

## War Song 1501

### Chapter 1501

Carissa studied the man and woman carefully, feeling a sense of unease. She couldn't quite place their age. They looked to be in their thirties, yet there was an undeniable vitality about them, as if they were no older than twenty.

Her gaze moved to their eyes, particularly the man's. His eyes were as deep and mysterious, yet they held the calculating sharpness of a seasoned old fox.

Before Carissa could say anything, the man stepped forward and spoke.

"This is where the orphanage is being built? Is the local government funding it?"

Travis glanced at them, noting their perfectly spoken Starhaven dialect. They clearly weren't from Victory Pass, yet he saw no malice in their faces. He nodded.

"Yes, it's a place to take in abandoned children," he replied. "It's being supported by the local government."

The man nodded. "That's a good cause."

Carissa stepped forward. "Are you from the capital?"

The man regarded her but didn't answer her question. Instead, he asked, "Are you the Hell Monarch's princess consort, Lady Carissa?"

A chill ran through Carissa. She was about to demand how he knew that when he spoke again. "You're heading to Orivenia, aren't you? When do you leave? Could we accompany you?"

Carissa was taken aback. While many people knew they were traveling to Orivenia for the negotiations, it was a mission involving official delegates. There was no way they could bring outsiders along.

Yet, the man had asked so casually.

She regained her composure and asked, "What is it that you need in Orivenia?"

The man answered, "We just want to observe your talks and bear witness, if you will."

Carissa felt a mix of suspicion and curiosity. He either had a significant background or was simply talking nonsense. She studied them again. They seemed serious, but their appearance-dressed in threadbare clothes-made them look more like wandering vagabonds than anything else.

Before she could respond, the man spoke once more.

"We haven't eaten yet. Could we trouble you to share a meal with us? It's been a long journey, and we're anxious to look around once we arrive. We even missed last night's dinner."

Violet had just stepped out when she heard this. She had missed the earlier conversation and only caught the part about someone asking

Carissa to treat them to a meal. She

glanced at the couple and as she

they were wandering travelers, then said, "Sure, I'll treat you to a meal. We're all friends when we're away from home."

The man's expression softened, and a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "Then I thank you kindly. How does Spring Pavilion sound?"

Carissa knew Spring Pavilion well-it was a well-known restaurant in the border town, famed for its unique dishes. The prices were reasonable, the portions generous, and it was only a short walk away.

Carissa wasn't accustomed to inviting strangers to dinner, but since Violet had already agreed and she herself was curious about their backgrounds, she nodded in assent.

She led them toward the restaurant, but to her surprise, the man followed them while the woman went in the opposite direction.

Violet was somewhat puzzled and asked, "Isn't your wife coming with us?"

The man answered, "She is. She returned to fetch a few others. We have companions."

He then asked, "There are more people coming, which means more people to feed. Would you mind?"

Violet smiled. "Not at all."

More people meant more people to feed, but it hardly mattered there would still be plenty of food to go around.

As they walked to Spring Pavilion, Carissa asked him his surname. The man shrugged, his voice light. "Names are mere symbols. What matters is fate."

Travis observed him closely for a moment and muttered under his breath,

"Mysterious, isn't he? Could he be some hidden expert?"

His voice was so quiet that only he could hear, but the man replied, "I'm no hidden expert-just a weary soul worn by endless travel."

When Violet heard this, she felt a

twinge of irritation. They were about to treat him and his wife to dinner, and yet he wouldn't even share his name. It struck her as rather petty.

Chapter 1502

Spring Pavilion was full that day.

The restaurant wasn't very big to begin with, and it usually had some customers. The black-clad men that lady brought had taken up all the remaining seats.

Carissa, Violet, and Travis had to sit at a small table the owner had set up at the last minute, separate from the others.

The man's voice, soft and apologetic, reached Carissa's ear. It was warm and pleasant.

"These are my brothers-in-arms. We've been traveling since last night and haven't had a bite to eat. If it troubles you, I can have them wait outside and just pass them some bread each when we're done."

Violet paused, surprised, but quickly shook her head. "No need for that. Please, let them stay. They can sit where they like and order what they wish."

The man smiled kindly. "You are kind-hearted, miss. In that case, we'll order freely, and we'll take extra."

"Alright... That's fine," Violet replied, casting a glance at the sea of black. The men were dressed in a way that suggested some sort of organization, with embroidered characters on their sleeves, though they were so wrinkled and dirty that she couldn't make out the words.

After a moment of squinting, she thought she recognized words like "Shadow Guard" or "Lightning Guard" among the stains.

Despite their rough appearance, the men weren't rude. After confirming they had their places, they all stood up and thanked their host for the meal.

Some had graying hair, but their tanned faces didn't make them look all that old. There were a few, however, whose appearances were downright unsettling- strange, twisted faces that made them look like something out of a ghost story. Carissa, Violet, and Travis exchanged a glance, feeling as though they had been roped into this meal without much choice. They had hoped to converse during the meal, to learn more about the strangers' identities and intentions. After all, there were 20 or more of them here, each one clearly skilled in martial arts. It would have been wise to inquire further, as there were risks in not knowing who they

were.

Little did they know, as soon as the food was served, the group ate like a storm sweeping through the land-silent and swift. Not a single word was spoken, not even by the woman with them. It was as if they hadn't eaten in days.

The only time anyone spoke was when one of the men in black stabbed the last piece of meat with his fork, looked at another reaching for it, and said firmly, "Mine."

Other than that, not a single word was uttered.

There was one other instance: Travis had offered them wine, and the man had replied, "No wine while working."

Then, without another word, he returned to his meal.

Their meal was eaten swiftly, and with remarkable precision. It seemed as though they all finished at once, setting their cutlery down in unison.

Carissa had been thinking that they must be a well-trained group, but it became clear that the speed of their meal wasn't due to discipline-it was because the dishes had been emptied entirely. Not a scrap of meat or garnish remained the plates were truly wiped clean.

Carissa glanced at her plate. It seemed...she had barely eaten more than five bites?

The man approached them and bowed in thanks. "We are grateful for your kindness. The meal will not be forgotten. Farewell, and until we meet again."

The group rose in unison, nodding respectfully. "Farewell."

Carissa stood to return the gesture, but by the time she did, they had already left the restaurant.

"Wait!" Carissa called after them.

It was probably better if she hadn't said anything. The moment she called out, they picked up their pace, walking even faster.

Travis looked at her, bewildered. "What's the rush? Do they think we're asking them to pay the bill?"

Violet was equally puzzled and muttered, "They must have something urgent. It's not as if they'd need to run off over a meal, right? Besides, we already told them we'd be treating them."

Carissa stepped out of Spring Pavilion and found the street empty. They had truly vanished quickly—so quickly, in fact, that following them would have been impossible.

But with so many of them and all of them dressed in black, it couldn't be too hard

to find out where they had gone. A quick inquiry at the inns should reveal something.

After settling the bill, they returned to Stormwatch Keep.

Upon hearing about the group of black-clad men who seemed skilled in martial

arts, Dominic grew immediately wary.

Since the end of the war, trade had

picked up, and travelers were more frequent. But with the influx of people, every entrance and exit to

the city had to be monitored. If

group of 20 or more had arrived, security would have been more diligent.

Yet, there had been no report about them.

Wallace sent people to check the major inns, but they found nothing.

Recalling how difficult it seemed for the group to eat, Carissa suspected they hadn't stayed at an inn. Instead, it might be more useful to check the nearby villages, the mountain shrines, or perhaps the temples and similar places.

## Chapter 1503

Wallace gave the order, and Barrett was tasked with the job of investigating. He led a group to search the area.

Barrett was aware that Carissa had arrived at Victory Pass. He had been there to greet the group. However, he had stayed at a distance, watching from afar without approaching. From that distance, he hadn't been able to make out any faces, only a vague silhouette that seemed to resemble hers.

He had thought his actions unnecessary. After all, what business did he have with her? The affairs of the capital were nothing for him to involve himself with.

While the diplomatic envoy rested in Victory Pass, they spent their time discussing strategies and rehearsing their approach. Everyone understood that while this negotiation might seem easier compared to the last, it was by no means a simple task.

Lisandra had long kept this matter at the forefront of her mind and would not easily yield to any compromises.

The Sullivan family also feared that someone might infiltrate the envoy and eavesdrop on their plans. If their strategies were known, Orivenia could counter them, putting Starhaven at a disadvantage.

Thus, Wallace had ordered Barrett to find out who those mysterious people were. At the same time, he had instructed Barrett to scrutinize everyone around the envoy, ensuring that no one had infiltrated their ranks.

After two days of investigation, Barrett had come up empty. No one had disguised themselves, and there was no sign of anyone sending messages out of Victory Pass.

The only lead Barrett had was that they had once eaten at Spring Pavilion. After leaving the restaurant, a few traders had seen them, but no one could say where they had gone or where they were staying.

It was curious, indeed. How could a group of 30 people in black simply vanish?

Victory Pass had many roads, all leading in different directions. However, only one high mountain pass connected the city to the outside. Even so, trade between the two kingdoms had been established, so it was unnecessary to risk crossing the treacherous mountains. The cliffs were too dangerous—one misstep could lead to a deadly fall.

Dominic had ordered further investigation into their city records, worried that something might have been overlooked. They couldn't simply follow the trail of 30 black-clad figures, as they could have entered in smaller groups or even dressed differently.

According to the descriptions Carissa and Violet had given, these men had terrifying features that could scare children into silence. People who looked like that were rare—if anyone had seen them, they would surely remember. But no one did.

Carissa herself was perplexed. How could 30 living people simply vanish into thin air?

Yet, there was nothing to be done. The next morning, they would be departing for Orivenia.

Since their departure was set for the early hours of the day after tomorrow, there was little time to dwell on the matter. Tonight was for gathering together, for sharing meat and a few laughs. They would treat the whole thing like a strange dream and move on.

And honestly, it did feel like a dream. Their encounter with that couple had been so brief, so fleeting, that now, when they tried to recall them, the memories were hazy at best. The only thing that stood out vividly was the man's toes poking out from his worn, dusty shoes.

On the evening's farewell feast, Barrett made an appearance.

The Sullivan family had not planned to invite him, but Davis had brought a message from Salvador, urging Barrett to take a more active role in handling military matters. It was clear that Salvador still held him in high regard.

So, Wallace decided to extend the invitation.

There was no reason to avoid him now, especially since past grievances had long since faded. To do so would only make it seem as if Carissa had not truly let go of the past.



However, out of respect for Carissa, Wallace went to speak with her first.

When he had finished, he looked at her with tenderness and asked, "If you don't want to see him, I can make sure he's not invited. I'll have Mr. Lloyd speak with him privately instead."

When Carissa thought of Barrett, she realized he no longer stirred even the faintest ripple in her heart.

"It doesn't matter," she replied. "If we are inviting the generals, he should be included. What happened between us is in the past. There's no need to go out of our way to avoid him."

Wallace laughed warmly. "Good. That's all I needed to hear."

At the start of the feast, Carissa noticed Barrett. He arrived late and quietly found

a seat in the corner, doing his best to go unnoticed.

She wouldn't have noticed him if Violet hadn't pointed him out. When Carissa's gaze shifted over, she caught him looking her way as well. Their eyes met for a brief moment before Barrett quickly looked away, his face paling slightly.

Throughout the feast, he remained silent. He ate when it was time to eat, and raised when it was time to drink. But with only one hand, his movements seemed a little awkward.

Every so often, he stole a glance at Carissa. The woman he once knew was now far beyond his reach.

Beside him, Davis murmured something in a low voice. Barrett listened carefully, then gave a solemn nod.

Chapter 1504

At the break of dawn, the large procession set out for Orivenia.

Carissa didn't feel much regret in leaving. After all, they would pass through Victory Pass on the way back, and she would have the chance to meet with her grandfather and his family again.

Once they had left Victory Pass, the road grew rougher. Many sections were full of deep potholes or had been intentionally damaged, making it difficult for the carriages to move forward.

However, Kendrick was determined not to ride a horse again. Even after days of rest, his legs were still sore from the relentless friction of the saddle. Walking was manageable, but sitting on horseback?

That was pure agony.

So, despite having earned his merit at Victory Pass for establishing an orphanage there, Kendrick insisted on traveling by carriage. When the wheels got stuck or the path became too treacherous, the Mystic Army soldiers dismounted and pushed the carriage forward, inching their way through the difficult terrain.

Fortunately, the roads had been cleared between the two kingdoms, and they were able to use the routes that had been established for such purposes. Had they needed to cross the high mountains, Kendrick's noble rear end would have surely suffered greatly.

As they entered Orivenia territory, the officials and soldiers of Orivenia were there to greet them and escort them toward Fawnrun City.

Apart from the translator, everyone else from Starhaven was visiting Orivenia for the first time.

While it was still a border city, Fawnrun City was clearly in worse shape than Victory Pass. The streets were lined with dilapidated buildings and ragged beggars, and the faces of the common folk were marred with sorrow and worry.

Carissa was a little surprised. Despite the war between the two kingdoms, it seemed odd that Fawnrun City had been so badly affected. The conflict hadn't reached this far, at least not directly. Even though Barrett and Aurora had passed through here before, causing the massacre in the nearby villages, the damage should have been limited to that area, not the entire city.

It wasn't until they arrived at the guesthouse in Fawnrun City that Carissa learned from one of the escorting officials that the devastation was not merely from the war. During the previous battle between Leroy and Victory Pass, Leroy's forces, struggling with supply shortages, had resorted to raiding Fawnrun City for provisions.

At that time, Leroy's situation was not much better than Victor's. Few in the then Westhaven supported the war, and the abdicated king, despite his title, lacked the strength to lead effectively. The war had been driven more by personal bravado than anything resembling strategy.

When it was heard that Leroy had perished in battle, his body had never been retrieved. Instead, it had been discarded in a mass grave. It was clear that the people and officials of Fawnrun City harbored a deep hatred for him.

The roads became a bit easier to travel after leaving Fawnrun City, though they were still not as smooth as the roads of Starhaven.

Along the way, many of the local Orivenia citizens watched the Starhaven delegation pass by. Some gazed with curiosity, while others looked on with hostility and disdain.

After years of conflict, with wars flaring up and dying down only to reignite, and now with the incident involving the former Westhaven's crown prince Arthur, the people's feelings toward Starhaven were far from friendly.

On the third day after leaving Fawnrun City, the envoy settled for the night at a relay station in Haverbrook. It was there, under the cover of darkness, that they were attacked by assassins.

The assailants came swiftly, their numbers overwhelming-34 in total. They were all dressed in black, with cloth masks covering their faces, leaving only their cold, murderous eyes visible.

Carissa had remained vigilant throughout their journey. Even after they had settled in the inn, she never let her guard down. Despite the large number of assassins, she was not caught off guard.

Violet protected Kendrick and the other officials while Carissa, Michael, and Travis led their people into battle. Orivenia's guards also joined the fight to fend off the assailants.

The assassins were formidable. Their martial arts skills were advanced, their techniques intricate, and their ability to adapt quickly was remarkable.

Though Carissa and her

companions were skilled in combat, the majority of the Mystic Army were not experts in this kind of

high-level fighting. They were better

suited for large-scale battles;-

against such highly

assassins, they were at

disadvantage.

This left Carissa and her group on the defensive. They couldn't fully engage in combat, only managing to protect themselves while

occasionally knocking down a few assassins. However, they didn't deal fatal blows, and the assassins could still escape.

Fortunately, the assassins didn't linger after realizing they were not making

progress. Soon, they all disappeared into the night.

Carissa didn't issue any orders to

pursue them. They were in

unfamiliar territory, and chasing blindly into the night could lead to ambush or

worse. But as she watched the assassins disappear into the shadows, she noticed something troubling-the Orivenia guards had deliberately left gaps in their defense, allowing the assassins to escape smoothly.

Thaddeus Maxwell, the commander of the Orivenia guards, seemed to have noticed this. After addressing the immediate aftermath, he began a thorough investigation.

## Chapter 1505

Kendrick had been shaken by the attack, and the royal physician had already been called to prepare a sedative to calm his nerves.

When Carissa visited him, it was a pitiful sight. His face was as pale as paper, drained of all color. His lips trembled, and he shakily asked if the assassins were gone.

She reassured him, saying they had gone, and only then did his trembling subside slightly.

The people around him had already informed him that the assassins were driven off, but he hadn't believed them. He needed to hear it from Carissa to feel any sense of security.

Carissa reminded him to rest and recuperate before she left.

Meanwhile, Davis was busy comforting the others. As the Defense Minister, he had seen his fair share of chaos and remained calm. Also, he trusted Carissa and the Mystic Army. He didn't think there was much to fear-at worst, they had just risked losing a head.

It was Meadow Ridge's members who gathered together, speculating that the black-clad figures they had encountered in Victory Pass might be the same as the assassins who had attacked them.

It was Violet who first brought up the theory.

She believed the way that group had disappeared was too strange there had to be some hidden passage they used to slip away. It all felt premeditated.

And then there was the matter of their black clothing. The number of them might not add up perfectly, but that was easy enough to explain. Some of them had probably stayed behind, lying in wait.

"At the time, they must have sent out so many people to target us," Violet theorized. "But then, they probably realized that in Victory Pass, even if they killed us, they wouldn't be able to escape."

She continued analyzing, growing more convinced.

She glanced at Carissa and asked, "Do you think I'm right?"

Carissa took a moment to think before shaking her head.

"It wasn't them. Or rather, these assassins weren't as skilled as those people. If they could move freely in and out of Victory Pass, as you said, that idea doesn't hold up. They could've struck and then escaped without us being able to catch up or trace them. Think about it-after we finished our meal at Spring Pavilion, we sent people to look for them. Aside from the staff there, no one else had seen them."

Violet thought about it and agreed. Those black-clad people from the other day had shown remarkable skill. The assassins from tonight were good, but not to the same extraordinary degree.

Carissa continued, "Also, tonight, the assassins had people covering their escape. Do you think the black-clad group we met before needed that?"

Everyone seemed to agree. It was clear that the black-clad figures from before had not needed any such help.

After they left the restaurant, Carissa rushed out to follow them but saw not even a shadow.

Thaddeus had conducted an investigation and now came to give Carissa an update.

His Stellish was rough, but it was clear enough to understand.

He explained that these assassins had once been under the former king's command. They had been trained to hate the people of

Starhaven deeply. Even though net

Edmund had abdicated, their hatred was so ingrained that they had plotted this assassination

Thaddeus assured Carissa and the others that he had already dispatched people

to apprehend those responsible and promised that such an incident would never happen again.

Carissa knew he had already dealt with a few of the guards involved, but she didn't wish to press further. It was pointless to dig deeper. Many people probably understood how Edmund had abdicated.

History was full of victors and vanquished those who lost had to step aside. However, their influence lingered. Furthermore, Orivenia was still a land of turmoil, especially after a female ruler had taken the throne. There were likely many who resented her and were eager to disrupt these negotiations.

Edmund was the younger brother of Westhaven's former crown prince Arthur, who had been killed by Aurora at Victory Pass. Arthur had been beloved by the people and had considerable weight in the court. So, even though Edmund acted erratically after taking the throne, he still gained some support because of his brother.

As for those who didn't support him, they didn't strongly oppose him either.

Other noble families and factions were likely fighting behind the scenes. With a new ruler came a new court, and everyone was scrambling to rise to the top. So, it was hard to say if those assassins were Edmund's people or not.

In the end, it didn't matter. Thaddeus' assurances meant little now. Carissa and her group would need to be on high alert and exercise extreme caution.

As expected, another assassination attempt occurred two days later.

This time, the assassins were clearly not the same group as before. Their skills were much weaker, and they were quickly defeated.

Thaddeus captured a few for interrogation. It was unclear if he got any answers, but Travis saw several bodies being dragged out. They must have been tortured, as their deaths looked brutal.

Thaddeus' explanation was the same as last time-they were people who used to serve the former king.

## Chapter 1506

By the time they reached the capital of Orivenia, it was the 13th of August. A full month had passed since they left Starhaven.

The afternoon sun shone brightly, and Kendrick lay back in the carriage as they entered the city.

Since entering Orivenia's borders, they had endured seven assassination attempts. The last one had been particularly brutal, likely involving suicide soldiers. Many of the Mystic Army were injured, and even Violet had been grazed on the shoulder. Thankfully, it hadn't struck anything vital.

Kendrick's fear was understandable. The attack had come when he was emerging from the washroom. The assassin's sword had pierced his chest, nearly plunging in completely. It was Carissa who noticed in time and swiftly turned, driving her spear into the assassin's chest before dragging him back with the hooked tip of her dagger, saving Kendrick's life.

Though the injuries were minor, Kendrick reacted as if he had been mortally wounded. He howled in agony for half the night before finally quieting.

Liam, now the prime minister of Orivenia, led the official welcome party. He spotted Carissa immediately and greeted her with a smile.

"General Sinclair, it's been a long time. Your elegance remains as striking as ever."

Carissa dismounted and returned the gesture, her gaze assessing him. To be honest, she hadn't recognized him at first.

He had aged considerably, his hair streaked with gray, his beard and eyebrows mixed with white. Yet, his eyes still shone with a sharp vitality, more so than when he had been on the Southern Frontier. Back then, he had been consumed by rage. His expression had been cold and stern, his presence one of deep sorrow, as if he lived only for revenge.

"Thank you, Mr. Stellwyn." Carissa smiled.



"Such an honor!" Liam chuckled, greeting Davis and the other officials one by one. Since his Stellish was impeccable, there was no need for a translator, which made the exchanges all the smoother.

After the pleasantries, they were escorted to the royal guest residence. This venue was not typically used to host foreign envoys, but Liam explained that this was an exception due to Lisandra's high regard for the Starhaven delegation.

Upon hearing of Kendrick's injury, Liam even brought a royal physician to tend to him, ensuring that every detail of this visit was handled with the utmost care.

Liam also conveyed the queen's decree, acknowledging the long journey and insisting that the Starhaven delegation rest the night before a grand banquet was held in their honor the following day.

Everyone was absolutely exhausted. After a hearty lunch, they retired to their rooms to bathe, change, and rest.

Carissa slept until late in the evening. When she finally opened her eyes, she saw Lulu waiting nearby.

Rubbing her eyes sleepily, Carissa mumbled in a hoarse voice, "Why aren't you asleep?"

Lulu smiled and replied, "I slept a little, but I'm not used to the bed here. I couldn't get comfortable."

"When did you become so picky about beds?" Carissa chuckled as she sat up, noticing the worried expression on Lulu's face. "What's wrong? Something happened?"

Lulu reached out to pull the cool blanket off her and said, "The queen sent someone to ask for your presence. They want you to come to the palace alone- just you. No other officials were invited."

Lulu was clearly concerned. With all the assassinations they had encountered

along the way, it was understandable that she feared something might be amiss.

Carissa nodded, stretching her body

and loosening up her muscles. "I'll

go with Vivi. Don't worry. Mr. Stellwyn should send someone to escort us along the way. They won't let anything happen to us here in the capital. This is their territory, after all."

Lulu frowned. "That's true, but we've encountered plenty of assassins on this journey."

Carissa smiled. "Exactly. The fact that we've been targeted on the road means the assassins know that once we enter the capital, they won't get another chance. They wouldn't risk coming after us here."

She stood up, preparing to change and comb her hair.

Her clothes were simple and practical, without the lavish finery one might expect of nobility. Her position as the commander of the Mystic Army required efficiency, not the finery of a princess consort. The simple attire allowed her to move freely, ready to take action at any moment.

The weather was warm, so she and Violet wore short-sleeved tunics with leather vests over them for added practicality. Their hair was neatly tied back in practical braids, and neither wore jewelry.

Liam himself came to escort her. The carriage was spacious, flanked by 30 palace guards on each side, all armed and standing ready.

Chapter 1507

The royal palace of Orivenia stood resplendent and imposing, its golden architecture gleaming under the night sky, exuding an air of solemn grandeur.

Upon passing through the first palace gate, the carriage rolled smoothly along the wide palace path, its spaciousness a stark contrast to the more cramped streets outside.

However, what stood out the most was the abundance of lamps. It seemed as if oil was no object, for the palace grounds were lit up as though the night itself had been banished. As they got out of

the carriage and walked along the winding corridor, the large trees ahead were hung with many lamps. Anyone trying to hide in the trees wouldn't stand a chance; they would be seen immediately.

Liam led the way. As they approached a grand palace hall, two female attendants stepped forward. They exchanged a few words with Liam in the Westic before smiling and nodding to Carissa and Violet.

"Ladies, Her Majesty invites you to enter the palace," Liam said with a polite gesture.

The two women led the way, guiding Carissa and Violet inside.

The hall was lavishly decorated, with two thick carved beams standing on either side. They towered as if reaching the sky, casting a heavy, oppressive atmosphere.

The new queen sat on an ornate armchair, smiling but showing signs of fatigue.

Carissa and Violet knelt respectfully before her, and Lisandra gestured for them to take seats. She gazed at Carissa with a soft smile.

"I heard you were the one leading the delegation here, Commander Sinclair. I've been eagerly awaiting your arrival, and now, finally, you are here."

Carissa's smile was warm and sincere. "I was also very happy to hear of your ascension, Your Majesty. My heartfelt congratulations to you on fulfilling your wishes."

As Carissa studied Lisandra, she was struck by how little had changed. Though she was now queen, Lisandra's demeanor was the same as it had been when she was the and princess. There was the same air of fatigue, the sam gravity in her presence.

Carissa understood that the life of a queen was likely as taxing as that of a grand princess—if not more so.

"It hasn't been easy to achieve my wishes," Lisandra said with a faint smile. "But at least now, some things are a bit more manageable."

The attendants began to serve refreshments, which were all local Orivenia delicacies. Carissa and Violet had already eaten, so they weren't hungry and only took a little taste of the food.

Lisandra's hand was clenched into a fist, resting on her temple as she regarded them both. "The reason I asked you to come tonight isn't for anything official. I simply wanted to catch up and share some private words."

Carissa nodded. Before the formal negotiations began, it made sense to set aside the politics and speak as women who shared a certain understanding. Once the talks began, there would be no room for personal matters-only the interests of their respective nations.

Lisandra descended from her throne and joined them at the table, her posture relaxed and less formal. She regarded Carissa and Violet, taking in their youthful faces, the strength in their gazes, and the resilience in their spirits. She didn't hide her admiration, her words full of warmth and genuine respect.

"I believe Orivenia will see more young women like you two. They will shine brightly, their names etched in the history of our land, just as yours will be."

Violet flushed slightly, caught off guard by the praise. "Your Majesty, you flatter us."

Lisandra shook her head with a soft smile. "It's no flattery, it's the truth. In September, Orivenia will hold the civil service examinations. Both men and women can participate. There will be no separate exam for women-they will have an equal chance. What do you think of this?"

This, after all, was a matter of Orivenia's governance, and the two women had little to add beyond their approval. They could only agree with Lisandra's wisdom, murmuring their respect for her decision.

Lisandra was unbothered by their reluctance to engage in a deeper conversation.

She smiled and said, "But you see,

the system has never been fair. From the start, it was always stacked against women. Unless a woman is exceptional, the local education officials won't even allow her to enroll. Women are also rarely recommended to sit the exams. Of course, they'll let a few through the cracks to appease me, but never the best of them. They're afraid."

Violet replied, "They're afraid that women might truly hold up half the world."

"Indeed, part of it is that," Lisandra said with a wry smile. "But the other reason..."

She trailed off, her expression turning solemn. A bitter edge to her voice betrayed a deeper frustration.

"Because I'm a woman, they fear

that I'll elevate more women to positions of power. If a man sat on the throne, they wouldn't be so scared. They wouldn't guard their positions so fiercely, because men would defend the interests and status of other men. I've worked so hard to get here, and yet haven't gained what I truly desire. How can that be considered fulfilling my wishes? This path... It is still so long."

Chapter 1508

Lisandra continued, "The irony is, when I was a grand princess, I could call for women to join the ranks of government without hesitation. Now that I am the queen, I must move slowly, cautiously, balancing all the factions, weakening their hostility and wariness toward me. There are so many things to consider and so many forces at play. At times, I grow impatient, and I wish I could simply rid myself of those who oppose me."

Carissa thought for a moment before replying, "In truth, whether one is a king or an official, man or woman, I believe their goal is the same, Your Majesty. It's to ensure the long-term stability of the kingdom and the peace and prosperity of the people."

"When the nation prospers and war is no longer a threat, any reforms you wish to make will face less resistance. But for now, you must first secure your position, Your Majesty."

Her meaning was subtle, but Lisandra understood clearly. The kingdom was still in turmoil, with various factions causing obstacles. Simply maintaining stability in the court was already an immense challenge.

If she pushed for radical reforms now, she wouldn't even be able to secure her throne. In that case, how could she even think about the future?

Violet nodded in agreement with Carissa's assessment. "There is more than one way to accomplish a goal. Confronting them head-on is one way, but it's the worst one. Changing the mindset of a single person is difficult enough-changing traditions that have lasted for a thousand years is even harder. However, you can plant the idea now, Your Majesty. Over time, there will be those who follow in your footsteps, little by little."

After a brief pause, she added cautiously, "Just like when Cari and I trained in Meadow Ridge—many refused to accept us at first. But we proved ourselves by defeating them one by one. Words alone won't change anything. The best way is to be capable and prove yourself through action."

Lisandra fell into deep thought, seriously considering their words.

After a while, she said, "You're right-I've been too impatient. I feel this way because this has been on my mind for so many years, and it already feels like such a long wait. But this kingdom isn't ready yet, and neither are the women. They're not strong enough to compete with men just yet. They need time, and so do I."

Lisandra didn't continue the topic and instead relaxed, chatting with them about more personal matters.

Sitting on the throne meant she no longer had friends in court-only court officials and ministers. But with these two foreign women, she could talk like a friend, and it felt comforting.

Lisandra preferred listening to Violet since Carissa, as an envoy of Starhaven, couldn't fully set aside her official role. Her words were always careful and reserved, often speaking in hints rather than plainly.

On the other hand, Violet spoke without hesitation, unafraid to voice her thoughts. With everything she had been doing in secret, she had developed her own views on right and wrong, and her words often carried insight.

They also talked about family, friendship, and love.

Lisandra said these were the most beautiful emotions in the world. She longed to

have them all, but if she couldn't, she wouldn't force it.

After all, there would always be regrets in life.

Regret wasn't beautiful, nor was it something to be celebrated-but it was, undeniably, part of life.

Overall, the conversation was pleasant.

They spoke for nearly two hours before finally taking their leave. Lisandra watched their retreating figures, picking up her now-cold

coffee. In the stifling heat of net

night, she had felt like a regular woman, sharing her heart with friends.

It felt truly wonderful.

She hoped to be friends with the people of Starhaven. It would be good for both nations.

Yet, few officials supported her. Even her most trusted ministers believed that neighboring countries were enemies, not potential friends. They thought any alliance was only temporary, based on mutual benefit, and warned her not to be too softhearted.

She wasn't softhearted—she just didn't want another war.

So, for this negotiation, she invited mediators, hoping both nations would make compromises to keep the peace and spare the people from the suffering of war again.

Chapter 1509

The banquet began in the late afternoon, with Liam personally escorting the Starhaven delegation to the palace again.

As they had suspected, the coronation ceremony had already been held. This evening's gathering was mainly focused on the border negotiations. Upon entering, Carissa and Violet noticed that there were no other foreign emissaries present-only royals, nobles, and officials from various departments.

While they showed no hostility toward the Starhaven delegation, they weren't particularly welcoming either. Since a translator was needed for communication, conversations remained minimal, limited to simple greetings.

Just as they were settling in, Lisandra turned to the Starhaven delegation and remarked, "Today, we have guests from Nerathia joining us as well. They should be arriving shortly. I believe you will find that you have much in common."

Davis' eyes brightened immediately. "Guests from Nerathia? Who might they be?"

His excitement was understandable.

The weapons that Isaac had brought to Starhaven-Adrian's six-barreled matchlock and cannon carriage-were all based on designs from Nerathia. Davis had also heard that Adrian himself had traveled to Nerathia to study their techniques. As the Defense Minister for Starhaven, he was keen to learn as much as he could from them.

Nerathia had long been a model for Starhaven, not only for their advanced weaponry but also their methods of governance, which were far more progressive. Of course, their systems couldn't be entirely replicated, given the differences between the two kingdoms, but any opportunity for deeper discussion was one Davis would cherish.

Seeing the enthusiasm on their faces, Lisandra chuckled and replied, "You will know soon enough."

The banquet itself was likely to be long and tedious, but the prospect of meeting Nerathian guests had raised everyone's spirits.

Just as anticipation filled the air, a voice rang out across the hall: "Prince Faelan Aldridge, the Halcyon Monarch, and his princess consort, Lady Elysia Hart, have arrived."

Davis gasped, his hand flying to his mouth in shock. He couldn't find the words to speak, though his eyes sparkled with uncontainable joy.



Carissa had heard of the Halcyon Monarch from Adrian, who spoke highly of him. To think she would meet him in person today was a delightful surprise. She couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement as well.

Bun, Travis, and the others seemed far more indifferent. They may have heard of the prince but had not paid much attention to his reputation.

As the hall buzzed with eager anticipation, a procession of people entered, filling the room with their presence.

When Carissa and Violet finally caught sight of the leader of the group, they froze in place, utterly stunned. Wasn't that the man they had encountered at Victory Pass? The one who had casually joined them for a meal?

As they scanned the other guests, Carissa and Violet's memories began to stir. They vaguely recognized several faces, especially the men with fierce expressions, whose appearances jolted fading recollections. Today, however, the men were dressed in fine, new clothes. They looked nothing like the grimy, ragged figures they had been at Victory Pass.

Faelan was not the king of Nerathia, but his status there was unrivaled, and his reputation was well-known in other kingdoms as well. This made him a figure of great respect, so it was no surprise that everyone in the room rose to welcome him, including Lisandra.

Faelan held Elysia's hand and stepped forward, a broad smile on his face. He scanned the room briefly before bowing respectfully to Lisandra.

"No need for such formalities. Please take your seat, Your Highness, Your Grace," Lisandra said with a smile.

Faelan nodded, then turned his gaze to Carissa and Violet.

"Commander Sinclair, Ms. Spencer," he greeted, smiling. "It seems we've crossed paths again."

Carissa and Violet returned the greeting with a formal bow, realizing that their identities had already been discovered long ago. The meal they had shared together had likely been part of a carefully planned move to establish a connection.

Lisandra was a bit surprised. "Have you met before?"

Elysia smiled and said, "When we passed through Victory Pass, we were starving.

It was Commander Sinclair and Ms. Spencer who kindly gave us a meal."

"Ah, I see," Lisandra responded with a smile. "It seems fate brought you together."

Elysia nodded seriously. "Indeed. To share a meal with someone is no small thing. It must be destiny."

An Orivenian prince spoke briefly with Elysia in Westic, and she

responded in kind. Carissa didn't understand the exchange, but judging by the overly eager smile on the prince's face, it was undoubtedly some form of flattery.

The black-clad attendants accompanying Faellan seemed well-trained. Once seated, they remained utterly silent. Their eyes were fixed outwards, seemingly uninterested in the conversations around them.

Outside, palace servants began filing in to serve the food.

Having attended several palace banquets before, Carissa knew that eating was secondary. The main focus was the exchange of

compliments and subtly laying the groundwork with indirect words. As for what to say, she had her own plan in mind.

But when Faellan casually said, "Let's eat," all conversation came to a halt.

Even when Lisandra raised her cup to propose a toast, the people from Nerathia continued to eat without lifting their heads. The cups left on the side were quickly emptied as soon as the palace attendants refilled them.

No one had a chance to speak, as even Faelan and his wife were engrossed in their food, not giving anyone a glance or showing any intent to talk.

Lisandra couldn't just toast to Carissa and the others, so she simply enjoyed the wine on her own.

Both Carissa and Violet felt an oddly familiar sense of déjà vu. It had been the same at Victory Pass. Just like then, the Nerathians were now eating in silence without saying a word.

#### Chapter 1510

In banquets like these, no one truly ate with much enthusiasm. Most dishes were merely tasted before being set aside, barely touched before servants whisked

them away.

But the Nerathians were different. They treated every dish with genuine respect, cleaning their plates entirely, no matter what was served. Their wine glasses, once filled, were immediately emptied again. The palace servants attending to them must have been exhausted, constantly refilling their glasses and replacing empty plates.

Violet recalled their meal at Spring Pavilion. Just like tonight, not a single scrap had been left behind. She wanted to say something to Carissa, but the only sound in the hall was the clinking of cutlery and the quiet shifting of plates. Speaking now would be too conspicuous.

Still, one glance between them was enough.

Violet's thought was clear-the Nerathians' presence at this banquet must be tied to the negotiations. Carissa agreed.

However, their exact role remained uncertain. Were they here to mediate and broker peace? If so, the treaty could be finalized swiftly.

Or were they here to back Orivenia? If that was the case, then this would become a drawn-out battle. With Nerathia behind them, Orivenia would have little reason

to compromise, and Starhaven's position at the table would be far weaker.

The realization must have struck the Starhaven envoys as well. Davis and the Diplomatic Affairs Minister, Alden Grey, who had earlier been brimming with excitement, now wore more somber expressions. They barely touched their food, though with everyone else still eating, they had no choice but to follow suit.

It was, without a doubt, the strangest banquet they had ever attended. An eerie, foreboding silence hung over them like the calm before a storm.

There were 32 courses in the palace banquet, but each portion was very small. The servants came in one after another, placing dish after dish on the table, then quickly clearing them away. When someone tried to raise a glass for a toast, it was just like earlier with Lisandra. They took a quick glance around, drank their wine, and then set the glass down to continue eating.

Finally, the last dish was served, and just as quickly, the Nerathians finished. Only then did the rest of the hall dare to stop eating.

Faelan dabbed at the corner of his mouth with a napkin before smiling and speaking in fluent Westic. Carissa listened as the translator relayed his words. He was offering polite praise—commending the exquisite flavors of the meal, the fine quality of the wine, and expressing gratitude for Lisandra's warm hospitality.

Carissa recalled how fluent in Stellish the Nerathians had been back at Spring Pavilion, speaking as if they were native-born Starhaveners. Now, Faelan spoke Westic just as effortlessly.

A thought suddenly struck her: Adrian had once mentioned that the Halcyon Monarch and his princess consort traveled between many kingdoms, and their time in Nerathia was actually limited.

Lisandra spoke next, also in Westic, leaving the interpretation to the translator.

"Her Majesty, the queen of Orivenia, has invited Prince Faelan to bear witness to the negotiations between our two kingdoms, in the hope that both sides may reach an agreement that benefits all and spares our people from further war," the translator announced to the room.

A witness.

The word was carefully chosen, neutral enough to avoid revealing their true stance. But what did it mean? Were they here to mediate and broker peace, or to back Orivenia up? It was hard to say.

"Starhaven welcomes Prince Faelan

as a witness to our negotiations. We will strive for a peace agreement that is fair and just, one that safeguards the interests of both kingdoms and spares our people from unnecessary suffering, Davis responded, his voice steady.

After the translator relayed this to the hall, Faelan smiled and said, "Since both kingdoms share the same goal, the negotiations should not be difficult. I represent Nerathia in this matter and hope for a resolution that will be satisfying for all."

That single statement weighed heavily on the Starhaven delegation.

He was not here in a personal capacity, but was representing Nerathia. That meant the kingdom had a vested interest in this conflict. If they truly sided with Orivenia, Starhaven would have to make further concessions to avoid offending Nerathia.

Before leaving Starhaven, Salvador had set clear expectations—seek peace where possible, but do not surrender to unreasonable terms. There was room for negotiation, but Starhaven could not simply yield to Orivenia's demands.

Now that Nerathia was involved, it seemed like that step alone might not be enough to settle things.

Orivenia had gone to great lengths to bring Faelan and Elysia here. Clearly, they anticipated that Starhaven might only offer a modest concession, and they wouldn't be satisfied with that.