

## War Song 891

### Chapter 891

The man was Wayne, but his appearance was quite different from when Barrett had seen him at Edgeview Estate. Even his face seemed unfamiliar.

He took a step forward and nodded in greeting. "Commander Warren, I am aware of the passing of your mom and sister-in-law. My condolences."

Though Barrett recognized the sentiment, he still maintained a certain distance, as he did with all strangers, simply saying, "Thank you. Since you don't want to introduce yourself, I'll take my leave now."

Wayne nodded and said, "Commander Warren, my name is Horace. I serve at Hartstone Estate. It was Lady Heather's request that I come to offer my condolences. Considering the unpleasantness between you and Lady Carissa in the past, she felt it inappropriate to visit directly."

Barrett hadn't met many people from Hartstone Estate, but he knew that their steward was named Horace, so this man was likely him.

However, the man before him had a scholarly air about him, far from the typical appearance of someone who handled internal affairs. He seemed more like a scholar-though, of course, as a servant of a royal estate, he must be well-educated.

Barrett hadn't expected Heather to send someone to express her condolences. A wave of mixed emotions swept over him.

"I appreciate Lady Heather's kindness. It's my fault. I've failed... Madam Sinclair and Lady Heather's expectations."

"Would you mind moving to a coffeehouse to talk?" Wayne asked. "Lady Heather has some words she'd like me to convey to you."

Barrett had gone to Victory Pass on the day of his wedding, then returned and separated from Carissa afterward. When Heather hadn't intervened, Barrett had assumed she didn't want the divorce to happen, which gave him an instinctive sense of goodwill toward her.

Moreover, Harvey and his family had always kept a low profile in the capital, so exchanging pleasantries once or twice with them would not raise any concerns.

"Very well," Barrett agreed with a polite nod. "Lead the way, sir."

As the two of them entered the coffeehouse, many eyes hidden in the shadows were watching their every move.

Wayne studied Barrett quietly. He had already been observing him from afar for some time-he had even placed people to keep track of him.

A year had passed, and Barrett had slimmed down considerably. His face now appeared more angular, while his eyes were far more composed and serious than before. But Wayne felt a bit disappointed, as he saw no trace of the sharp edge or hidden ambition he had expected to find in the other man's gaze.

After everything he had been through-his sister-in-law's suicide, the loss of his power, the death of his child, his mom's passing, and the mourning period-Wayne had assumed Barrett would either become more ambitious or completely broken.

Instead, he seemed unnervingly calm.

Perhaps that wasn't such a bad thing. Yuvan could use a calm and level-headed assistant, especially one who had authority over the king's personal guards.

Wayne continued, "Lady Heather knows about everything that's happened in the Warren family, and is deeply saddened. She feels guilty for not convincing Lady Carissa to stay, for letting her ruin the Warren family's reputation by getting a divorce, and also tarnishing Lady Heather's name in the process."

Barrett felt a strange, almost indescribable emotion rise in him. He had heard about what happened to Leona as well. She was Heather's own daughter. When Leona was mistreated by her husband's family, Harvey and his

family didn't intervene to help. So, to hear this man sent by Heather speaking about his divorce from Carissa sounded hard to believe.

"You should know that Lady Heather was left with no choice," Wayne continued. "Prince Harvey has been able to remain in the capital only because he stays out of state affairs and lives quietly. There are many things he wants to manage but dares not to, so this guilt should have remained private. But seeing how things have turned out with the Warren family, she simply couldn't bear it and sent me to express her condolences."

Wayne's ability to read people was sharp. Barrett, standing in front of him, felt almost childlike in comparison. Barrett thought back to how low-key Harvey and his family had been in recent years. It made sense.

Back when Sigmund was still alive, Harvey was the younger brother of the king, Augustus' biological son. If he and his family hadn't kept a low profile, they would have been vulnerable to false accusations of disloyalty. If that happened, wouldn't that have ruined his entire family?

Barrett nodded thoughtfully. "Your words make sense, Horace. I understand, and I appreciate Lady Heather's concern."

Wayne's gaze was filled with sincerity and worry. "So, do you plan to observe the mourning period for three years? Don't you want to consider another approach?"

"Another approach?" Barrett furrowed his brow in confusion.

"Like applying for an exemption," Wayne said with a small smile. "Three years is a long time. Do you know what the situation will look like then? The king plans to make the Crown Guard independent from the Mystic Army, meaning it won't be under Lady Carissa's control anymore. But for that to happen, there needs to be a commander for the Crown Guard. If you remain in mourning, that position will fall to someone else."

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Barrett wasn't really surprised. Though his time as the commander of the Crown Guard had been short, he wasn't foolish and could sense the king's intentions to make the Crown Guard an independent unit.

Salvador was wary of the Hell Monarch, so how could he allow Carissa to control all the security in the kingdom, including the king's own safety?

Barrett smiled wryly. "Well, it's something beyond my control. I am in mourning for my mom and must observe the mourning period."

Wayne smiled gently, pouring him a cup of coffee. He spoke quietly, "Prince Harvey can help you."

Barrett blinked, taken aback. Harvey barely interacted with anyone in the capital, so how could he possibly help him? Besides, would he really do it out of guilt-if that guilt even existed? And if there was guilt, it would be for Carissa, not for him.

Barrett wasn't stupid.

Setting aside whether Harvey could actually help him, if he could, it would be for a reason. If he truly did assist him, Barrett would owe him, and from then on, he would become the prince's servant.

"In accordance with tradition, I'm observing the mourning period for my mom, unless the king issues an edict to revoke it. However, I'm not an important court official, nor am I a general on the frontier. The king does not need me," Barrett said slowly.

Wayne chuckled softly. 'Commander Warren, you underestimate yourself. You've disappointed the king time and again, yet he's still willing to offer you a chance. Do you know why?'

"Why?" Barrett asked, indeed confused about it.

"It's because of your grudge against the Hell Monarch. The Mystic Army was originally led by Prince Rafael. After he became Chief Judge, he could have continued leading it. Many court officials hold multiple positions. So, why did His Majesty choose Lady Carissa to take over as commander of the Mystic Army?" Wayne posited, his gaze fixed on the other man.

Barrett paused, thinking. Slowly, the pieces began to fall into place, but he still didn't fully understand.

"Why?" he asked again.

Wayne didn't bother holding back and spoke directly, "Changing the commander of the Mystic Army would cause dissatisfaction within its ranks, since the soldiers were all handpicked and trained by Prince Rafael. But Lady Carissa is his wife. Replacing him with her would make it easier for them to accept her.

"However, she won't hold the position for long. The king will gradually reduce her power-first the Crown Guard, then the Royal Guard, and eventually the Capital Guard. At best, she'll be left with the Garrison Unit, which is mostly made up of useless, undisciplined men who are no threat at all."

Even though Barrett had suspected some of it, hearing it laid out so plainly still sent a chill down his spine.

Salvador's repeated attempts to keep Barrett close weren't because he appreciated his talents. No, Barrett was just a pawn in Salvador's game, used to balance out Rafael and Carissa, who had personal grudges against him. He remembered Sebastian's words-how Barrett had potential, but wasn't a great man of talent. Sebastian could see it, so how could the king not? In other words, without the tension between Barrett, Rafael, and Carissa, Salvador would have cast him aside long ago, right?

A complicated storm of thoughts swept through Barrett's mind. In the back of it all, he wondered if he would rather be just an ordinary member of the Capital Guard.

Seeing his conflicted expression, Wayne continued to push, "I imagine you're not content with the situation, Commander Warren. A woman who divorced you, who even caused such a public scandal, is now above you and

holding power over you.

"Don't you want the power to put her beneath your feet? When she divorced you, it caused a citywide uproar. It tarnished the Warren family's reputation and even caused your mom's death. If it weren't for her, Sebastian would never have stopped your mom's medicine."

Barrett looked up, his expression darkening, his gaze full of anger and confusion.

Pleased to see that look, Wayne's voice was laced with even more persuasion as he added, "It was Lady Carissa who killed your mom. It was she who destroyed your family's reputation, turning them into a joke.

"If you lose the Crown Guard commander's position, you'll never rise again. The king may want you to help balance out Prince Rafael and Lady Carissa, but he doesn't need you. If you want a future, Prince Harvey can help you, Commander Warren."

Chapter 893

Barrett met Wayne's gaze, feeling an icy chill run down his spine as he saw the calculating glint in the latter's eyes.

The case involving Eleanor's rebellion wasn't even resolved yet, and now Harvey was trying to place someone by the king's side? Was he really as timid as he seemed? What exactly was he trying to do?

Barrett knew his own limits. He could never play double agent, especially not with Salvador. Having ten lives wouldn't be enough if he tried that.

He stood up immediately and respectfully said, "There's a matter at home that requires my attention. I must take my leave."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and left.

Wayne stared after Barrett's retreating figure, his expression growing serious.

Had he misjudged? Did Barrett truly lack any ambition? Did he understand what it meant to be commander of the Crown Guard? That role meant he would be the king's most trusted personal guard, even more influential than a second-rank minister.

There was no way Barrett lacked ambition. Wayne had done his research before seeking him out. He had always dreamed of bringing honor to the Warren family-it was almost an obsession for his entire family. How could he possibly be content with mourning for three years like this?

Unless someone else had already approached him? His mourning paperwork had been filed-someone must have known. It wouldn't be surprising if someone had got to him first.

But lately, there had been eyes on him. After the New Year celebrations, Barrett hadn't gone anywhere other than the Capital Guard headquarters' training grounds. Because he was in mourning, he hadn't visited anyone, nor had he received visitors, with the exception of people from the Earl of Silverstone's family.

Could it be them? But that didn't make sense. Oliver was at the Southern Frontier, Caspian was useless, and the rest were women. How could they help Barrett?

Wayne thought it over. It was more likely that Barrett didn't trust Harvey's abilities. After all, these past years, the prince had been no better than a coward hiding away. But that was out of their hands.

He also couldn't approach Barrett using Yuvan's name or status. And as for the ministers Eleanor had tried to win over, none of them could be used now, as they had all retreated.

Sighing, Wayne recalled how he had advised Yuvan years ago to slowly take over Eleanor's network and to never let her hold all the cards herself. But the prince had insisted she wouldn't be suspected, and now, years of effort in the capital had been lost in an instant.

Now, besides Harvey and a couple of others they had recommended, there was no one else useful. That was why they had no choice but to take a risky move, sending Harvey to Westhaven to secure the cooperation.

What worried Yuvan now was that the queen dowager had sent someone to Hartstone Estate and discovered Harvey was no longer in the capital, yet no action had been taken against him.

Wayne had studied Salvador thoroughly. The man's ambition ran deep, and he trusted no one. Harvey's sudden illness and departure from the capital at such a sensitive time should have raised alarms, yet the king had done nothing.

His inaction left Wayne at a loss. Without knowing Salvador's next move, he couldn't make any predictions or prepare for what was to come.

Now, even someone insignificant like Barrett seemed beyond their control. Wayne couldn't shake the feeling that things were slipping from their grasp, yet it didn't feel like they were being countered directly.

It was more like wandering through a fog-everything was vague and unclear.

In the royal study, Salvador raised an eyebrow slightly upon hearing the report. "Did you hear what they discussed?"

"I couldn't hear much. They were in a private room and the coffeehouse was noisy. But one thing's certain- Commander Warren didn't seem to get along with that man who works in Hartstone Estate. The man left with a dark expression, Ian responded.

Salvador seemed pleased. "Are you sure that man is one of Heather's servants?"

"No," Ian replied, shaking his head. "I've been studying the people from Hartstone Estate recently. Not a single one of them is like him. He isn't a servant of their household."

Salvador thought for a moment, his gaze sharpening. "It seems they're losing patience. Keep an eye on Barrett."

At Hell Monarch Estate, Jacob looked at Rafael after receiving the report, saying, "Wayne disguised himself as someone else? Your Highness, it seems that man is good at disguises."

"Well, the meaning of his name is 'formless', so it's not a surprise he's good at taking the forms of others," Rafael replied with a dark look. "Do you think Barrett underestimates Harvey and his family, or is he just trying to avoid suspicion?"

"He probably thinks Prince Harvey can't help him, which is part of it. But even if they could help him, Commander Warren might be even more wary and keep his distance. The Warren family can't afford anymore trouble. I imagine his ambition has been tempered enough. Give him any respectable job and he'll throw himself into it. That's exactly the kind of person His Majesty wants," responded Jacob, who was good at reading people.

"He doesn't pose a big problem," Rafael said, then asked, "What about Westhaven? Any news?"  
"Nothing yet."

Chapter 894

Two days later, Kyle arrived with a carrier pigeon from Winona. His face was serious.



"The king of Westhaven plans to send envoys to Starhaven. An official correspondence will arrive in the next few days."

Rafael's expression darkened.

It had been inevitable. Sooner or later, this day would come.

Before the New Year celebrations had even ended, Salvador announced that the Crown Guard would be separated from the Mystic Army and would no longer be answerable to Carissa. Also, Barrett would remain in charge of the Crown Guard.

Barrett could hardly believe it. He recalled his meeting with the man the other day and privately wondered if it was really Harvey helping him. But if it was the prince, then Barrett's reinstatement came with considerable risk.

He had no one to consult, so he went home and told Viola.

"Who cares what he wants to do? Just get reinstated as an official and be done with it. Besides, the Crown Guard isn't even under Carissa's control anymore. How is that not a good thing?" she responded.

Barrett furrowed his brow. "No, I think there's something behind this. It might be part of some scheme. I need to speak with His Majesty."

Viola looked at him in disbelief. "Are you crazy? If you go to the king while he's in a bad mood, he'll strip you of your position. You won't have any chance at a career after that. Forget about being commander of the Crown Guard-you won't even make it into the Capital Guard!"

Barrett fell silent. He shared her concerns.

Viola continued, "You can't say anything. Listen to me. Prince Harvey is helping you because of what happened with Carissa. He and his family didn't stop it, so they probably feel guilty..."

Barrett shook his head, interrupting her, "That doesn't make sense. If Lady Heather feels guilty, it's for Carissa. Why would she feel guilty toward me? I'm the one who disappointed Carissa."

"Unbelievable..." Viola's eyes widened in exasperation. 'Fine. Forget what their motives are. What's clear is Prince Harvey has no ambition and isn't plotting a rebellion. He's helping you get reinstated because he needs something from you. He probably wants you to protect him in return.'

"That doesn't add up either," Barrett replied. "If he's capable of securing my position, then that means his previous 'low profile' and 'timidity' were all an act."

Viola sighed. "Why do you care about all of that? Just think about yourself. Do you want the position of the Crown Guard's commander or not?"

"It's not that simple. You' Barrett started to say, but seeing her growing impatience, he stopped. "Never mind. I'll think about it myself."

Viola's face twisted with frustration. "I don't know what you're still thinking about. Maybe you should be worrying about whether our family can survive. If you lose your position, the whole family will be begging for scraps."

The words hit Barrett like a slap. He stormed off, not bothering to respond.

In a fit of rage, Viola hurled a cup across the room. No matter what they said, they always parted on bad terms. Barrett spent the next two days back on duty, but his mind was elsewhere. After much thought, he made up his mind to speak directly with Salvador. He wanted the position of the Crown Guard's commander, but feared the consequences of being dragged into the rebellion case. He couldn't afford to take even the smallest risk.

In the royal study, Salvador observed Barrett as he knelt on one leg and recounted the conversation from the coffeehouse word for word.

Salvador was pleased. Barrett had to stand alone, with no one behind him. He had to be a loyal servant-he was the most useful that way. Other noble heirs might be talented, but with their powerful backers, they could never be as easily manipulated as Barrett.

"No one interceded on your behalf," Salvador said, his voice calm but firm. "The Crown Guard is now independent and it must be reformed. I recognize your abilities, which is why I've given the order to reinstate you."

At that moment, Barrett's eyes burned. He knew Salvador's words weren't entirely sincere, and understood the political balance at play. But hearing the king say he recognized his capabilities was, to him, a form of redemption.

He knelt for a long time before finally choking out his gratitude.

Salvador smiled knowingly, his fingers resting lightly on a paperweight without a word.

At the next court session, Salvador presented the official correspondence from Westhaven.

The king of Westhaven had dispatched envoys and their grand princess, Lisandra, to Starhaven to hold the kingdom accountable for breaking the agreement to spare civilians. The official correspondence also disclosed the number of civilians killed in Fawnrune City, as well as accused Dominic's forces of capturing Westhaven's former crown prince and torturing him to death-again, in Fawnrune City.

The court erupted into chaos. The revelation sent shockwaves through the room.

With the official correspondence in hand, the events of Fawnrune City could no longer be hidden. Salvador had no choice but to make the truth public.

## Chapter 895

Salvador and the entire court were faced with only two choices.

The first was to flatly deny the massacre of civilians ever occurred.

The second was to act as though they had been unaware of the events, and after receiving the official correspondence from Westhaven, cooperate with their investigation. They could arrest those responsible, take corrective measures, and salvage their kingdom's honor before it was too late.

The official correspondence from Westhaven did not mention the border issues, but that matter would be decided later.

Salvador gathered his ministers and deliberated for three days.

The first option was impossible-Westhaven had already issued a formal accusation and had enough evidence. They had been building support within their own borders for months. The borders between the two kingdoms were already in turmoil, and any attempt to deflect responsibility would lead directly to war.

Given that the second option was the only viable one, the question now became who would be held accountable. Once the decision was made, Salvador exchanged a long look with Jeremiah. The others in the room remained silent, no one daring to speak.

To handle this matter, they would have to recall Dominic and hold him accountable.

But Dominic had lived a life of battle. He had been involved in quelling rebellions and eliminating bandits during Augustus' reign. He had fought at the Southern Frontier, repelled ambitious nomadic tribes, and in the end, guarded Victory Pass. Over the years, the Sullivan family's men had marched alongside him, with many dying in battle.

And now, Dominic would be celebrating his 70th birthday on the 19th of February. For a general to still be guarding the borders at such an age-since the founding of Starhaven, he was the only one.

Who would dare speak up and ask to summon him back to the capital for questioning?

Salvador finally turned his gaze to Rafael. "Hell Monarch, you were once the marshal of the armies during the Southern Frontier battle. How do you think this matter should be resolved?"

There was a stunned silence in the room. Why would Salvador ask Rafael for advice? The Hell Monarch's wife was Dominic's granddaughter. If Rafael were to suggest summoning the general back to the capital, would that not cause a rift between the couple?

Davis immediately felt a sense of dread, recalling all the unpleasant consequences of crossing his wife. His sympathy took over, and in one swift motion, he stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, I suggest investigating this matter by issuing an order for General Dominic to return to the capital for questioning. In the meantime, the command of Victory Pass should be handed over to his adopted son, General Wallace."

As the Defense Minister, Davis knew that the king should actually ask the prime minister, as well as Davis himself, for their opinion. The two of them would be the most appropriate people to make suggestions in this situation.

Salvador glanced at Davis, then asked, "Do any of the other ministers have objections?"

After a brief silence, several voices spoke in agreement, "We concur!"

Rafael remained silent and naturally didn't oppose. In fact, he had anticipated this happening.

Over the past year, he had maintained correspondence with Dominic. The events in Fawnrun City were irreversible; those who had died could not be brought back. Dominic had already submitted a petition of apology at the time, but Salvador had not made it public, nor had he imposed any punishment.

Now, Salvador would not bring it up either, because acknowledging it would imply he had known all along. Once that information spread, especially when the Westhaven envoy arrived, it would stir trouble and only harm Starhaven's reputation.

"Draft the edict!" Salvador said flatly.

The first edict ordered Dominic to return to the capital immediately, transferring command of Victory Pass to Wallace.

The second edict ordered the arrest of Aurora, who had been responsible for negotiating the border lines and signing the treaty. She would be taken to the Ministry of Justice's prison to await trial.

As for Barrett, Salvador didn't mention him. No one else did either, as the fewer people involved at this stage, the better. They would wait to see the attitude of the Westhaven envoy upon their arrival and what demands they would bring.

Meanwhile, Barrett stood just outside the hall, listening to the ministers as they debated inside. His heart was heavy, and fear gripped him.

Aurora was certainly unlikely to escape punishment, but what about him? He had led the raid on Westhaven's supply depot. He had failed to keep an eye on Aurora, who had gone on to massacre the villagers in Fawnrun City. Afterward, he had been completely unaware.

If he hadn't known, how could Dominic have known?

In the end, it was Barrett who had dragged Dominic into this mess.

Chapter 896

The Deputy Minister of Justice, Cyrus Zellner, personally led a team to Valor Estate. To prevent Aurora from escaping, they first surrounded the estate.

Viola was terrified when she heard the news. She hid in Grace Mansion, too afraid to step outside. It wasn't until she learned they were there to capture Aurora that she finally dared to leave her hiding place.

As soon as the commotion started, Aurora had an inkling of what was happening.

Standing at the entrance of Blessed Haven, she gripped her sword. As the chill wind cut across her already scarred face, an eerie, deathly stillness surrounded her.

She watched the officers from the Ministry of Justice storm into Blessed Haven, then twirled her sword in a swift flourish, aiming it directly at the leading officer.

"Aurora Yates, surrender yourself at once!" Cyrus shouted from outside the gates of Blessed Haven.

"Where's Barrett?" she asked coldly.

She knew about Barrett's reinstatement. Now that he was serving at the king's side, he must know everything. Yet, he had never come back to tell her.

Cyrus didn't answer her question. Instead, his voice grew more harsh as he said, "You'd better not resist-you can't escape. Valor Estate is already surrounded."

But Aurora pressed the blade of her sword against her neck, her face twisted into a bitter, mocking smile. "Bring Barrett to me!"

Fearing that Aurora's defiance might drag the Warren family into further trouble, Viola quickly shouted, "Aurora, stop this madness!"

Aurora didn't even spare her a glance. She kept her cold, piercing gaze on Cyrus and repeated, "Bring Barrett to me. I have questions for him. If I'm going to die, I'd rather die sooner than suffer any longer."

Cyrus furrowed his brows. Aurora couldn't die yet. She had to endure the wrath of the Westhaven envoy. Even if she died, she had to die in front of them and under their watch.

"Aurora, it's easy for you to die, but think of your family. Don't act recklessly. Your death will implicate them," he said.

"My family?" Aurora sneered, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "They never cared about me. The moment someone spoke ill of me, they packed up and left the capital. If they don't even see me as their daughter, why should I care about their lives?"

Viola's anger flared. "But you can't drag the Warren family into this!"

Aurora looked at Viola with contempt, as though she were nothing more than a pile of filth. "It would be best if the Warren family went down with me."

Viola's fingers trembled with rage, but she dared not step into Blessed Haven. "How could you be so vicious?" Aurora pressed the sword's edge against her neck harder, the skin breaking and blood beginning to seep out. She raised her voice coldly, "Stop wasting time. Bring Barrett to me."

Cyrus' brow furrowed as he gestured sharply. "Go summon Commander Warren."

After sending someone off, Cyrus paused, feeling that something wasn't quite right. What was the point of calling Barrett now? If there was something for him and his wife to discuss, they could have done it already.

Taking a few steps back, he gave another order, "Find Commander Prince. Tell him to send two of the strongest soldiers from the Royal Guard."

Barrett had once gone to great lengths for Aurora, even using his military achievements to secure her hand in marriage, forcing his first wife into a divorce. It was clear they had deep feelings for each other. If Barrett didn't want her to be captured and tried, he could very well stage a hostage situation. That wouldn't end well.

Whether it was a fake or real hostage situation, it would be tricky. Barrett was the commander of the Crown Guard and served the king directly. The fact that Salvador hadn't required Barrett to observe the mourning period for his mom showed just how highly the king regarded him.

A Ministry of Justice officer sent word to Alistair, explaining that Aurora's arrest wasn't going smoothly and there was a risk of a hostage situation happening. Upon hearing this, Alistair immediately reported it to Carissa.

"If a hostage situation happens, even I won't be able to rescue anyone from Aurora's grasp," Alistair said. "Commander Sinclair, it's better if you go yourself."

Carissa hesitated for a moment before responding, "Take two men with you and let Aurora see you. She likely already guessed that Mr. Zellner sent for us."

"Are you not going?" Alistair asked.

He was an impatient man, and he immediately fired off a barrage of questions after hearing her orders.

"If you don't go, shouldn't you at least send Sage Violet? If they're conspiring behind the scenes and staging a fake hostage situation, we'll be at their mercy. Who in the Royal Guard has the skill to disarm someone with a blade pressed to their throat? If it goes wrong, someone could die..."

"Enough!" Carissa interrupted him sharply. "Go with two men. I'll move in the shadows and wait for an opportunity."

Alistair was instantly sobered by her command and straightened up. "Understood! I'll leave right away."



## Chapter 897

Barrett rushed back to Valor Estate in a panic. The moment he heard that Cyrus' men had come with news, his heart skipped a beat.

He knew Aurora too well-her personality was a mess of contradictions. She was proud and stubborn, but also afraid of dying. Even when pushed to the edge, she would always struggle one more time.

He wasn't so sure she would surrender without a fight this time.

With the way things had ended between them, he couldn't predict what Aurora might do to survive. For all he knew, she might go to extreme lengths.

Lately, Aurora had been talking about leaving the capital, but she was terrified of being ambushed outside Blessed Haven. The assassination attempt on her had shaken her deeply. She likely thought through the possibilities repeatedly and decided how to handle things in case of trouble.

Hence, Barrett hadn't told her about the Westhaven envoy. He didn't want her preparing ahead of time.

When he arrived at Blessed Haven and saw Aurora standing with her sword pressed against her neck, his chest tightened.

"Put the sword down, Aurora!"

Her eyes were ice-cold, her gaze slicing through him like a blade.

She practically hissed his name, 'Barrett Warren!'"

Alistair also arrived with two royal guards by his side, just in time to stop Barrett from advancing.

"Don't get too close."

Barrett cast a complex glance at Alistair. He knew what the man was worried about.

"Aurora, go with Mr. Zellner to the Ministry of Justice," Barrett called out over Alistair's shoulder, his tone steady but firm. 'Don't make this harder than it needs to be. Cooperate with the investigation. The Ministry of Justice won't make things difficult for you.'

Aurora's eyes flashed with rage, sneering bitterly. "Don't talk nonsense! If they won't make things difficult for me, then why don't they just let me stay at Valor Estate? Barrett, I'll ask you just one thing-you have no feelings left for me, right?"

Barrett felt a pang of discomfort. "That's between us. Just cooperate with the Ministry of Justice for now."

Aurora laughed coldly. "Cooperate? Fine! I want you to come here and arrest me yourself. Aren't you the commander of the Crown Guard?"

Barrett stayed still.

Aurora's fury slowly drained away, leaving only a trace of sorrow.

Her voice softened, almost mournful as she said, 'Barrett, we fought together at Victory Pass. We risked our lives together. Do you remember what you said to me when we went to Fawnrune City?'

Barrett's breath caught at her words. His eyes narrowed, and he nodded instinctively. "I remember."

"Good." Tears shimmered in her eyes. "I'll go with them. I won't drag the Warren family down with me. I only ask

one thing-remember our past, remember the little bit of affection we once shared. Please, ask the king to let me die with dignity."

Barrett's entire body tensed as he stood there, silent for a long while.

Finally, he nodded. "I promise you I'll do that."

Tears slid down the disfigured side of Aurora's face, and she smiled sadly. "Alright. Fine."

Hearing that she was willing to go with the Ministry of Justice, everyone let out a collective breath of relief. Cyrus and Alistair noticed the solemn expression on Barrett's face, which they found only natural. After all, Aurora was his wife, and the king granted them marriage due to their military merit. She mentioned the dangerous times they endured together during the war, times that no one else could truly understand. Now, as she was about to be taken away, it was clear that her trial was little more than a formality before her death.

If Barrett had shown any sign of ease or indifference, it would have been an insult to her memory—he would have been worse than an animal.

With the sword still pressed to her neck, Aurora slowly stepped out from Blessed Haven. The Ministry of Justice officers didn't dare to move closer, for fear she would slit her neck if she were provoked even just a little. If that happened, she would surely die of blood loss before they could do anything.

Alistair remained vigilant and kept himself between Barrett and Aurora. Barrett understood Alistair's caution and respected the latter's position, so he retreated a few steps, prompting Alistair to follow him.

Now slightly less on edge, Cyrus said, "Put down your sword."

Aurora moved the blade away from her neck. At that instant, everyone exhaled in relief.

But before the tension could even fully ease, Aurora suddenly lunged at Cyrus. The distance between them was barely a few steps, and she moved with lightning speed.

Alistair, stunned, instinctively moved forward to push Cyrus out of harm's way. But it was too late. As he had retreated a few steps to stay with Barrett, he was too far from Cyrus to intervene in time.

The Ministry of Justice officers and the two royal guards were closer, but Aurora was faster—she moved like one who had been professionally trained. By the time they reacted, her sword was only a short distance from Cyrus' neck.

In that critical moment, a whip snapped through the air, wrapping around Aurora's hand and yanking it sharply to the right. Her sword clattered to the ground, and the officers immediately jumped on her, pinning her down.

Her face was forced into the dirt, leaving her unable to push herself up. She had no idea who had intervened, but the next thing she heard was a triumphant shout from the people around her.

"Commander Sinclair!"

It was then Aurora realized the one who had stopped her was Carissa.

Chapter 898

Aurora was roughly dragged to her feet, her hands shackled behind her back. When she was slammed to the ground, her face scraped against the sharp stones, drawing a few thin lines of blood.

She first shot a look at Barrett, her eyes filled with nothing but disappointment. Then, her gaze turned to Carissa, sharp and unrelenting. Carissa's official uniform was everything she had ever dreamed of, yet here she was, never even having the chance to touch them, let alone wear them.

Carissa pulled the whip back and stood directly in front of Aurora. The two locked eyes-one pair filled with resentment, the other brimming with unabashed hatred.

For the first time, Carissa's hatred for Aurora was unmasked. Even in front of her parents' memory plaques, Carissa had tempered her feelings, unwilling to let the spirits of her family see her consumed by such hatred.

But now, with everything coming to a head, there was no holding back. The resentment that had festered in Carissa's heart boiled over. Aurora had destroyed her family and dragged her grandfather down with her-this grudge was something she could never forgive.

In the face of such hate, Aurora's jealousy and unwillingness to accept her fate seemed like nothing more than a pale shadow. After just a moment of meeting Carissa's gaze, the weight of the anger was enough to crush her.

She turned her eyes away and glanced at Barrett, this time genuinely seeking help, her expression pleading for mercy.

Barrett's heart twisted, caught in a turmoil of emotions. Earlier, he had purposely let Alistair stop him when in truth, it was him who had been standing in Alistair's way.

Aurora couldn't have truly taken Barrett hostage-it wouldn't have worked, and Barrett knew it. However, holding the Ministry of Justice's deputy minister hostage would make the entire ministry's forces step back. He understood Aurora's intentions. They had always had an unspoken understanding between them.

During their time at Victory Pass, it wasn't just about Fawnrun City. Before that, they had fought side by side, killing enemies together. Their bond was forged in that shared danger, and it had led to moments where their hearts and minds had aligned.

Barrett remembered the time when, during the mission to burn the supply depot in Fawnrun City, Aurora had asked him what he would do if she found herself in mortal danger. He had answered, without hesitation, that he would risk everything to save her-even his life.

And now, when Aurora had looked at him earlier, he had felt that same struggle, but his promise still held. No matter the cost, even if it meant losing his title or facing punishment, he was willing to keep that promise.

Yet, Carissa's appearance was like a slap in the face. While he had kept his promise to Aurora, why hadn't he upheld his vows to Carissa at the start?

At that moment, Barrett felt as if he was being torn apart from within.

A sharp pain in his foot brought him back to reality. He looked up to see Alistair, who had just stomped on him, face twisted with anger. Alistair had seen through Barrett's intentions.

"Wretch!" Alistair muttered under his breath.

To him, anyone who acted in a despicable manner, regardless of their gender, was a wretch.

Those present all assumed Alistair was insulting Aurora. Though they found the words harsh, they knew Alistair's volatile nature, so none of them said anything.

It took a while for Cyrus to regain his composure.

The blade had been just inches from his throat. Had Aurora miscalculated even slightly, the sword would've sliced his neck open. That was a near-death experience. Even if he survived, being taken hostage by Aurora would ruin his position. There was no way he could keep his title if she managed to escape.

He felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude toward Carissa, and bowed deeply to her. "Thank you for saving my life, Commander Sinclair."

Carissa nodded. "Take her back and lock her up properly, Mr. Zellner. Remember to search her thoroughly and ensure there are no weapons on her."

"Yes, I understand," Cyrus replied, still bowing. He quickly led his men away, his steps heavy. Before he left, he glanced at Barrett.

Cyrus was suspicious. He noticed that Aurora had only asked Barrett one question, and their exchange had been full of strange, unspoken understanding. Without any concrete evidence, however, he could do nothing about it. Barrett stood there, pale and lost in thought.

Without missing a beat, Alistair turned to Carissa and reported, "Commander Sinclair, he was trying to help Aurora escape.

"Don't talk nonsense!" Viola snapped, finally coming to her senses.

Hearing Alistair's accusation, she immediately chided him, "Alistair, stop being ridiculous. He's your family by marriage."

Though Alistair was from a branch of the Prince family, he always had a strained relationship with the Earl of Silverstone's family. When he heard Viola refer to Barrett as family, he sneered.

"You expect me to acknowledge him as my family when you can't even address me properly? Watch your mouth, Viola," he snarled.

Chapter 899

Carissa was still present. Viola, having been insulted, was naturally furious.

"You watch your mouth, Alistair!" she snapped. "Don't think you've become untouchable just because you're the commander of the Royal Guard. You're still being controlled by a woman, aren't you?"

She knew how proud and arrogant Alistair was, and she also knew that he had never gotten along with Carissa. She intended to provoke him by flaunting their discord and humiliating him in front of Carissa.

However, it was obvious Viola wasn't aware of the entire situation.

After Alistair became Violet's apprentice, he had witnessed his mentor's martial prowess firsthand. He had also listened to her talk several times about how she had been effortlessly defeated by Carissa when they were at Meadow Ridge, leaving her powerless to fight back. Having sparred with Carissa himself, Alistair understood just how laughable his past arrogance had been.

With a smug smile, he said sarcastically, "Oh, being commander of the Royal Guard is no small thing. If you think it's easy, then by all means, you try doing it. And don't talk about women not being fit for such positions-look at Commander Sinclair.

"She once controlled your husband, and now, she's my superior. I may not be as capable as her, and I acknowledge that. But do you? What's so shameful about being commanded by a woman? Who in their own home isn't controlled by their wife? On the other hand, what about you? Can you control Barrett?"

Viola's face turned red with anger.

Realizing she couldn't win this argument, she turned to Barrett, who still looked lost in thought, and shouted, "Why are you just standing there in a daze? He's accusing you! Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

Barrett glanced at Carissa. "I..."

"May I ask you a few questions in private?" Carissa interrupted, her voice calm but firm.

Barrett nodded, his face pale. "Yes, let's go to the side hall."

"Alone?" Viola's tone grew sharp, sensing something was amiss. "What can't be said here? Is there something I can't hear?"

Carissa looked at Viola steadily. "You can't, but Commander Prince can."

Hearing that they wouldn't be alone, Viola felt a slight sense of relief. At least that meant it wasn't about personal matters.

The side hall of Valor Estate, where they headed, was no longer the one Carissa had once known. Almost all the furniture had been replaced. The tables and chairs were new, and what had once been filled with her bridal dowry -fine wood and intricately carved pieces-was now gone.

The room was now furnished with simple, ordinary tables and chairs. Even the partition screen had a crack running through it.

As they entered the side hall, Alistair was still talking, "He deliberately tried to stop me earlier and led me away from Mr. Zellner."

Carissa turned to him. "Do you have any evidence?"

Alistair deflated, clearly frustrated. "No!"

"If there's no evidence, put that aside for now," Carissa said calmly. "I have questions for him. I asked you to come in only to avoid suspicion, but there's nothing here you can't hear. Sit down and keep quiet unless you're asked to speak."

"Understood!" Alistair sat down, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

Carissa and Barrett took their seats as well, and she got straight to the point, saying, "When you were at Victory Pass, my third uncle lost an arm trying to save you and nearly died in the process. Do you remember that, Commander Warren?"

Shame flickered across Barrett's face. "I remember."



Carissa continued, "Don't worry, I'm not trying to ask you to return the favor. There's no such thing as life debts on the battlefield. In moments of danger, we all save each other. What I want to ask is, who suggested burning the supply depot? Why did you and Aurora separate when you got to Fawnrun City? You didn't know about the massacre of the villagers at the time, did you?"

Although Winona had investigated the Fawnrun City incident thoroughly, there were still details that were hard to uncover.

While they couldn't change the fact that Aurora had killed innocent civilians, the operation itself had been led by Barrett. It was important to understand as much as possible, especially since after Dominic returned to the capital, Carissa and the others would need to know how to best act in his favor.

## Chapter 900

Barrett fell into thought, his mind wandering back to past events.

"It was my idea to burn the supply depot in Fawnrun City. At the time, Westhaven had already suffered several defeats in a row, and it looked like they were about to retreat.

"General Shane said that our battles with Westhaven have always been sporadic skirmishes. But when it comes to real fighting, both sides tend to hold back. So, when Westhaven retreated, we grew complacent. We didn't expect them to launch such a fierce offensive. It was during that battle that General Dominic was injured..."

"No," Carissa interrupted him once more. "When you first arrived at Victory Pass, my third uncle lost an arm in the chaos of war, proving that the battle was already intense. If both sides were holding back, there wouldn't have been a need for your reinforcements."

Barrett explained, "The fighting had always been somewhat restrained. The reason it suddenly escalated was because Marshal Liam pulled back from the frontlines, replacing himself with his brother, Marshal Leroy, who's much more ruthless and fierce. He changed tactics completely because he wanted to push us back and draw a new borderline.

"At the time, the situation at the Southern Frontier was critical. Troops were dispatched from Victory Pass, which left an opening for Leroy to exploit. That's when His Majesty sent me to Victory Pass with reinforcements. This is all on record."

Carissa knew this already. She looked at Barrett and asked, "So, when you thought Westhaven was retreating, was it because Marshal Liam had returned to command the battle?"

"Yes," Barrett replied, recalling the discussions he'd had in the command tent with Dominic and the others. "At the time, Uncle Shan... I mean, General Shane, said Marshal Liam's tactics were always like this-he didn't want a full- scale war or to sacrifice too many lives. Since we hadn't lost anything, we figured we could just hold our ground. But then, Marshal Leroy suddenly replaced Marshal Liam. They launched a vicious attack, catching us completely off guard."

Carissa listened carefully, analyzing everything he said. She pieced together that when Leroy took command, it likely meant that Liam had gone back to try to prevent the then Westhaven crown prince, Arthur, from going to the battlefield. By that time, Westhaven's king should have already fallen seriously ill.

If Arthur had stayed to stabilize the political situation, it would have been far safer. Instead, he went to the battlefield, which was a risky move.

Once Liam left, Leroy, as the temporary marshal, launched a brutal offensive. When Liam returned, Arthur showed up in Fawnrun City. It was clear that Liam hadn't been able to stop him, and the war had escalated. This conflict would undoubtedly have been reported back to Westhaven.

Liam hadn't wanted to escalate the war while the old king's condition worsened, fearing a prolonged conflict. So, after his return, he had ordered a temporary ceasefire.

But by then, Dominic had already been injured.

Leroy clearly didn't want to halt the fighting at such a critical juncture. If he were more self-serving, he might have sent Liam away and continued fighting with Starhaven.

That was, in fact, what happened. After Liam disappeared, Leroy ordered the attack to continue.

Barrett went on, "Westhaven's relentless siege continued, and General Dominic was injured. Everyone was scrambling to figure out how to slow things down so he could recover. He had been hit by an arrow; it nearly cost him his life. That's when I proposed leading a small force into Fawnrun City to burn Westhaven's supply depot. Without their supplies, we would at least buy ourselves another two weeks."

"And while you were sneaking into Fawnrun City, Marshal Liam had already returned to the battlefield?" Carissa asked.

"That's right, but we didn't find out until later." Barrett wasn't surprised Carissa knew that. "When I took the troops into Fawnrun City, Marshal Leroy was still commanding the battle."

"How many days did it take you to enter Fawnrun City?" Carissa asked.

"About seven days," Barrett replied.

"Then, why did you and Aurora separate? Wasn't the plan to burn the supply depot?"

"The supply depot was heavily guarded, but we were also worried about running into an ambush. Getting into Westhaven's territory was risky, so I had her lead a team to scout the area..."

Under Carissa's intense gaze, Barrett felt like he was being stripped bare.

After a brief silence, he finally confessed, "I did want to protect her by doing that, but I was also thinking about the bigger picture. If I failed, she could still complete the mission. I never expected her to massacre the villagers. had no idea."

"So, you had no idea, which means when you reported back, you couldn't have mentioned it to General Dominic," Carissa said.

"Exactly. If I didn't know about it, how could I have told him?"

Carissa processed his words, replaying them in her mind before asking again, "As the commanding officer leading the troops to Fawnrun City, you truly didn't know what Aurora did?"

Barrett met her gaze without flinching. "I didn't know, but that doesn't matter, Commander Sinclair."

Carissa stood up. "Thank you for telling me. It may not matter to you, but it matters to me."

