole family can take a trip together

with Bella. It'd be great if Romeo could join too. It's Bella's first New Year's back, so it should be something special."

Looking at Serena, she inquired, "You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Of course not." Serena forced a smile, feigning understanding, "I've had so many New Year's with the family and all their love. It's only fair that my sister gets to experience it fully this time."

"Then we'll make it as spectacular as possible for our Bella, who we've finally gotten back. Can't let her feel slighted," Eunice said, offering more food to Arabella.

Serena nearly choked on her irritation. As the meal concluded, Bard casually slung an arm around Romeo's shoulder, admiring the house while engaging in small talk.

Darren and Belinda pulled Arabella aside for a private chat in the living room.

"Romeo seems like a solid guy." Darren mused, "The way he looks at you is all adoration and indulgence.

He must be quite smitten to have that kind of sparkle in his eyes." Darren always thought those lovestruck gazes were almost too sweet.

Romeo's affection for her was evident, unguarded and heartfelt.

Belinda nodded in agreement, "Did you notice? With every question we asked him, even something as simple as whether he drinks, he looks to you for your reaction. One glance from you, and he wouldn't dare take a sip. It's not about not daring to make his wife angry; it's genuinely caring about your feelings."

"He's not my husband yet," Arabella pointed out.

"It's just a matter of time." Belinda said, full of praise for Romeo, "Just look at him, young, successful, polite, and his every move reflects the upbringing of a well-to-do family. It's hard not to like him. You can find such a life partner, and I'm truly delighted for you."

"Yes, Romeo is quite the catch. Everything about him pleases me to no end," Darren couldn't hide his fondness for Romeo.

Hidden in the shadows, Serena's face changed due to exasperation.

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After a while, Belinda glanced at the clock and said to Arabella, "What's the deal with your uncle? Why's he hogging Romeo for such a long chat? It's already nine o'clock. Bella, go find them, tell your uncle that grandma needs him."

Darren couldn't help but chime in with a complaint, "Romeo's here for Bella, and after dinner, they ought to have a walk and talk together. Your uncle's monopolizing him - don't scare the guy off on his first visit."

"Yeah, hurry up. You young people should be together. What's he doing hanging around so long for?"

Belinda nudged Arabella towards the garden to find them.

Bard and Romeo were hitting it off splendidly, and if it wasn't for Arabella's arrival, Bard might not have realized he'd been hogging Romeo's time.

"You guys chat." Bard said with a chuckle, making space for them.

Once her uncle had left, Arabella asked, "What's been keeping you so entertained?"

"The wedding," Romeo said affectionately. "your uncle wants to come to our wedding; he said he'd give us a hefty gift."

Arabella was taken aback that they'd discussed something so far in the future.

Romeo reached for her hand, "I've got a few buddies around here who want to meet you. Are you free?"

"You have friends?" Arabella was surprised. In the half year they'd been together, she didn't realize a man of few words like Romeo had friends. Noticing her surprise, Romeo smiled indulgently, "Just a couple of old chums. It doesn't really matter if you meet them, but I want them to see that I've got such a wonderful fiancée."

He gently stroked her cheek, which was soft and smooth.

Arabella knew what he was up to - he wanted to flaunt their love in front of others.

"Alright then."

Romeo hadn't expected her to agree so quickly, his eyes shimmering with joy, "I'll arrange a time and let you know in advance."

"Sounds good."

Hand in hand, they strolled through the garden until ten at night when Arabella suggested he head back to rest.

Romeo went to say goodbye to Darren and the others, who warmly saw him to the door, piling gift after gift into his car until the trunk was full.

"These are little tokens from your grandparents, uncle, and aunt, you can't say no!" Darren insisted, saying affectionately, "Come over for dinner anytime. We all like you a lot, and so does Bella."

"I really shouldn't accept this."

Romeo's protest was cut short as Darren and Bard escorted him to his car, with Belinda and Eunice on the side saying, "You gotta take it, and once you do, it means you're one of us. Drive safe, take it slow, and

come over whenever you have time."
Romeo felt their warmth and replied
gently, "Alright."
He turned to Arabella, his tone as tender
as ever, "I'll call you when I get home."
"Okay."

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"I'm heading out. Thanks for the kind hospitality tonight. It's chilly outside, you guys should head in."

"Ah, sure, sure."

They watched him leave before slowly heading back into the house.

An hour later.

After her bath, Arabella was catching up with Romeo on WhatsApp when she was startled by a rapid knocking on her door.

"Miss. Collins, are you asleep? Mrs. Griffith needs you."

Opening the door, Arabella was met with a hushed voice, "She looks a bit under the weather, seems like it's got something to do with the fright Serena had."

Serena??

"What happened to her?"

"They say Serena came bolting out of the basement so scared she lost a shoe, pale as a ghost. I don't know the details, just bits and pieces from the other staff."

Arabella knew the basement held some unsavory characters; surely one of the grisly sights down there had spooked Serena. She followed the servant's lead to the study.

Inside the study.

Eunice sat with an austere expression, gazing down at the figure huddled in the corner.

Serena was curled up, shaking uncontrollably.

After closing the door, Arabella turned to Eunice, "Aunt Eunice, what happened?"

Eunice looked at Serena, her face etched with gravity and silence, before finally speaking, "The man's dead."

That was unexpected.

Two days ago, someone on the dark web had put a hefty bounty on her head.

Eunice had traced the IP address to its source, dragged the perpetrator to the basement, and gave him a beating within an inch of his life.

At that time, the man refused to divulge who was behind it all until Arabella had offered him a deal: reveal the truth and she'd help fake his death so he could start fresh under a new identity. As he seemed to waver, Arabella gave him two days to think it over. But now, on the final day, he was dead.

"How did he die?" Arabella inquired, "When did it happen?"

"Half an hour ago, asphyxiation," Eunice explained, her gaze shifting back to Serena with a complex emotion, "Serena saw him last."

"It wasn't my fault. The staff told me he wanted to see me. When I got there, he said I wasn't the one he wanted to see. But he said he'd made up his mind, that he wouldn't spill the beans. Said it didn't matter who came, and that he'd rather end it himself than suffer at our hands. Then, suddenly, he went silent. When I looked again, he wasn't moving. I didn't know what happened."

Serena was beside herself with fear, speaking incoherently, "He was already so terrifying, covered in blood, and the basement was so dark and dreadful."

She was clearly terrified!

Arabella saw her hugging her knees, sitting on the floor, shaking and sobbing uncontrollably. She should be really aghast at it.

"What did the servant say?" Arabella asked Eunice.

"The servant said that guy wanted to see Miss. Collins, and she thought he wanted to see Serena, so she asked Serena over. She wasn't there to see what happened next, just waiting outside. Not long after, she saw Serena running out of the basement. When I checked, he was already dead."

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"It's really not my fault." Serena's tears cascaded down her cheeks uncontrollably, "I swear I didn't know him. I have no idea why he wanted to see me. He even said it himself - he was looking for Miss Collins, my sister, not me. It was the maid who got it wrong. As for what he called the truth, how he died, I'm totally clueless. Aunt Eunice, you have to believe me. How could I possibly commit murder!"

Serena seemed to be traumatized, sobbing without any regard for her appearance. She looked utterly pitiable.

However, Eunice watched her with a complex expression in her eyes. Logically speaking, Serena simply didn't have the nerve to kill someone. But that man wanted to see Miss Collins, which meant he had figured something out and wanted to confess the truth to Bella, hoping she would help him create a new identity to start over.

But upon seeing Serena, did he hesitate? Change his mind?

If it was a homicide, the most likely suspect was this weeping girl before her, wasn't it?

"I'm going down to the basement."

Arabella left the study to inspect the man's body for wounds. Aside from the bruises from a beating a couple of days earlier, there were no new injuries.

After a thorough examination, Arabella returned to the study.

The study, lit with a warm glow at one in the morning, seemed somewhat eerie against the pitch-black night outside and the occasional rattling of the windows in the wind.

"Did you find out anything?" Eunice was the first to ask.

"There were no signs of a struggle or a fight, nor did he ingest any lethal poison. His hands and feet were bound just as they were before he died, but he definitely died of suffocation."

At these words, Serena's tears flooded again, "It really wasn't me. He said he wanted a quick end - could he have not wanted to live anymore? Maybe held his breath until he suffocated himself."

Arabella had to clarify, "It's impossible for a person to commit suicide without external help, including holding one's breath."

When pushed to the limit, the brain stem and autonomic nervous system, which control breathing, automatically kick in. They are not governed by conscious thought. It's not like the brain can tell the body to stop breathing indefinitely without it eventually taking a breath.

In simpler terms, if one holds their breath to the point of brain hypoxia, muscle relaxation would naturally occur, interrupting the breath-holding and preventing death.

"Could it be that he had some kind of disease, a sudden death?" Serena speculated, looking pale with fear.

"I checked. It was mechanical asphyxiation, plain and simple. In other words, someone smothered him."

Serena turned even paler, "Not me. When I saw him covered in blood, I was so scared I went weak all over. How could I have gotten close to him, let alone have the strength to smother him?"

Arabella's gaze also turned complex. Logically, Serena didn't have the courage or strength to kill a grown man, especially an assassin. If he had wanted to resist, even with his hands and feet tied, he could have easily overpowered a frail girl.

But if not her, could there be a mole inside the house? Or had someone else infiltrated the estate unseen?

However, this possibility was quickly dismissed by Arabella.

The crime scene still had Serena. If someone had come in with the intent to kill the man and done so in front of Serena, she wouldn't have survived either, not to mention still being here to weep and wail.

Moreover, if someone had wanted him dead, he would have fought back, yet there were no signs of a struggle.

If he was intent on dying, why would he want to see Miss Collins? It seemed like he wanted to reveal the truth to her - not like someone desiring death.

What on earth was going on?
Arabella was deep in thought.

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"Aunt Eunice, I swear it wasn't me. I didn't even know who he was. How could I possibly kill him? For one, I had no grudge against him, and for another, I don't have the guts or the courage. I had no motive and certainly no means to kill him. Why would I do such a thing?"

Serena was crying, the picture of injustice personified.

"Besides, it was the maid who summoned me. I was just about to hit the hay when she said someone wanted to see me. That's the only reason I went down there. I had no clue about all those people locked up in the basement. I'm no psychic, how could I have predicted that the maid would call the wrong person, much less that it'd be me? And I have no reason to do such a thing."

Eunice, however, couldn't wrap her head around the situation, but given that Serena was the last one to see him alive, suspicion naturally fell on her.

"You're a doctor. Can't you check for fingerprints or something? Aunt Eunice, you know some pretty influential people. If I had smothered him, I would've left some evidence." Serena sobbed, "It really wasn't

me, Aunt Eunice. You might not believe me in other things, but murder, that's something I could never do."

As Serena seemed on the verge of passing out from her tears, there was a sudden, urgent knock on the study door.

Without further ado, Belinda burst in, finding Eunice and Arabella as if interrogating Serena, who was sobbing uncontrollably, looking as pitiable as a frightened little lamb.

"What's going on here? What happened?"

Belinda rushed in, concerned.

"Grandma." Serena opened her arms, seeking comfort from her grandmother, her body trembling with fear, barely able to stand.

She desperately needed someone to hold her and offer solace.

Belinda hurriedly walked over, questioning, "What in the world happened? Eunice, it's the dead of night. What are you doing?"

Darren, too, peered in from the door, his expression a mix of confusion and concern, "What's all this?"

He and his wife were about to turn in for the night when they heard a faint weeping from the study, which grew louder and unmistakably sounded like Serena.

But they hadn't caught the details of the matter.

Serena clung to Belinda, weeping unabated. She was just wailing helplessly without telling them the reason.

"Eunice, what in the world is going on?"

Belinda turned to Eunice, her voice filled with concern. It was late,

and Serena was crying so hard she could barely breathe.

"Just let her go back to bed," Eunice suggested, not wanting to alarm the elders with the night's grim revelations - a hired hit on Bella, and the perpetrator somehow linked to Doom. She felt frustrated that the lead had gone cold. Serena, having been the last to see him, was naturally a person of interest, but there was no evidence.

Seeing her daughter-in-law's reluctance to divulge more, Belinda didn't press further, instead helping

Serena to her feet with a gentle voice, "Let's get you to bed, dear. We can talk about all this tomorrow."

Serena was truly frightened, her legs weak. She nearly stumbled with her first step.

Belinda held her tight.

"What scared you so much?" Darren also stepped forward to help. Every time Serena thought of that dark and dreadful basement, the chills were uncontrollable. The cells holding people, their mournful cries, the bloody wounds, she never knew her uncle's house concealed such a nightmarish level. It was like a layer of hell on earth, utterly chilling to the bone.

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After they supported Serena away, one on each side, Eunice turned her gaze back to Arabella, "She's definitely a suspect, but there's no proof she had a hand in this."

Arabella preempted her aunt, knowing what she was about to ask, "Keep digging, we'll probably find something. There's no need to rush this." Eunice wanted to say more, but ultimately nodded in agreement, "You've had a long day too, go get some rest."

"Don't worry, Aunt Eunice. The truth will come to light sooner or later."

Over the years, Arabella had investigated many cases and had learned the value of patience; sometimes taking it slow could lead to more clues. Nodding thoughtfully, Eunice was left alone in the study after Arabella left. Until Bard, fresh from his shower, came knocking, "Why aren't you in bed yet?"

Eunice recounted the events and shared her doubts, "Let's say Serena hired someone to take out Bella but that guy was locked in the basement by me before he could do anything; suppose Serena had no idea where he was hiding after his initial failure until she stumbled upon him by accident. Fearing he'd rat her out, she then kill him. But why wouldn't he struggle if he wanted to live? And if he didn't want to live, why

did he ask to see Bella again? Two days ago, when Bella talked to him, I thought he wanted to live."

Too many questions swirled in Eunice's mind, leaving her puzzled.

"Could it be that someone else killed him? Serena did say the man suddenly went silent. Maybe she thought he was dead and got scared off. After she ran, someone else could've sneaked in and finished the job," Bard speculated.

"If he was murdered, how could there be no struggle?"

"Didn't he tell Serena he wanted to end it himself, saying it's better than suffering at our hands? Maybe the killer was one of his own?"

"But Bella said there were no additional traces at the scene, no extra footprints."

"Maybe we overlooked some clue?" Bard patted her shoulder reassuringly, "Don't overthink it. I'll have the scene checked again. You should get some rest."

Knowing that worrying wouldn't help, Eunice nodded, "Wake me up as soon as there's any news, even if I'm asleep."

"Don't worry. I'll tell you immediately."

Bard wrapped an arm around her shoulder to lead her back to bed, tenderly covering her with the quilt. He uttered, feeling disquieted, "Ever since you came back to this family, you've barely had a moment's peace. There's been too much for you to worry about. Just look at the time, and you're still not asleep."

"I just feel pity that the lead we finally had has hit a dead end. If they're still out there trying to kill Bella,

who knows how many dangers she'll face." Eunice's concern was genuine. But she couldn't share these worries with the elders at home, not wanting them to lose sleep fretting alongside her.

"Indeed, we should step it up and root out those people once and for all."

Eunice had promised Arabella that even if it meant turning Dawnstar upside down, she would weed out the remnants of their enemies, leaving none behind.

In the last few days, she had indeed ordered her subordinates to do just that, but the job wasn't finished when this incident occurred.

"Alright, stop thinking about it. Get some sleep." Bard cooed gently until she began to feel drowsy. Only then did he turn off the main light, close the door, and leave.

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In the still of the night, Eunice's mind replayed the image of Serena, crying as if her heart would break, her face wet with tears. Could it be that she had wronged the girl?

Serena had grown up with the finest education. It seemed impossible that a girl raised with such values could commit murder.

The remarks her husband had made lingered in her mind; it wasn't impossible. Perhaps the real killer was someone else. Maybe she had indeed wronged Serena. The next morning, Eunice awoke to find her husband had not yet come to bed.

After freshening up, she discovered he had been up all night conducting his investigation. Sleep had not claimed him.

In the garden.

Bard was questioning every servant personally.

Eunice descended the spiral staircase and approached him, "Why didn't you wake me?"

Then she turned to the servants gathered, "Did anyone confess anything?"

"Mrs. Griffith, I swear I'm innocent."

The servant, who had called Serena to the basement the previous night, fell to her knees at Eunice's feet, crying, "I've been with you since day one in this house. Whether you were out on business or at home, I was always by your side. All these years have gone by in the blink of an eye. You were injured once while saving my life. With such a heavy bond between us, how could I ever betray you?"

Adam sobbed and continued, "Last night, that man asked to see Miss Collins. Since Miss. Arabella

Collins' identity hasn't been made public, I thought maybe they wanted to see Miss Serena Collins."

Because to everyone, Serena was known as Bard and Eunice's cherished niece, the beloved daughter of

the Collins family.

While Miss. Arabella Collins had only recently returned to the family, her identity still needed to be kept in secret.

"So I took it upon myself to ask Miss Serena Collins. I had no idea I was messing up your plans. I deserve to die, I do." Adam kept bowing his head, "But to accuse me of betrayal, that I cannot accept."

Eunice, looking at her tearful servant, bent down to help her to her feet, softly saying, "We've been through life and death together so many times. I trust you."

The servant cried tears of joy, "Thank you for trusting me. Even in death, I could never betray you. I owe you my life. In this life, I only take orders from you."

"You all may leave."

"Yes."

Once they had left, Eunice turned to Bard, "This line of questioning will get us nowhere. Have you checked the surveillance in the house?"

Bard reported truthfully, "Yes, we've checked. There's no evidence of tampering or deletion. The nearby street cameras were functioning normally as well. No suspicious individuals were seen entering or exiting our estate last night."

"And the basement, any new evidence there?" Eunice inquired.

The basement was reserved for covert operations, hence it was devoid of cameras, too risky to have recordings that could fall into the wrong hands and cause trouble.

"Nothing as of yet."

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Last night, Bard had taken a few of his trusted subordinates to check out the scene, including a forensic expert. But the clues they found pretty much lined up with what Bella had said - death by mechanical asphyxiation, ruling out any pathological factors.

"Once Serena calms down a bit, I'll have a chat with her." Bard mentioned casually, "Maybe she's forgotten some crucial detail, or perhaps a conversation might reveal something we hadn't caught before."

Just then, Darren, yawning, sauntered over and grumbled, "What's with all the secrecy around here?"

What are you all plotting? Poor Serena got so spooked last night, and she insisted on resting with her granny. I ended up moving to the spare room."

Darren hadn't expected this. Finally he reunited with his partner, and yet now he had to vacate his own bed.

"I heard the kid woke up screaming a couple of times, saying she was having nightmares."

Eunice immediately pounced on this, "Did she say anything in her sleep? Any sleep-talk?"

"I wouldn't know; I wasn't the one sleeping next to her." Darren replied with a deep sigh, hands clasped

behind his back, "Eunice, Bard, don't mind an old man's meddling. I've never interfered with your

decisions or actions, even though I'm often in the dark about them. But I

wholeheartedly trust your

judgment because I know you both have your heads on straight."

Bard and Eunice knew what he was hinting at, but they remained silent, choosing not to interrupt.

"Bella's finally come back to this family, and we ought to make it up to her. But Serena's grown up under

our watch too. Even if she's made a few small mistakes, there's no need to lash out and terrify the kid.

You've never been that harsh with her before."

Darren thought Serena had just slipped up on some trivial matter, earning a scolding from them.

He continued, "We've always said that we should treat all the kids equally."

"What if someone hired a hitman to kill Bella?" Eunice interjected sharply, her gaze piercing.

"What? What are you saying?" Darren clutched his chest, gasping for breath, the shock too much for him to handle.

"Easy, Dad. I'm just asking." Eunice quickly moved to pat him on the back.

"You're suggesting someone wanted to hire a hitman for Bella? And the scolding last night, do you suspect

it's connected to her? Is, is the kid involved in something behind our backs?" Maybe because the information was overwhelming, and Darren's heart couldn't bear it. No amount of clutching at his chest could ease the pain. Ever since his heart surgery, his own kin had upset him time and again. The last time someone falsely accused the Ar-BI-Clear Group of selling defective products, which had left him similarly distressed. Yesterday, Arabella had reminded him during his check-up that he needed to keep his emotions stable and avoid any extreme upset. But Eunice's words had caused his heart to clench tight, like a fist squeezing hard. On one hand, there was the child he'd dearly loved for eighteen years, and on the other, there was the

darling girl who had returned to them after a long absence, having saved his and his wife's lives, and who had won his affection with her contributions to the family.

Both were dear to his heart, but Eunice's words were like a knife twisting in it.

Seeing Darren's pallor, Eunice quickly reassured him, "It's nothing. I was just asking. I mean, do you think if Serena was involved in something as serious as hiring a hitman, that would justify the severity of last night's scolding? If it was a minor mistake, there's no need to dwell on it, right?"

Darren, breathing heavily, took a while before nodding, "Eunice, tell me straight, what exactly happened last night?"

Considering his fragile health, Eunice applied directly, "Nothing serious, really. Serena just stumbled upon

some people I was keeping in the basement and got scared. I gave her a good talking-to, and told her to stop wandering around like that again." Darren had long been aware of the people cooped up in the basement. His two sons, Bard and Sampson, needed to be tough and resourceful to survive the cutthroat world they lived in.

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/ Chapter 1470

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The Princess and the Pauper (Arabella)

Chapter 1470

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"What on earth was Serena doing in the basement?" Darren couldn't help but ask. "Probably heard some noise, or caught one of the staff gossiping. You know how curious she is. Wanted to check it out for herself. Bard already gave those chatterboxes a good talking-to."

Eunice gently rubbed Darren's back, careful not to rile him further.

Darren finally eased up a bit, no longer as stiff as it had been moments ago.

"No wonder the poor girl had nightmares last night." Darren mumbled with newfound clarity, "She's never been exposed to anything like that, and those folks locked up in the basement must've scared her witless."

He remembered how Serena had curled up in a corner of the study the previous night, crying pitifully.

She must have been terrified!

"I should talk to her grandma, have her comfort Serena. Help her forget all this sooner rather than later."

As Darren spoke, a light bulb went off in his head, "Why not have her and Bella head back home first?

The holidays are just around the corner.

They can go ahead, and we'll join them at Reflections Villa for a reunion once your mom and I are back in fighting shape."

Eunice looked at him, speechless. Was he sure he's all better now??

Who was it that nearly had a heart attack just a while ago??

"You've got a whole mess of trouble locked up in that basement; just make sure Bella doesn't see." Darren

expressed his concern.

Even though Bella had already seen the extent of his siblings' cruelty in the hospital, the ruthless killing of so many people.

But such bloody and brutal scenes were best avoided, especially for a teenager like Bella.

If Darren knew that Bella was the leader and had seen such horrific scenes hundreds of times, he'd probably worry his heart out even more.

Eunice had only learned of Bella's capabilities through stories Bard had told her. The way Bella had orchestrated things to expose Calvin and Arlen and others, it made her realize the girl was extraordinary.

And when her husband revealed that Bella was Mr. Bryant, Eunice saw her in a whole new light.

"That settles it then. Let's have them go back to the States. This way, Romeo and Martin can get back to business there. They can get a head start on work and enjoy the holidays together without having to revolve around the girls, putting off their responsibilities."

Darren thought it was an excellent plan and nodded in agreement, ready to discuss it with his better half.

Eunice glanced at Bard, a tad worried. If Serena was involved in all this, sending her back would be like freeing the tiger back into the wild.

Bard, sensing her thoughts, reassured her, "Right now, she's all tears and no talk. If it really is her, and she clams up, denying everything, we've got no evidence. We'd have to let her go either way, right?"

They couldn't very well lock up a girl they'd cherished for eighteen years and subject her to a barrage of interrogations, could they?

Besides, Serena's life had always been sheltered, untainted. Given her strength, courage, and connections, it seemed unlikely she'd be involved in any foul play.

Just then, Bard's phone buzzed. After taking the call, he turned to Eunice and said, "Bella's start-up, the Ar-BI-Clear Group, has just topped the charts, surpassing all the major brands. Their skincare line is now ranked number one."

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