

## War Song 931

### Chapter 931

Despite kneeling on one knee, Rafael's posture remained firm and unwavering. "To demonstrate fairness, I request permission for the Ministry of Justice to interrogate Commander Warren, so that his testimony can be corroborated with that of others. This will help reveal the truth of the matter to the people of Westhaven.

"Please believe, Your Majesty, that I do this without any personal agenda. The people of Westhaven know more about the massacre of the villagers than we do. If we try to shield Commander Warren, it will only make them angrier and they will think we have no intention of negotiating in good faith."

He lifted his gaze, locking eyes with Salvador, his voice growing more audacious as he added, "It will also dishearten the soldiers and citizens of Victory Pass, making them believe that you intend to cultivate loyal generals and place all the blame on the old veterans who have spent their lives guarding the border.

Crash!

A cup shattered on the floor.

Salvador's chest heaved and a dark fury clouded his eyes as he shouted, "How dare you?!" Derek flinched, quickly begging the king to calm his anger.

He then turned to Rafael, pleading, "Your Highness, please stop! Do not provoke His Majesty further!"

Salvador stood, his towering figure casting a long shadow over the kneeling Rafael. His eyes were sharp and cold.

"So, all your previous deference and humility was just a show? You dare defy and challenge me? And now you accuse me of being harsh to the veteran generals? If word of this gets out, won't the soldiers and the people lose faith in me? What exactly are you trying to do?" asked the king.

Rafael met his gaze without hesitation. "Everything I do for the good of Starhaven, Your Majesty. But I would ask you, what do you think I am trying to do?"

Salvador was both furious and taken aback by the prince's calm response.

It was true the king had taken away his brother's command of the army, but he hadn't yet taken control of the military's loyalty. After the Southern Frontier campaign, Salvador had kept Rafael away from military affairs to gradually diminish his reputation in the army. But this gradual process would take time. It was not something the king could accomplish so easily, not in a single moment like this.

Especially now-it was the worst time for such a move.

Salvador's anger slowly subsided, though his fists remained clenched.

"I don't want to guess at your intentions. Since you claim everything you do is for the good of Starhaven, as your brother, I have no reason not to trust you. If you believe interrogating Commander Warren is necessary, I will allow it. But I hope it's not driven by personal resentment. I don't want you to face any reproach. You must understand my brotherly

concern for you," he said.

Rafael lowered his eyes, his tone respectful as replied, "Your Majesty, you think of me as I think of you. I am deeply grateful, and hope you will believe in my loyalty."

Salvador nodded. "We are brothers, of course I trust you. You may rise."

Thank you, Your Majesty!

As Rafael stood, he gave Derek a helping hand. The aide's legs wobbled, his face drained of color and beads of sweat dotting his forehead. He never expected the prince to suddenly defy the king like that. It had completely shocked him.

After Rafael took his leave, Salvador issued an order for Barrett to be sent to the Ministry of Justice. This would be his official command, not something Rafael had taken upon himself to do by overriding the king's authority.

Derek thought the king would be furious, but instead, Salvador only spoke in a cool tone, asking. "Is it true that everyone outside, like Rafael, believes I am sparing Commander Warren in order to build a faction of loyalists to replace the veteran generals?"

Derek fearfully replied, "Your Majesty, you are overthinking. The officials and people of the kingdom all know your wisdom and benevolence."

Wisdom and benevolence? Yes, when General Sullivan entered the city, the people were shouting and praising my wisdom, weren't they?" Salvador retorted sarcastically, rubbing his temples.

Derek didn't dare to reply. He simply lowered his head and stood off to the side, his back drenched in sweat. The heat from the fires in the hall made the sticky, uncomfortable air even harder to endure.

## Chapter 932

Salvador paused the movements of his quill, his voice cold as ice as he said, "That statement wasn't wrong. I do intend to cultivate new generals, but I am no fool. Even if I want to raise new blood, I would never abandon the veterans who have served the country loyally for half their lives.

"Doesn't Rafael understand why I want to cultivate new generals? Though the Hell Monarch Army no longer answers to him, his prestige still commands respect. His unparalleled achievement in reclaiming the Southern Frontier stands as an immovable mountain, one I cannot shift by even a single inch. Yet, he dares threaten me."

With a sharp snap, the red quill in his hand broke, the sound cracking through the tense silence. He threw it onto the desk, his expression darkening.

"I bet Rafael doesn't want to be accused of being a traitor, but what can I do about it if he truly has ambitious designs?" Salvador added.

Anxious, Derek hurriedly said, "Your Majesty, I am certain the Hell Monarch harbors no treasonous thoughts. He is your brother."

Salvador's response was cold, simply saying, "I know he isn't planning anything treacherous for now. But the longer someone sits in a high position, the more likely they are to develop ulterior motives. I keep an eye on him, not because I want to see us at odds, but because I don't want to face a rift between brothers. He'd better not harbor such ambitions, or I won't hesitate to act with ruthless resolve."

While Salvador was furious at his brother's defiance, his anger subsided somewhat after the confrontation. If the prince were truly plotting something, he would never have been careless enough to expose himself over the matter about Dominic.

Now, Rafael's dismissive attitude toward Dominic confirmed his current position—at least for the moment, he had no aspirations of rebellion.

Derek understood from these words that the king's anger was more about his brother's disrespect than any real suspicion of treason. Salvador still considered Rafael a potential threat, but had concluded that the prince harbored no rebellious intent.

Meanwhile, Barrett arrived at the Ministry of Justice, where Patrick personally oversaw his interrogation. He held nothing back, spilling everything about the events at Victory Pass, including his affair with Aurora.

He had known for some time that he couldn't escape this. Even though the king had tried to protect him, the truth was plain for everyone to see. He had been the commanding general responsible for the Fawnrun City operation, and his affair with Aurora could not be denied.

There was no way for him to shift the blame now.

Once Barrett confessed everything, a weight seemed to lift off his shoulders. Accepting that he couldn't distance himself from this any longer, he only hoped that Dominic wouldn't be too deeply entangled in it all.

He owed everything to Wyatt, who had sacrificed his arm for him, and to the Sullivan family, who had shown him such kindness at Victory Pass.

But his time as the commander of the Nightsteel Guard would no doubt come to an end. Even if he wanted to join the Capital Guard as an ordinary soldier, that was no longer possible. Simply surviving this ordeal would be a mercy from the heavens.

The battle at Victory Pass, which Barrett once saw as the beginning of a glorious future, had instead become the event that ruined his career and tarnished the honor of his ancestors.

For now, Patrick placed him under temporary detention at the Ministry of Justice-not in a dungeon, but in a specially prepared cell originally intended for Dominic, though it had never been used.

After Barrett's interrogation, Patrick returned to question Aurora once more, personally overseeing her session as before.

She had been through so much that she barely resembled herself anymore. Her hair was a tangled mess, her face sallow, and her fingers swollen from the torture she had endured. Every detail of her appearance testified to the miserable treatment she had experienced during her time at the Ministry of Justice.

But in reality, it hadn't been that bad. To keep her alive, the ministry's officers had refrained from using harsher methods of torture.

Patrick sat in his chair, his cold gaze fixed on Aurora, saying, "Commander Warren has confessed. Before you went to Fawnrune City, you never saw General Sullivan. In fact, by the time the operation began, he had already been struck by an arrow. So, it's impossible that he gave you your orders."

Aurora seemed stunned, her eyes wide with disbelief. "Barrett confessed? You arrested him? No, that's impossible!"

Why is that impossible? He was the general in charge of the Fawnrune City operation. You've committed a crime of catastrophic proportions, and he naturally bears responsibility for it as well.'

Aurora took a deep breath and shook her head violently. "No, that's impossible. The king has plans to groom him. Why would he drag Barrett into this? Didn't General Sullivan already return to the capital for questioning? If he's being interrogated, what difference does it make whether Barrett is involved or not?"

Aurora still assumed that Salvador was thoroughly investigating this matter just to give the Westhaven envoys an explanation. Since that was the case, wasn't Dominic's confession enough? Why involve Barrett at all?

## Chapter 933

Patrick's voice turned harsh, "You're the reason for General Sullivan's return to the capital for questioning. Are you really trying to make him carry all your crimes? How can you say such a thing?"

"Someone is making excuses for General Sullivan! I'm sure of it!" Aurora snarled, raging like a cornered beast.

Had she not been shackled, she would have lunged forward.

"It's not fair! General Sullivan is the leader of Victory Pass, so he should bear the heaviest responsibility. You all flatter Prince Rafael and Carissa, trying to take down Barrett, but he had no idea about how I massacred the villagers or killed the prisoner. He's being unjustly accused!" she yelled.

"If Commander Warren didn't know, then General Sullivan definitely wouldn't have known.' Patrick scoffed, turning to the scribe. "Write this down-Aurora has confessed that both Commander Warren and General Sullivan were unaware of the matter.

"No! I never said that!" Aurora shouted in protest.

Patrick's voice cut through her outburst, "There are too many ears in this room for you to take it back now."

Aurora opened her mouth, but the words stuck in her throat. She realized her situation-there was no escaping now. She slumped, her gaze dropping as she hid the defiance that still burned in her eyes.

As Patrick observed her, he couldn't help but admire Rafael's decisiveness. With Barrett's confession, Aurora's claims held no weight. After all, Barrett had been the general in charge of the operation. If even he didn't know about it, how could Dominic?

Aurora was just one of Barrett's subordinates. She was never in a position to bypass him and take orders directly from Dominic.

Had this been earlier, Aurora wouldn't have cared about dragging Barrett down with her. Before the Ministry of Justice came for her, she believed that her husband had no feelings left for her and that their bond was severed.

But that day, when she had asked him if he remembered the promise he made at Victory Pass, he had unhesitatingly risked his future to help her escape. At that moment, she knew- he hadn't completely erased her from his heart.

So, after being brought to the Ministry of Justice, she clung to the story of Dominic being the mastermind, knowing full well that the king was protective of Barrett. Her confession, presented in front of the court, would surely exonerate her husband and absolve him of any guilt.

But she hadn't anticipated that Salvador would abandon Barrett, allowing him to be brought to the Ministry of Justice for questioning. And that man, in his foolishness, had confessed everything. If he had pinned the blame on Dominic, their situation might not have been so dire.

In the end, it was true that Barrett still had feelings for Aurora, but Carissa's place in his heart was far more important.

Aurora couldn't say whether it was guilt or love-perhaps even Barrett himself didn't understand what he truly felt. What she did know was that he hadn't erased her completely from his heart, yet he hadn't been willing to sacrifice Carissa for her.

With all the confessions stacked against her, including Barrett's own, Aurora realized it was pointless to keep accusing Dominic. She had lost that battle. She could only try to secure a way out for herself, but no way forward seemed to present itself.

The only option left was to protect Barrett's life with everything she had.

She started to confess, "General Sullivan didn't know, and neither did Barrett. When I encountered that group of Westhaven soldiers near the village in Fawnrun City, we clashed. They lost and retreated into a village to hide. The massacre was only meant to flush them

out.

"As for humiliating that young general... I didn't know who he was at the time. I only thought he was a coward who had fled the battlefield and hidden in the village. I tortured him because they killed several of my soldiers during the clash..."

Aurora didn't spare any details about the torture, but the scribe didn't record them fully. He merely wrote the term 'tortured prisoner to keep things brief, as the confession was meant for the Westhaven envoys' eyes.

She continued, "After I captured them, I didn't expect Marshal Liam to arrive with his troops. I was terrified, and confused as to why he would go so far for a mere young general. He even abandoned the front lines. That's when I suspected the general's identity wasn't simple. I never imagined he could be the crown prince. At the time, I thought he might be Marshal Liam's son.

Their army was so much larger than ours. If a battle broke out, we wouldn't stand a chance. But Marshal Liam actually wanted to talk terms for the sake of that young general. I was shocked. I tested the waters by making a bold suggestion, which was to redraw the boundary lines and cease the war.

"I never thought he would agree. I just wanted to test how high-ranking that prisoner really was. When Marshal Liam agreed without hesitation, I was certain the young general was his

son.

## Chapter 934

The scribe meticulously recorded Aurora's words, which once again pieced together the truth as told by Zeke and the others.

Aurora had proposed returning to Victory Pass to finalize the details of the treaty, but Liam had dismissed the idea and said it wasn't necessary. The terms had already previously been discussed between the two kingdoms, though neither side had agreed on them.

Aurora had indeed seen the terms in question before. They were Starhaven's demands-a ceasefire, as well as the pushing back of the border to its original demarcation, using the base of the mountain outside Fawnrun City as the boundary.



"I was momentarily tempted by my desires. I thought that if I signed the treaty, I would claim all the credit," she confessed. So, I had Marshal Liam pull his forces back about six miles and leave only 12 men behind. This served two purposes. First, it helped Barrett with his plan to burn the supply depot. Second, I needed to ensure my own safety and that of my soldiers after the agreement was signed.

"Originally, I was worried he would leave behind a group of elite soldiers, which would still put us at risk. But I never expected that of the 12 men he left, one was a strategist and three were military doctors. With that, I had no more concerns. The treaty was signed even more smoothly than I had anticipated. Afterward, we took the young general hostage and retreated to the foot of the mountain before releasing him."

Afterward, she had waited for Barrett to arrive and informed him about the treaty. Once back at Victory Pass, Liam sent someone to follow up. It was all so confusing, but in the end, Aurora became the hero.

Of course, Wyatt had repeatedly asked her about the details of the treaty with Liam. She and her officers had concocted a story. Supposedly, they had met the marshal and his 12 men at the foot of the mountain. A fight broke out, during which Liam was captured. That was how the treaty had been signed.

Wyatt didn't fully believe it, but Liam had indeed disappeared from the frontlines and the treaty carried his military seal, which symbolized his authority as a military leader. On Starhaven's side, they only needed Dominic's military seal to officially make the agreement binding.

While recording, the scribe intentionally omitted the mention of the Westhaven crown prince, replacing him with a young general instead. Since the Westhaven official correspondence didn't explicitly state Arthur's identity, they couldn't mention it yet. They would wait for the envoys to arrive and gauge their stance before deciding how to proceed.

Although Patrick had already learned from Zeke and the others about the torture of Arthur and the massacre of villagers, hearing Aurora speak of it once again sent a cold shiver down his spine.

"How can someone be so cruel? Because you slaughtered civilians and razed villages, the entire Sinclair family-old, young, women, and children-were all murdered in cold blood. How could you be so vicious?" he asked, horrified.

"Vicious?" Aurora slowly lifted her gaze to meet Patrick's, then scoffed, her expression full of

disdain. "What do you know of viciousness on the battlefield? Those soldiers hid among the common folk. If I hadn't razed the village, how would they have come out to be captured?"

You privileged people in the capital are always talking about morality and righteousness. I'm sure if any of you had ever set foot on a battlefield, you would know how ruthless it is. If you're not ruthless, you'll be slaughtered like cattle. Since I found them, I had to force them out. If I didn't, our entire squad would have been ambushed. Are our lives worth nothing to you?"

She turned her head, trying to hide the brief flicker of guilt that passed through her, adding. As for the Sinclair family's massacre, that was the work of Westhaven spies. If Carissa wants revenge, she should go after them. Isn't she so capable? To blame me for the slaughter of the family-what kind of trick is this?"

His voice cold as ice, Patrick replied, "At this point, you still have no remorse? It's a wonder the queen dowager ever thought so highly of you."

He ordered that Aurora be taken back, and her confession was immediately sent to Rafael, who wanted the facts she had just spoken.

With this confession and Barret's account, there was hope. Moreover, there was the fact that Dominic had been injured by an arrow and was fighting for his life back then. With all this, Lisandra's anger would be shifted away from Dominic, which might be enough to save his life.

After reading the confession, Rafael instructed Patrick to deliver it to Salvador for review. The prince's task was done, so he would step back for now and await the arrival of the Westhaven envoys.

## Chapter 935

The confession was presented to the king. After Salvador read through it, he furrowed his brow as he listened while Patrick detailed Aurora's admission.

The king was well aware of the entire Fawnrun City affair-the massacre of villagers and the killing of the prisoner. The entire matter was soaked in blood.

However, he didn't know the specifics. The confession didn't detail the grisly events of the massacre, but Patrick had described them. Hearing these bloody details, even Salvador, despite his position as king of Starhaven, couldn't help but slam his fist on the table in a fit of anger as he cursed Aurora.

Patrick could understand Salvador's fury. Even he felt a chill run down his spine. Fortunately, someone like Aurora had asked for a marriage based on her military merit. If she had served in court or as a military officer, she would have been a huge threat, just like how Carissa currently was.

"Has the Hell Monarch seen these confessions?" Salvador asked after his outburst.

Patrick knew that Rafael had sent people to summon Barrett before the king issued his order, so he answered carefully, 'As soon as Aurora confessed, I had it sent to the palace for your review, Your Majesty.'

Salvador nodded in approval. "Good, Send it to him. Even though the Supreme Court hasn't been involved in this case, General Sullivan is the Hell Monarch's grandfather-in-law. He can't just sit by and do nothing."

Patrick was momentarily stunned. Was Salvador now tacitly allowing Rafael to be involved in the case? He had assumed there might be some tension between the two brothers.

"Yes, Your Majesty, Ill go personally," he said respectfully, making sure to not show his shock on his face.

After his dismissal, Patrick made sure to go back and review the confession with Rafael, making sure everything matched up properly to avoid any mistakes in front of the king.

Ever since Patrick had taken on this task, he had been walking on eggshells as the Hell Monarch's involvement had been overwhelming. Now that Salvador had spoken, the Ministry of Justice would follow Rafael's lead.

Patrick was well aware that this wasn't just a simple case. It required the utmost caution. If he handled it well, there would be no credit. But if he failed, demotion and punishment would be the least of his worries. So, Patrick couldn't help but feel a sense of relief as he hurried to find the prince.

Perhaps Rafael would go directly to Sullivan Estate and obtain Dominic's testimony. If that happened, the Ministry of Justice wouldn't have to worry about it.

However, Patrick's wishful thinking didn't work out. Rafael agreed to keep things under wraps in front of the king, but as for going to Sullivan Estate to get Dominic's testimony, that responsibility still fell to the Ministry of Justice.

Well, that was fine. Now that the situation had changed, there wasn't anything wrong with being respectful toward Dominic.

At dinner, Rafael announced that Aurora had stopped accusing Dominic, and everyone visibly relaxed.

Winona had also arrived in the capital, bringing the two Westhaven spies with her. Rafael handed them over to the Ministry of Justice for detention, where they would be interrogated by the ministry's officials.

The Ministry of Justice's officials were greatly excited when they learned that the Westhaven spies involved in the massacre of the Duke of Northwatch's family had been captured. There were two main reasons for their enthusiasm.

First, they had long suspected there were survivors who had escaped their net, and now, with these spies in custody, they had finally rounded up the missing pieces. Second, with these spies, they could confirm that the Sinclair family's annihilation had indeed been orchestrated by Westhaven, which would be a significant advantage in negotiations.

Winona temporarily stayed at Hell Monarch Estate. She knew the past few days had been difficult for Carissa, so she remained in the capital to keep the latter company.

Everything was in place now. They were just waiting for the Westhaven envoys to arrive.

As the storm clouds gathered, there was a sense of nervous anticipation among everyone, though Helen seemed unaffected. She knew the Westhaven envoys were coming, and she knew they wouldn't be coming with good intentions.

However, she felt it wasn't her problem to worry about. With so many capable officials in court, there was no doubt they would handle it. It wouldn't affect her in the slightest, so she intended to continue living her life as usual.

In fact, she was glad that Hell Monarch Estate was becoming more lively. When Cindy and Winona had some free time, Helen invited them to chat. She said that she didn't often get the chance to see the outside world, so listening to their stories was interesting. She would also call Carissa over, and all of them would spend the whole day together.

Sometimes, when her daughter-in-law wanted to go out for something, Helen would stop her, saying. There are so many people in the house. You don't need to handle everything yourself. It's rare that your third aunt's back in the capital, and your senior guild member is here too. Wouldn't it be nice if you just relax and chat with us, have some snacks, watch a play, and maybe play a game of cards?"

Carissa couldn't refuse and would stay.

But truth be told, the days passed quickly as they waited for the Westhaven envoys to arrive. Finally, Claire came to report that, barring any unforeseen delays, the Westhaven envoys would arrive in the capital the next day.

That evening, Helen rubbed her cheeks and said, "Tomorrow, I'm sleeping until noon. Don't wake me up."

Gillian smiled and replied, "Of course, Your Grace. I'll have the kitchen prepare a few of your favorite dishes, and we'll wait until you wake to serve them. You've had quite a few difficult

days."

Helen sighed dramatically. "The waiting is the worst. I can't help with anything. All I can do is invite more people to keep Carissa company, chat, laugh, and get through the day."

With that, she lay down and fell asleep immediately.

Chapter 936

Around noon the next day, the Westhaven envoys arrived in the capital. The Protocol Department and the Diplomatic Affairs Department made the arrangements for their reception and provided lodging at Concord Lodge.

Westhaven's government system was similar to Starhaven's, though they did not have a position equivalent to the prime minister. Instead, they had a cabinet and various ministry departments that were similar to Starhaven.

This delegation to Starhaven was led by Lisandra, along with Leroy, Westhaven's Defense Minister. They were accompanied by various cabinet members-Garrick Horton and Amos Bailey, both Secretaries of State; Klaus Reed, the Diplomatic Affairs Department Minister, and Icarus Mendez, commander of the Sovereign Guard.

Also present was Harlan Fitzgerald, the guard captain of Lisandra's household soldiers, as well as two interpreters and three female officials. Since the names of the female officials had not been announced, their identities remained unknown. The rest of the entourage consisted of various guards and attendants.

Rafael, Carissa, and the others stood at a tavern near the city gates, watching the envoys pass by.

Lisandra was dressed in purple official attire and riding a bay horse, slowly making her way into the city with her large procession. Though she was actually 32 years old, the weariness from the long journey made her appear older than her age.

"The man riding the black horse behind Grand Princess Lissandra is Leroy Stellwyn," Jacob remarked.

Though Liam and Leroy were indeed related to the Westhaven royal family, they actually had a different family name. They had used the Tudor surname on the battlefield, but their actual surname was Stellwyn.

"He's Marshal Liam's younger brother, but they're not on good terms. He was the one who pushed for the battle at Victory Pass, and even now, he's the one urging King Edmund to go to war.

"King Edmund greatly respects his older sister, but he respects the late crown prince, Prince Arthur, even more. That's why he wants to go to war. King Edmund..."

Jacob paused, considering the best way to describe him before continuing, "He's a capable person. He's well-versed in both civil and military matters. He followed Prince Arthur for a long time and earned a reputation for virtue in Westhaven. But his nature is rather unhinged.

"Back in the day, when Grand Princess Lisandra and Prince Arthur were watching over him and with Marshal Liam guiding him, his true nature didn't show. That's why Grand Princess Lisandra supported his rise to power. What she didn't know, though, is that in his heart, the kingdom and the people don't come before his brother."

Carissa picked up on Jacob's words, saying, 'Grand Princess Lisandra prioritizes the kingdom and the people, so naturally, she assumed that King Edmund would do the same. "Now, she probably realizes what's going on. This time, she's come personally to push

through the decisions, which is favorable for us. But we can't let our guard down with Mr. Stellwyn. He's always wanted to replace his older brother, Marshal Liam."

Since their return from the Southern Frontier, the Hell Monarch Estate's members had begun investigating the princes and influential figures in Westhaven, uncovering the true nature of their personalities.

The second prince, Eamon, had been granted a title, but was mediocre and had almost no chance of ascending the throne.

The third prince, Edmund, was now king of Westhaven.

The fourth prince, Emory, was on par with Edmund in terms of ability, but his heart was twisted, cruel, and without compassion. His maternal family was powerful, which was why Lisandra had supported Edmund's ascension to the throne. Without the grand princess, the throne would likely have fallen to Emory.

Now that Edmund had ascended as king, he hadn't fully dismantled his brother's power. The fourth prince's maternal family still held substantial influence and watched the throne with greedy eyes. This internal division and severe internal strife were the reasons why Liam and Lisandra did not want to go to war.

The fifth and sixth princes, Elian and Elinor, were twins who had been born with heart conditions. Simply surviving was considered a great blessing.

The seventh prince, Esher, was only twelve years old. His mom was Emory's mom's cousin, further strengthening the fourth prince's power.

Canissa's gaze fell on the three female officials accompanying the delegation. Though their names were not listed on the roster, it was clear that Westhaven was more accommodating toward women holding official positions compared to Starhaven, where women entering court was a rare sight.

She couldn't help but feel envious. Starhaven also had many capable women, but they were confined to the inner household, where they managed household affairs, educated their children, and served their husbands.

"Does Westhaven have a civil service exam for women?" Carissa asked.

Rafael shook his head. "No, women usually enter court through recommendations. Westhaven has a women's academy where a selection is held every three years, but only three women are chosen each time. It's like a single plank bridge with fierce competition. So, it's quite difficult for women to serve in court."

Carissa's gaze lingered on them. "It may be difficult, but at least it gives women a chance. Choosing three every three years, thirty every ten years—slowly, more women will enter the government and their influence will grow."

Rafael hesitated for a moment, but at the hopeful expression on her face, decided not to elaborate further.

In truth, it wasn't as easy as she imagined. The selection every three years only allowed women into official positions, but the opportunity for promotion was slim. Women who held positions above the fourth rank were only found in the palace, not at court.

Rafael's eyes scanned the ranks of guards, spotting a face with a flat expression.

That person..

As the Westhaven delegation's procession gradually disappeared from view, their mood became more serious.



There would be a royal banquet tomorrow evening to host the envoys. The royal family and high-ranking court officials, those of third rank or higher, would attend. The negotiations wouldn't take place on that night, but the envoys' attitude could be gauged from the banquet.

## Chapter 937

The next day, Winona's sources gathered information that after the Westhaven envoys had checked into Concord Lodge the day before, Harvey had secretly returned to his estate. Early this morning, he had disguised himself and left again, apparently mobilizing some people. Winona thought for a moment, then seemed to understand Harvey's intentions.

"Be careful. If he's working with Leroy, he might try to make a move against you," she said. Carissa nodded. 'Got it.'

In fact, Rafael had already informed her the night before, having spotted someone amongst the Westhaven guards who resembled Harvey. So, the two of them had spent the whole night speculating, coming up with various possibilities.

The royal banquet hall glittered under the lights, as bright as daylight, its beams twinkling like stars in the sky.

By the time Rafael and Carissa arrived, the Westhaven envoys had already entered the palace and were seated to the right of the hall. The guards and palace attendants waited outside. As weapons were not permitted inside the palace, the guards weren't armed with

swords.

Victoria and Kylie sat at the head of the room. Since the banquet hadn't started yet, they were busy entertaining Lisandra.

Normally, Victoria wouldn't have come, but she heard that the Westhaven grand princess was attending. The queen dowager had a fondness for capable women, so she ignored her persistent cough and insisted on making an appearance.

At the moment, Lisandra and Victoria were deep in conversation. What was surprising to Carissa, however, was that the two of them spoke without needing an interpreter. At times, they used Starhaven's language, Stellish. At other times, they switched to Westhaven's tongue, Westic. It wasn't surprising that Lisandra spoke Stellish, but Carissa hadn't expected Victoria to be fluent in Westic.

Rafael and Carissa entered to pay their respects to Salvador first, then moved on to greet Victoria.

Upon hearing that Carissa was Hector's daughter, Dominic's granddaughter, and had distinguished herself during the Southem Frontier's reconquest, Lisandra couldn't help but study her a little longer. After observing her for a few moments, the grand princess shifted her gaze away, her expression complicated.

The Hell Monarch's household had gathered plenty of information on Lisandra, and the grand princess, in turn, had made inquiries about some important people in Starhaven, especially Carissa and Aurora. The former because of her family background and abilities, and the latter due to her involvement in the massacre at Victory Pass.

When Carissa stepped forward, Lisandra stood up and curtsied to her, her head bowed low, initiating a formal gesture of respect.

"Lady Carissa, the Hell Monarch's princess consort. I've long heard of your esteemed name,"

Lisandra said in fluent Stellish.

She addressed her as Lady Carissa instead of Commander Sinclair, because tonight, those entering the palace were either high-ranking royal relatives or powerful ministers and lords. Though Carissa held an official position in court, tonight, she was entering as a princess

consort.

As the banquet was meant to welcome the Westhaven envoys, other matters were set aside for now.

"Long have I admired you, Your Highness, Carissa said, curtsying respectfully. "It is a great honor to finally meet you today."

She was seated beside Lisandra. As the banquet had yet to begin, the group was just chatting casually. Of course, such conversations weren't open to just anyone.

Once seated, Carissa felt a piercing gaze on her. She looked up and met the eyes of a man sitting across from her. His features bore a striking resemblance to Liam's, though his eyes were sharper, colder, and full of disdain. He didn't even attempt to hide his scrutiny, and there was an unmistakable air of contempt in his gaze.

Rafael sat beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder and giving him a light pat. "Mr. Stellwyn, we've met before. Do you remember?"

Though not as physically broad as Leroy, Rafael was tall and imposing, his presence more commanding than the other man.

Leroy's eyes flickered away from Carissa, turning to the prince with a forced smile. Earlier, he'd been speaking in Westic with Jeremiah, deliberately ignoring Starhaven's language.

Now, facing Rafael, he switched to flawless Stellish, saying, "How could I forget? It's been years, and you're no longer the young man you once were, Your Highness."

Rafael shot him a brief, cold glance, the weight of his gaze still lingering. "A young man should never be underestimated. Now, you're staring at my wife with such malice, Mr. Stellwyn. Is it because you think me weak, that I can be trampled upon?"

A flicker of displeasure flashed in Leroy's eyes. They had agreed to set aside past grievances for tonight-to offer the Westhaven envoys a warm welcome. Why was the Hell Monarch violating this truce and provoking him so openly? What was this all about?

Leroy glanced at Salvador, silently hoping he would rebuke the Hell Monarch

But at that moment, the Starhaven king shifted his gaze to Lisandra, smiling as he spoke, "I've heard much about your king. A young and valiant ruler, he was on the battlefield by the age of sixteen. I must say, I have great respect for such courage."

Lisandra smiled graciously. You flatter us, Your Majesty. When you were crown prince, I heard that you too fought alongside Grand General Hector on the battlefield and were never defeated. It's truly your skills that I admire."

The polite exchange was nothing but mutual flattery.

While Edmund was indeed brave, his military accomplishments were minimal. As for Salvador's supposed undefeated record, it was more of a courtesy than a reflection of reality. Hector's strategic brilliance had kept them safe, and the wars at that time were not

large-scale, so claiming an unblemished record was more a compliment than a fact.

## Chapter 938

Leroy grew increasingly frustrated as he realized Salvador was deliberately ignoring him. To make matters worse, Rafael continued to exude an oppressive aura beside him, which only deepened his irritation. He could hardly suppress the urge to bring up the Victory Pass situation and settle it once and for all.

As his anger burned, his thoughts were interrupted by Rafael's voice, "I heard Marshal Liam was injured. Is he fully recovered now?"

Leroy broke his glare and replied stiffly. Thank you for your concern, Your Highness. My brother is no longer in any danger."

"I thought he would be accompanying you today," Rafael said, his tone casual.

Leroy's gaze turned icy. "Though my brother is no longer seriously injured, he sustained heavy wounds and is not fit for travel."

"General Sullivan also suffered severe injuries. He was struck by arrows twice within a year, and has just recently turned 70. Yet, for the sake of our two kingdoms, he has come back to the capital from Victory Pass, replied the prince, pretending to be unaware of the fact that Liam had been thrown into prison.

Leroy furrowed his brows. What was that supposed to mean? They had agreed not to bring up such matters today. If they were to speak of it, he had plenty to say in return.

But before he could respond, Rafael casually shifted the conversation, saying, "By the way. I've heard that you have a great passion for crafting swords, Mr. Stellwyn. Have you recently forged any exceptional weapons? I'd love to see one.

The topic had shifted with such ease, leaving Leroy seething with rage.

His eyes bulged as he snapped, "Military duties have kept me too busy to forge swords. If you want to see Westhaven's weaponry, there will be plenty of opportunities, Your Highness." After all, Rafael could always see them on the battlefield, right?

Rafael met his gaze and responded with a soft, almost nonchalant, "Sure."

Though the words were spoken quietly, they struck Leroy as strangely provocative. He couldn't shake the feeling that the prince was subtly daring him, perhaps even seeking conflict.

However, that didn't make sense. Harvey had said that the Hell Monarch was the one who most wanted to avoid further conflict between their kingdoms. If war broke out again, the Sullivan family would inevitably bear the blame.

So, why did Rafael's words feel like he was pushing for anything but peace?

"I'm sure both you and I need an opportunity like that, Mr. Stellwyn," the prince added, almost lazily

Leroy studied Rafael, his eyes narrowed with scrutiny and confusion. Was Harvey intentionally deceiving him? But Harvey was now so tightly bound to his cause that there was no way he would have sent the wrong message.

Leroy's determination for war came from his need for a chance to establish himself, and now was the perfect opportunity. With Dominic facing punishment, he was unlikely to survive, let alone return to Victory Pass.

As for Rafael, who had been stripped of his military authority, he was left with only the position of Chief Judge. The marshal at Southern Frontier, Oliver, was practically useless, and the other generals at Victory Pass were no longer a threat without Dominic to lead them.

They all needed an opportunity?

Suddenly, Leroy's thoughts sharpened. Of course a man who had been stripped of his military power had no other way to reclaim it but through war.

Starhaven might not want a war, but the Hell Monarch did. The Sullivan family wasn't his bloodline. What did his princess consort's grandfather matter to him? A man who had made great achievements like Rafael would never be content to go from a battlefield general to a position of courtly politics.

Leroy's mind began to whirl. His desire for war stemmed largely from the knowledge that Rafael had been disarmed and unable to fight. But now, it was clear that the Hell Monarch was determined to regain that power. If he took command of Victory Pass, Westhaven wouldn't have much hope of victory.

He watched Rafael's knowing smile. Leroy feared no one in all of Starhaven, but Victory Pass was no longer the impenetrable fortress it once had been. Dominic was not a legend anymore. The only person who had ever truly defeated the Sandorians and recaptured the Southern Frontier was Rafael. In just three years, the prince had done what no one else had managed in all the years Starhaven had struggled.

As they talked, Lisandra remained unaware of their conversation. Carissa spoke to her quietly, distracting her. But judging from Leroy's sour expression, Lisandra could tell the conversation between the two men was not going well.

Leroy was impatient by nature. Before coming to Starhaven, he had loudly called for war, as if victory was already guaranteed the moment they went to battle. Now, seeing him humbled and with his spirit dampened, it was clear that the person he truly feared was the Hell Monarch.

That was fine. Rafael's presence alone was enough to keep him in check. Hopefully, his unease would help keep the upcoming talks in order and prevent his arrogance from disrupting the negotiations.

## Chapter 939

Carissa listened closely to Leroy and Rafael's conversation, taking in every word.

It was true that they were doing everything they could to avoid war. However, they couldn't let Westhaven be so certain that they didn't want to fight. In particular, Leroy needed to think that it was only the Sinclair and Sullivan families who didn't want war, while the Hell Monarch was eager to reclaim his military authority through battle. Carissa shifted her focus back to Lisandra, who was speaking fluent Stellish with ease.

\*I've long wanted to meet you, Lady Carissa," she said, her tone sincere. "So, I made sure to be assigned to this mission. One of the main purposes of my trip is meeting you."

Lisandra had already said this once before, but now it seemed more genuine. It was as if it came from the heart, instead of the diplomatic flattery they had exchanged earlier.

Carissa smiled. "It's also a great honor to meet you, Your Highness.'

Sitting close, Lisandra didn't appear as exhausted as she had the previous day at the city gates. It seemed the rest had done her well. The dark circles under her eyes, faintly concealed by makeup, were now gone. However, despite her appearance, her overall state suggested she was older than her actual years.

Carissa knew that Lisandra had once been a regent who navigated Westhaven through both internal and external turmoil. The hardships she must have faced were not something the public knew. And despite knowing that tomorrow's situation would be one of tense opposition, Carissa couldn't help but feel respect for the grand princess.

After some brief pleasantries, the banquet began. Everyone took their places at the table, and the meal was served. The Westhaven envoys still sat on the right side, while Rafael and Carissa took seats together.

Victoria didn't join the meal, having only come to meet with Lisandra to show her respect for the envoys. The king and queen were in attendance, and various princes and powerful officials filled the other seats.

Naturally, Harvey wasn't present, nor was Heather. Yuvan attended with Fiona. In this setting, he wouldn't bring Molly, even though she was his princess consort.

As the banquet progressed, wine flowed and glasses clinked. It created the appearance of a cordial relationship between the two kingdoms without any major grievances, Salvador made only polite remarks, such as wishing everyone an enjoyable evening, but said little else.

Between Carissa and Rafael, there was a palpable distance. They didn't exchange any glances, and though they were sitting next to each other, their chairs were a noticeable distance apart. Leroy and Amos occasionally cast curious glances in their direction, trying to discern whether the distance between the couple was genuine or merely for show. It was important to know.

Their stance on war largely depended on the Hell Monarch, as everyone believed that with the apparent affection between him and his wife, Rafael would do everything possible to avoid conflict, especially for the sake of Dominic.

It was clear that Salvador didn't want war either. Without the massacre of villagers and the killing of war prisoners on the record, it would be hard to justify an immediate shift to war if negotiations stalled. Such an abrupt escalation would seem unreasonable, likely sparking public outrage.

But what did the Hell Monarch have to fear? Public discontent wouldn't be aimed at him. It would target Salvador. The other nations and tribes would call the king incompetent and ineffective, but the Hell Monarch would come through unscathed.

In fact, war was far more advantageous for Rafael, especially if he harbored ambitions of taking Salvador's place. Reclaiming his military power would only serve his goals, with no real downside. As for marital affection, that was debatable. After all, Carissa was a woman who had wed and divorced once, and was not someone worth holding in particularly high regard.

Midway through the banquet, Leroy, who had been drinking heavily, stood up, claiming he needed to relieve himself. He motioned for Icarus to accompany him.

Derek arranged for Galen to guide them to the restroom. Upon arriving at the designated room, Leroy waved Galen away, instructing him to wait at a distance while he allowed Icarus to assist him inside.

Knowing his superior likely had something to discuss, Icarus only spoke up once they were alone, asking, "Mr. Stellwyn, is there something you wish to speak of?"

Leroy narrowed his eyes. "Commander Icarus, I couldn't help but notice that the Hell Monarch seems indifferent toward his princess consort. Do you feel the same way?"

"It's hard to say," Icarus answered, unsure.



A sharp coldness flickered in Leroy's gaze, almost like the glint of a blade. "Test it."

"Test it? How?" Icarus asked, confused.

Leroy had already planned his course of action before coming to the restroom. He leaned in close to Icarus and whispered a few instructions.

After listening, Icarus was silent for a moment, his brow furrowed. "But... I've heard that Carissa is quite skilled in martial arts, and we're currently in Starhaven's capital. Won't this be too risky?"

Leroy scoffed dismissively. "How strong can one woman be? You're the strongest warrior in Westhaven. Don't tell me you can't handle one woman."

## Chapter 940

Icarus felt uneasy about the plan. Regardless of whether the Hell Monarch cared about his wife or not, this approach would never reveal anything useful. Not only was it pointless, it also carried significant risk.

"Mr. Stellwyn, I still believe this isn't a good idea. They will suspect we are behind this," said Icarus as he shook his head.

"What's wrong with that?" Leroy's eyes narrowed, a flicker of anger in his expression. "I want him to suspect us. If he truly wants war, this gives him a perfect excuse to ruin the negotiations and go straight to battle. If he doesn't want war, he'll pretend not to know and secretly rescue her. Either way, we'll know his true intentions."

"The problem is that it may start a war. Grand Princess Lisandra has said she wants to avoid war between the two kingdoms," Icarus said carefully.

"That foolish woman is just like Liam, soft-hearted and indecisive," Leroy scoffed, pulling out an edict from his robes and handing it to Icarus. "Take a look at this. This is the king's true will."

Under the dim light in the restroom, Icarus opened the edict, his brow furrowing as he read. Having served at court for years, he recognized the handwriting instantly. Edmund's orders were clear. He demanded harsh terms, and if Starhaven didn't agree, they were to leave immediately and formally declare war.

Icarus understood now. Edmund had originally wanted war, but had been persuaded by Lisandra to hold off.

If this edict was genuine...

Icarus' eyes widened. "So, you're not really testing the Hell Monarch. You mean to capture Carissa."

Testing the Hell Monarch was just an excuse. Edmund wanted war. Capturing Carissa was the equivalent of returning the favor-just like how Aurora had kidnapped Arthur and humiliated him.

Westhaven would use the same tactic to make the Sullivan family's army at Victory Pass retreat.

"Mr. Stellwyn, this still isn't a good idea. After capturing Carissa, we can't just take her back to Concord Lodge," Icarus protested.

Leroy's eyes flashed coldly as he smirked. "Once we have her, we'll send her to the back courtyard of Hartstone Estate. Someone there will take care of the rest. And you'll have assistance as well, so don't worry."

"Hartstone Estate?" Icarus' eyes widened as realization hit.

The man Leroy had insisted on bringing along was most likely from Hartstone Estate. That man had arrived at Concord Lodge yesterday and disappeared shortly after.

So, no matter how the Hell Monarch and Carissa acted tonight, Leroy had already made up his mind to kidnap her. The preparations had been made, and Leroy hadn't told Icarus until now to prevent him from letting Lisandra know.

'Since it's His Majesty's command, I will follow through," Icarus said.

Hearing his agreement, Leroy whispered a few more words in his ear.

Icarus nodded. "Understood."

As they left the restroom, they saw Galen standing under a tree in the distance, waiting. He had been waiting for some time and almost called out to them, but had vaguely heard them speaking in Westic, which he couldn't understand. So, he assumed everything was fine and decided not to approach.

Back at the palace banquet, Rafael and Carissa had already figured out what was going on as soon as Leroy and Icarus left for the restroom.

Among the many suspicions they had the night before, one seemed the most plausible: Leroy, who was eager for war, might abduct Carissa to use as leverage against Wyatt and the others at Victory Pass.

The negotiations were just a cover. Once they captured Carissa, they would move quickly. After taking her, Leroy would cause a disturbance.

So, at today's banquet, Rafael and Carissa kept their distance, deliberately appearing indifferent to each other. Rafael also took the opportunity to intimidate Leroy, showing that he wasn't afraid of war-if anything, he was eager for it.

The goal was to ensure that tomorrow's negotiations would go smoothly without Leroy interfering.

The plan seemed solid. Leroy had shown signs of doubt and caution, but if he pressed on with his actions, it would be clear that he wasn't the only one who wanted a war-Edmund wanted it too.

So, Lisandra hadn't actually succeeded in persuading Edmund. Instead, he had been playing her for a fool.