

## War Song 951

### Chapter 951

"Impossible!" Leroy instinctively retorted. "No matter how skilled Lady Carissa is, can she really surpass Commander Icarus, the top fighter in Westhaven?"

"The fact is, she can and she did," Lisandra replied coldly. "Not only that, but she captured him with ease. The so-called top fighter in Westhaven is too obsessed with scheming and power plays. His relentless pursuit of power has already determined the limits of his martial skills. Since you've already investigated Lady Carissa, you should know she's trained in the Pathfinders Guild since she was young. Do you even understand what kind of place the Pathfinders Guild is?"

"Isn't it just some martial arts guild? What's so special about that?" Leroy argued, still in denial.

Despite the undeniable evidence-Icarus had been defeated by Carissa's whip-he refused to believe that her martial skills could be that advanced. If it had been the Hell Monarch who defeated Icarus, he wouldn't have doubted it for a second.

"A young woman from a guild-just how powerful could she really be?" Amos chimed in, echoing Leroy's disbelief. He simply couldn't accept that a woman could be this formidable.

Lisandra cast a sharp look at the two men, labeling them as fools. Their skepticism stemmed from their ignorance, and their ignorance was rooted in arrogance. They would never understand the sheer effort and sacrifice it took for a woman to enter court as an official. The blood, sweat, and tears were unimaginable.

Not just in Starhaven-even in Westhaven, where female officials were chosen once every three years. Candidates would burn the midnight oil, not daring to slack off even a little. Many survived on just three hours of sleep a night, all for a shot at one of the mere three positions available every cycle.

As for Starhaven, there was only one female official currently serving-Carissa. If her martial arts skills weren't unparalleled, how could she possibly hold the position of commander of the Mystic Army? She had even fought on the battlefield and earned military merits. Of course, in the men's eyes, it was all because the Hell Monarch had elevated her to this position. Even so, how many princes could successfully push their wives into positions of real power throughout history?

Lisandra didn't bother explaining further. Instead, she issued an order, "Gather everyone. Since you've caused such trouble, we'll need to adjust our strategy for tomorrow's negotiations."

"Adjust the strategy? Are you suggesting we back down?" Leroy's head snapped up, his eyes blazing with dissatisfaction. "No way. Absolutely not! If the worst comes to worst, we'll just fight!" Lisandra ignored his protests. "Penny, summon the ministers. We need to discuss this."

"Yes, Your Highness," Penny replied before hurrying out to disperse the others and call the officials inside.

It seemed no one at Concord Lodge would be getting any sleep tonight.

At Hartstone Estate, the hours dragged on. By midnight, the back gate remained silent, showing no signs of activity.

Harvey frowned and sighed heavily. He called someone into his study and instructed, "Disguise me. I can't stay in the capital any longer. At first light tomorrow, we leave for Valken." "Yes, Your Grace!"

The people he had brought back with him were loyal confidants trained outside the estate, individuals he had never allowed near Hartstone Estate before this.

These confidants were capable in

their own right-not extraordinarily so, but skilled enough for delivering messages, self-defense, and

handling minor errands. However, he would have to rely on Yuvan's

work for something truly

significant.

His resolve hardened. "Open the treasury. Take every coin and banknote we have."

"Your Grace, shouldn't we leave some for Lady Heather?"

Over the years, Heather hadn't acquired much in the way of extravagant jewelry or fine clothes, in the name of maintaining a low profile. The estate was kept minimalistic in its decor. Though there were a few royal gifts, those

couldn't be sold off.

As for their lands and properties, Harvey had already liquidated most of them when Eleanor's incident occurred, preparing for exactly this kind of eventuality.

"Why bother?" Harvey's tone was

dismissive, devoid of any sentiment

for his wife, "She's a princess

consort. She has her monthly

stipend. The fief provides a mo.net"

income too. It's enough to keep the estate running."

On the other hand, Harvey had far bigger ambitions, which required substantial funds. "Check if there's anything else of value in the estate. Take it all with us," he ordered. "Your Grace, shouldn't we wait a little longer? There's still a chance the plan could succeed."

"It's hopeless. The Westhaven connection is as good as dead. Leroy will never trust me again."

The palace banquet had ended over an hour ago, yet nothing had come of their efforts. Harvey wasn't worried about the suicide soldiers leaking anything. He only hoped that Icarus wouldn't fall into Starhaven's hands.

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The night before the negotiations turned into utter chaos.

While the Westhaven envoys at Concord Lodge worked through a sleepless night, the officials at the Supreme Court convened for an emergency session.

Over at the Ministry of Justice, Aurora had been relentlessly pleading to see Barrett one last time since her confession. She even dropped to her knees, crying and begging for mercy.

Ever since Aurora was taken into custody, she had maintained a strong front. Now, all of that seemed to have crumbled. Patrick knew that after the negotiations, she would likely be handed over to Westhaven's envoys for punishment. A quick death would be a mercy, but she would most probably receive a painful and humiliating end.

Even death row prisoners were allowed a final meeting with their loved ones, so Patrick allowed Aurora and Barrett to meet tonight, but only within the confines of the prison cell.

Barrett was escorted to the cell under heavy guard. The officials opened the cell door, then stationed themselves outside, giving the two some semblance of privacy.

Of course, Barrett was thoroughly searched before entering. Any sharp objects that could allow Aurora to harm herself were strictly prohibited. If she ended up dead before being handed over to the Westhaven envoys, it would be impossible to explain. Aurora was being held in solitary confinement in the women's prison. Her role in the case was too critical to risk anything happening to her, so Patrick had stationed heavy guards around her cell.

The flickering lantern light illuminated Barrett and Aurora's gaunt, haggard faces. The confident, triumphant air they had after the triumph at Victory Pass was now nowhere to be found. All that remained was exhaustion, desperation, and a palpable sense of defeat. "I changed my testimony for you," Aurora said, staring at the man in front of her. His lack of resolve only deepened her despair, and her voice grew urgent, "I told them you knew nothing about what happened at Victory Pass. That should be enough to keep you safe." "That's the truth. I truly didn't know," Barrett replied flatly.

"But before you were brought in, I insisted that Dominic was the mastermind behind the entire operation."

"That wouldn't have held up. It was just your word against his. Neither the king nor the Ministry of Justice will believe it."

Aurora's face twisted with fury and frustration, her features dark and menacing. "It doesn't matter! Westhaven didn't go through all this trouble just to see me dead. They've hated the Sullivan family for years. Guarding Victory Pass for generations has made the Sullivans a thorn in Westhaven's side. They are who Westhaven truly wants."

Barrett stared at her, his expression turning serious. "What are you planning?"

"Listen carefully," she said bluntly. "Westhaven is after the Sullivan family and me. To them, you're useless. They don't want your life. On top of that, the king is determined to protect you, so you'll be fine. At worst, you'll lose your position for a while, which might be good for you."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Save me."

Aurora's eyes burned with a cold intensity as she locked her gaze on Barrett.

"The Westhaven officials won't kill me right away, she went on. "They'll take me back to Westhaven and torture me. They'll drag it out until die as miserably as their crown prince did. That's the only way to

satisfy their grudge. But th1.ne

gives us an opportunity. Once I'm out of the capital, you can find a way to rescue me."

Barrett looked at her in shock. "So, your plan to protect me was just so you could use me to save yourself?" Aurora shook her head.

"No! I would never willingly drag you into this! From the start, I told them it was Dominic who secretly summoned me to plan this. I didn't implicate you. It wasn't until you confessed to your involvement that I was forced to admit I acted alone and that it had nothing to do with you. I never intended to harm you. Even in the worst moments, I still remembered our bond as husband and wife and did everything I could to protect you."

She placed her hand on his shoulder, her disfigured face filled with a mix of defiance and resentment.

"If it weren't for your confession, I wouldn't have been pinned as the mastermind. You caused this. Now, you have to fix it."

"You're overestimating me." Barrett looked at her. The face before him was almost unrecognizable, as though she were a stranger. "Even if I'm released, I'll still be stripped of my rank. What power would I have to save you?"

Aurora grabbed his clothes and pulled him closer, leaning in to whisper something into his ear.

Barrett jerked back, his eyes wide. "You've been planning this from the start?"

Aurora's voice turned cold, saying,

"What choice did I have? Sit in Blessed Haven and wait to die? If you'd cared even a little or bothered to visit me there, you'd have known what was doing. I studied every map of Starhaven, analyzed every possible escape route, and planned until I found the perfect one."

Chapter 953

Aurora had never been one to give up on her life so easily. Even clinging to a wretched existence was better than dying.

She firmly believed that no one could remain unlucky forever. As long as she stayed alive, there was always a chance to rise again. If she couldn't be a female general, she would find another path to make her mark. The world was vast, and she was determined to carve out her place in it.

So, she couldn't die.

Barrett looked at her, incredulous. "What good is your escape plan? Do you even know how many people Westhaven brought with them this time? Over a hundred, with at least 60 or 70 guards! There's no way I can save you." "You're not doing it alone," Aurora whispered, her voice barely audible.

Barrett had to strain to hear her as she continued, "The people from Hell Monarch Estate will help you. Once I'm in Westhaven's custody, I'll make sure they demand for Dominic as well. The people from Hell Monarch Estate won't abandon him. You just have to follow their lead. When they rescue him, they'll have no choice but to save me too."

Barrett felt a chill run through him as her words sank in. "What are you saying? How could you possibly get Westhaven to demand General Sullivan? What are you planning to tell them?"

Aurora shot him a sidelong glance and scoffed. "That's none of your concern. All you need to do is agree to help. Save me, and we're even. After that, whether I live or die has nothing to do with you anymore."

"No. I can't promise you that." Barrett drew in a deep breath. "I just can't."

"Barrett Warren," Aurora's voice turned icy as she stared fixedly at him. "You've never truly forgotten Carissa, have you? You've been unfair to me from the start. Yet even knowing that, I still altered my testimony to protect you. Are you seriously telling me you feel no gratitude at all?"

"Then, tell me, what's your plan? What guarantees do you have—"

Aurora frowned and cut him off sharply, "Whether you help me or not, Dominic is getting dragged into this. He's going with me to Westhaven no matter what! So, stop wasting time and answer me will you repay the favor I did for you or not?"

Barrett stared at her, a mixture of doubt and disbelief in his eyes. "You're still scheming? After everything, you won't stop?"

"What nonsense are you spouting? Am I supposed to wait to die?"

Aurora stretched out her swollen fingers, one by one, in front of Barrett's face. Her expression twisted with anger.

"I've endured so much-taking beatings and saying I did what I did on Dominic's orders. I changed my testimony only because you got involved. Barrett Warren, if you don't save me, you're a heartless bastard who's betrayed not just Carissa, but me as well!" Barrett looked as though he had been struck in his weakest, most vulnerable spot. His face turned pale and his lips parted slightly as he stared at her in shock.

Meanwhile, at Hell Monarch Estate, the study was bustling with activity. People came and went in waves, each bringing updates or reports. Jacob and Kyle were stationed inside, alongside Winona.

Tonight, there was a new

addition—an imposing figure who had just arrived in the capital, Everett. He had entered Hell

Monarch Estate after dinner, his net

expression dark and stormy. His presence sent chills down

everyone's spine. Everyone quickly stepped aside to avoid his wrath.

Kyle and Winona, seasoned martial artists with notable reputations, were thoroughly terrified.

In the eyes of their martial uncle,

they were nothing more than unruly children who needed discipline. Worse still, the two had avoided returning to the Pathfinders Guild precisely to escape Everett's grasp. Now that he was here, didn't that mean their long-dreaded reckoning had arrived?

Inside the study, Everett sat calmly sipping coffee with Jacob. As for Kyle and Winona, they were being punished forced to hold a horse stance while balancing large water jars on their heads. The jars were so massive that their heads seemed to disappear beneath them, leaving only their struggling, unsteady legs visible.

Kyle's usual scholarly grace was nowhere to be found, while Winona's confident and graceful figure had turned into a clumsy, bent-legged mess. They had already endured this punishment for an hour. Those who entered the room with updates caught sight of the scene, but wisely kept their reactions in check. They dared not laugh aloud, even though their amusement was evident in their fleeting glances.

However, Dylan wasn't as restrained. He stifled his laughter so hard that his stomach hurt. Since no one dared enter the study, reports were delivered to him outside, and he passed them along to Jacob inside. "I've got an update on Hartstone Estate," Dylan announced, snapping out of his amusement.



He kept his gaze downward, avoiding any more glances at the comical sight of Kyle and Winona as he prepared to deliver his report.

Chapter 954

Jacob rubbed his stomach, his hands massaging his face as he let out a long sigh.

What a tough situation!

Then, he muttered, "What's the update from Hartstone Estate?"

"Three carriages have been moved, and they're parked at the back door. They're loading up things looks like gold, silver, and other valuables from a distance," came the response. Jacob nodded.

"He's trying to run."

"Should we send someone to intercept them on the way out?"

Ever the diplomat, Jacob turned to Everett for advice. "What do you think, Sage Everett?"

With a calm expression, Everett replied, "Where can he go? He's definitely heading for Valken. Send someone to follow him, and along the way, take all his valuables. Let him head to Valken empty-handed. Once he's there..." He gave Winona a pointed look.

"Have your people keep a close watch. Everything he does and every move he makes needs to be reported back."

Winona gritted her teeth and responded with a firm, "Yes, sir!"

Jacob was aware that he would need to send someone to keep an eye on things, but the idea of stealing all of Hartstone Estate's valuables struck him as particularly ruthless-and he couldn't help but admire the cunning. Everett glanced at Kyle and Winona, and finally relented. "Fine, you can go now. Put the jars down and get on with your business."

The two of them felt like they had just been granted mercy. With shaky hands, they carefully carried the massive water jars out of the room. The jars were so large that they barely fit through the door. Had the door been any smaller, they wouldn't be able to get in or out. Once the jars were placed down, they returned, bracing themselves for more reprimands. Having been punished so many times before, they knew the process was never complete without at least a few words of scolding.

"Thank you for your forgiveness, Sage Everett."

Everett took a sip of his coffee before saying slowly, "I'm not punishing you because I'm heartless. If you want to blame someone, blame your hopeless mentor. He's up on the mountain experimenting with gunpowder and blew up my courtyard. And then he had the nerve to ask me to come to the capital to help his apprentices. If I don't punish you, how can I let off some steam?"

The two of them exchanged a look. Was Adrian still messing around with gunpowder from the kingdom of Nerathia?

He had been working on it when they first heard that Carissa was going to the battlefield. It wasn't the first time he had tried—each time ended in failure, with nothing but loud explosions and thick smoke.

This time, however, he had destroyed Everett's courtyard. Could he have actually succeeded?

Winona, unable to help herself, blurted, "How did it go? Did he blow up your entire courtyard?"

It was a foolish question, one that only fueled Everett's irritation. The moment the words left her mouth, Winona saw the change in the older man's expression—his face instantly darkened.

"Go tell your people to handle their business. Then, come back and continue holding up the jar."

With that, Winona quickly left, her head low in defeat.

Jacob watched the scene unfold, a deep sigh escaping his lips.

No matter how famous Kyle was or how well-known Winona was in the martial arts world, they were nothing in front of Everett. All their usual grace and intimidation melted away. Each punishment was met without a word, and they didn't dare utter a single complaint.

Not just them—Jacob suspected even Carissa would be the same.

It wasn't long before Winona left, and soon enough, Rafael, Carissa, and the others returned.

They had only found out Everett was in the estate after arriving. The

couple's reactions were entirely

different one pleased, the other

inwardly groaning. Still, both knew

they had to go to the study and greet him.

Everett's reputation in Meadow Ridge was notorious. Violet and Travis would never approach him willingly. After all, there was no point in seeking trouble when it could be avoided.

As the study door opened, Everett's gaze softened slightly when he saw his only apprentice enter, affection filling his eyes. His gaze shifted to the troublemaker in the corner the one who had been a constant headache ever since joining the Pathfinders Guild. His expression soured once again.

"Sage Everett, what brings you here?" Rafael asked with a bright smile, quickly stepping forward.

"Sir, what brings you here?" Carissa asked with a furrowed brow, dragging her feet as she walked in, clearly less than thrilled.

Everett naturally chose to answer his apprentice, saying, "That troublesome martial uncle of yours blew up my courtyard, so now I have to renovate it. Looks like I'll be staying here for a while."

He finished his statement with a cold, piercing glare at Carissa.

Naturally, Carissa silently walked over to stand beside Kyle and kept her mouth shut.

Chapter 955

Rafael wisely avoided commenting on the previous subject and quickly changed the topic.

"When did you arrive? Why didn't you send someone to let me know?"

"You have your own things to handle. I'm just here to keep an eye on things for you. How's everything going? Have you captured the target?" Everett asked. From Everett's tone, it was clear he was already aware of the assassination attempt that had taken place earlier that evening.

Rafael, looking rather pleased with himself, answered proudly, "Carissa and the others have already apprehended Commander Icarus and delivered him to the Supreme Court. He claimed to be the best fighter in Westhaven, but ended up being utterly defeated when he faced Carissa."

Everett responded with a neutral grunt before casting a brief glance at Carissa. "She has no real skills except for her martial arts. Icarus isn't the top fighter in Westhaven, either. That kingdom has many skilled warriors who choose not to serve in the court. Beating him isn't much of an achievement. Don't get too proud of yourself."

"Yes, sir," Carissa replied obediently.

After everything Carissa had been through, the way people looked at her had changed. Some pitied her, some admired her, and others envied her.

But Everett? He still treated her the same way he had when she was at Meadow Ridge. There was no difference at all.

Jacob then gave a brief rundown of what had happened since their participation in the palace banquet-details about Edgeview Estate, the movements of the people at Hartstone Estate, and the reports from Concorde Lodge. Once he finished, Everett spoke first before Rafael could.

"Everything else can wait, but sleep should never be delayed. I know you're in charge of the negotiations, and everything depends on you. Go get some rest," he said.

Rafael had no choice but to comply when his mentor gave him an order. However, he still had one more question.

"What did you mean when you said my martial uncle blew up your courtyard?"

Jacob nearly jumped out of his skin, and hurriedly shot Rafael a look that pleaded for silence. However, Rafael was completely unaware or perhaps simply didn't care. "He was playing with gunpowder and blew it up," Everett replied.

"What?" Rafael didn't expect Adrian to have such a hobby. "Your courtyard is so large. Did he blow up the whole thing?"

Everett shrugged. "Not really. Just my bedroom."

"I see. Then, you should stay in the capital for a while before going back," Rafael suggested.

Jacob blinked in surprise-he hadn't realized that was a question one could ask.

Everett, clearly eager to wrap things up, urged, "You two should go rest now."

Kyle, who had been quiet until now, stood up. He said he was tired and prepared to leave.

Before he could even move, however, Everett's sharp voice rang out, "What, are you going to the negotiations tomorrow too?"

Kyle, who had barely lifted himself from the chair, sank back down without a word.

Once Rafael, Garissa, and Jacob left, Everett's voice turned cold, "Your mentor blew up my bedroom on purpose to force me to the capital and keep an eye on your junior apprentice. He doesn't want me to be comfortable, so neither should you expect any comfort."

Kyle had no reply. What could he say? He had no choice but to endure.

The next day, the negotiations took place at the Diplomatic Affairs Department.

Despite the Westhaven envoy's best efforts to appear composed, their exhaustion was evident. Lisandra wore her formal court attire. While she held the title of grand princess in Westhaven, she had no official position or rank.

Leroy was also far from his usual energetic self. The dark circles under his eyes made him look particularly worn, and the others weren't faring much better. It was likely they had stayed up all night.

Rafael and Davis led the

negotiations on the Starhaven side,

with the officials from the

Diplomatic Affairs Department providing assistance. Jeremiah was present as well, though

e was th

only to observe and not to take part

in the discussions.

A long, intricately carved cherry wood table was set in the middle of the hall, surrounded by chairs for the participants. Due to the nature of the negotiations, refreshments were prepared to help sustain them.

Rafael gestured for everyone to take their seats. Documents were placed on the table, and interpreters were present to translate between the two languages. As was customary, the proceedings would be recorded in writing.

Before the discussions began,

Rafael said, "Last night, an incident

that has stirred great anger

occurred. Grand Princess Lisandra I'm sure you and our other honored guests are already aware. The

commander of your nation's Sovereign Guard colluded with assassins in an attempt to murder my wife. I have his confession here and I'd like all of you to review it."

The confession had been copied several times in advance, so there was no need for everyone to take turns reading it. Officials from the Diplomatic Affairs Department assisted with distributing the copies of the confession. Last night, the discussions among the Westhaven envoys had centered around what Icarus would say. The tension was evident in their eyes as they took the documents, their unease as clear as day.

Once the confessions had been handed out, Rafael continued, "This incident took place last night. I expect Grand Princess Lisandra to provide us with an explanation."

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The confession was written entirely in Stellish, which Westhaven envoys couldn't fully understand. The two interpreters read it aloud in Westic for them.

Icarus took full responsibility for the plot, explaining that his motive stemmed from Hector's past victory of Westhaven, which had resulted in the deaths of many Westhaven soldiers. He also harbored a deep grudge against the Sullivan family, particularly Carissa, whose grandfather, Dominic, had guarded Victory Pass for many years and fought in countless battles. Consumed by hatred, Icarus had seized the opportunity to strike at Carissa when he came to the capital, hoping to vent his anger.

Even after hearing the confession, the Westhaven envoys didn't seem any less tense. Regardless of their stance, this meant the attempt on Carissa's life was tied to Victory Pass.

The Westhaven envoys couldn't help but respect the Hell Monarch for his straightforwardness in not bringing this matter to the negotiating table directly. Instead, he had sought justice before the talks even began.

This, in turn, made the mood heavier. They would have preferred it if Starhaven had been a little more ruthless and put the matter directly on the table. Were that the case, they wouldn't have to worry about preserving their dignity.

All the envoys, except for Amos, were inwardly cursing Leroy. How foolish to think he could compare to his brother, Liam. Did he even realize how much like a clown he appeared?

Rafael remained calm as he watched them with a steady gaze. In negotiations, it was all about the psychological game.

Originally, the Westhaven envoys had come a long way to demand an explanation from Starhaven. Westhaven was the aggrieved party, with the right to present their conditions. They could be angry, could question, and could demand more than what was fair. Now, with the assassination attempt on Carissa, they suddenly found themselves at a disadvantage.

In reality, their only wrong lay in the eradication of the Sinclair family. The assassination attempt took place just last night, and today was the negotiation. That was what truly shook them psychologically.

Leroy pressed his hand against the confession, meeting Rafael's gaze. He raised his voice as he said, "Let's be clear. Whether the assassination attempt is true or not, we don't know yet. We can wait for the investigation to confirm the details. Let's return to the main topic, shall we?"

Rafael's posture was rigid, his face solemn. "You don't know whether it's true? Didn't you hear it with your own ears last night, Mr. Stellwyn? If you doubt the assassination attempt, why not investigate it further before we continue?"

"No, this can't be delayed any further!" Leroy's voice grew a little sharp. "You want an explanation, right? Since he attempted assassination in Starhaven, then your kingdom can handle the punishment according to your laws. Don't drag this out here."

Her patience already worn thin, Lisandra suddenly snapped. "Shut up!"

She hadn't slept all night. Her head

was pounding, and she had only been able to leave the inn after taking some medicine. Before she left, she had repeatedly reminded them that the Hell Monarch would likely bring up the assassination attempt. She had stressed how important it was to maintain an apologetic attitude about the

incident.

Their stance would directly influence Starhaven's response. If they were arrogant and dismissive, Starhaven would return that same attitude in the negotiations.



But now, Leroy was making trouble again.

Leroy shot Lisandra an irritable glance. No matter what, he was her uncle. How could she disrespect him so?

Seeing her cold expression and the icy authority she held, he snapped his mouth shut, silenced by the force of her presence.

Lisandra stood up and bowed

slightly to Rafael. "Commander Icarus is a Westhaven official. His attempt on your princess consort's life is a grievous offense. In my capacity as a grand princess of Westhaven, I offer my apologies. How to deal with him is for your kingdom to decide."

Since Icarus attempted to kill a princess consort of Starhaven, then Starhaven would handle the punishment.

Just as Aurora's massacre in Fawnrun City should be dealt with by Westhaven.

Rafael also rose, giving a respectful nod. "Very well. We'll do as you say, Your Highness. This matter is closed."

Lisandra felt her brow twitch slightly.

She knew that Icarus' assassination

attempt would put them in a disadvantageous position for the negotiations, but it had become unavoidable.

Now, Rafael wasn't pressing the issue further. His leniency effectively set the tone for the negotiations on both sides today.

She shot Leroy a sidelong glance.

See? A true general plans ahead. And you?

## Chapter 957

Leroy was seething with frustration. Today's negotiations had been his opportunity to take the initiative by demanding accountability and making unacceptable conditions, then declaring the talks a failure. After that, he would return to Westhaven and declare war. Yet now, not only had he been unable to follow through with his plan, the negotiations had also shifted into a disadvantageous position. To make matters worse, his niece, the grand princess, was looking down on him.

The humiliation gnawed at him.

Jeremiah, who had been sitting quietly to the side, felt a sense of resolve settle over him as he watched the proceedings. If they could negotiate peacefully, that would be ideal. The massacre in Fawnrun City was Starhaven's fault, and they were willing to offer apologies, compensation, and make amends-but only if given a chance for peaceful negotiations.

Westhaven had distributed the case files regarding the Fawnrun City incident, which contained numerous firsthand accounts from soldiers who had been captured alongside the late Westhaven crown prince, Arthur. Some had survived, and they had given detailed testimonies to recreate the true events.

Not everyone in the villages had met a tragic end. Some had managed to escape. Even those survivors had seen part of the brutality that had unfolded.

The case files referred to the crown prince as "Artie," but Rafael and Davis understood it was a pseudonym.

For Rafael and his group, the files were difficult to read. The details of the slaughter were heartbreaking. Even though Aurora and Zeke had been repeatedly interrogated and forced to reveal every detail, there were still things they had kept hidden-such as the methods used to force the villagers to betray the crown prince, the torture, and the cruelty.

The files also excluded how they had tortured Arthur.

Lisandra recognized Jeremiah, and ordered Penny to give him a copy of the files for his review.

At Rafael's signal, the officials from the Diplomatic Affairs Department began distributing the files concerning the Sinclair family massacre. The Sinclair family's destruction was intricately tied to Victory Pass, and it was inevitable that this issue would be brought to the table during the negotiations.

The room fell into a heavy silence, only broken by the rustling of pages turning.

Lisandra had been managing state affairs for many years, and she wasn't one easily moved by compassion. As she read through the Sinclair family's massacre, however, she felt her eyes well up with tears.

What struck her as the most tragic was the fact that every single male member of the Sinclair family had died for the kingdom, leaving behind only the elderly, women, children, and the family's servants. And even those people's deaths had been brutal-bodies hacked beyond recognition, with the children having met the same grim fate.

Leroy skimmed through the file quickly. When he reached the part that detailed the 108 cuts, he looked up, his voice cold as he said in Westic, "You all seem to understand why there were 108 cuts. General Artie's wounds also added up to 108. While none of them were fatal, each wound represents a

degradation."

The translator relayed the message, though Rafael and the officials from the Diplomatic Affairs Department understood the meaning without needing the translation.

Rafael met Leroy's words with an

equally cold response, "What you said is chilling, Mr. Stellwyn. We have never covered for Aurora. Are you trying to cover for the spies who wiped out the Sinclair family? If you want to make comparisons, then those 108 cuts should have been returned to those who committed the crime, not inflicted upon

innocent women and children. The way you speak makes one wonder if you truly wish to seek justice for the innocent victims."

Leroy felt the sting of the remark and bristled, "The Sinclair family wasn't just any common family! Even if they were all widows and orphans, they were a noble house."

"And so?" Rafael shot back. "Are the lives of those from a noble family life worth more than anyone else's? You hold an official title, Mr. Stellwyn. Does that mean your life is worth more than commoners' lives? Are you saying that they are beneath you?" Leroy's frustration flared. "That's not what I meant! Why are you so anxious, Hell Monarch?"

Rafael didn't respond and continued to focus on the files. Lisandra and the other envoys were engrossed in their reading as well; they showed no interest in engaging with Leroy.

Once everyone had finished reading, both sides expressed their regret over what had happened. Their attitudes were sincere.

The massacre of the villages at Fawnrun City and the destruction of the Sinclair family were both tragedies. Since the two kingdoms were sitting down to negotiate, it was essential to respect the facts as they stood. Neither side would dispute the known truth.

Chapter 958

Lisandra spoke first.

She believed Starhaven had violated the agreement between the two kingdoms, which was to not harm civilians or execute prisoners of war. The slaughter of civilians and the brutal treatment of a war prisoner during wartime were actions that would outrage both man and god. Similarly, the massacre of the Sinclair family by Westhaven's spies was a grave mistake.

"We seek peaceful negotiations, and for that to happen, both sides must acknowledge these facts. Only with that understanding can we proceed with talks for peace between our kingdoms."

Once the translator relayed her words, both Rafael and the negotiating officials from Starhaven agreed with her.

Thus, the negotiations officially began.

Westhaven put forward five conditions. Firstly, Starhaven must issue a formal apology to the people of Westhaven for the lives lost.

Second, Starhaven was to pay compensation of 10,000 gold coins.

Third, compensation of 3,000,000 bushels of grain was to be delivered to Westhaven by Starhaven representatives.

Fourth, the treaty signed at Fawnrun City was to be rendered null and void. This meant the border should revert to its previous terms before the agreement.

Fifth, Barrett, Aurora, and Dominic must be handed to Westhaven for punishment.

Even though Starhaven had prepared itself for tough terms, these demands were still too much to accept.

"We can agree to the first two conditions, but we cannot accept the terms of delivering 3,000,000 bushels of grain or shifting the borderlines," Rafael said. "We acknowledge our fault, but the massacre of the Sinclair family is also tied to the situation at Victory Pass. This is a shared responsibility.

"As for the fifth condition, Aurora may be handed over to Westhaven, but General Sullivan does not bear the main responsibility. At the time, he was severely injured and unable to control his subordinates. Therefore, he should be dealt with by our kingdom."

Garrick retorted, "The Sinclair family's massacre was a direct result of your violation of the agreement. Westhaven is at fault, yes, but you must also take responsibility for this incident."

"What you say shows a lack of

respect for the facts we all just agreed upon Mr. Horton," Davis pointed out "Grand Princess Lisandra herself said that the foundation for these talks is mutual respect for the facts. The Sinclair family massacre was carried out by Westhaven spies. Regardless of their reasons, it is unforgivable to carry out such a brutal act against innocent women, children, and the elderly."

"We respect the facts, and as such, we are willing to follow the first two conditions in regard to the massacre of the Sinclair family," Lisandra said firmly. "We will apologize to the remaining Sinclair family members and compensate them with 40,000 gold coins. With this, the first and second conditions are balanced out.

"However, I ask Starhaven not to overlook the most important fact that you killed war prisoners and massacred villagers, breaking the agreement first. Therefore, you bear the main responsibility. The compensation must be increased accordingly." "Balanced out" meant that the Sinclair family's massacre should not be brought up again.

However, Rafael certainly wasn't about to agree. His goal was to remove Dominic from those first two conditions and to place the Sinclair family issue on the negotiating table. The primary aim was to absolve Dominic from the matter entirely.

"Since we're talking about respecting

facts," Rafael said, his tone calm but

firm, "I ask that Westhaven also

respect General Sullivan's role in the Fawnrun City incident. He was only guilty of not being able to control his subordinates. He neither gave the order nor participated in the massacre of war prisoners and civilians."

Dominic wasn't one of Westhaven's primary targets. Bringing him into this conversation was a strategic move to gain leverage in negotiations, so naturally, Westhaven wouldn't back down easily.

Not only did they refuse to back down, but they also dragged Barrett into the conversation. They argued that as the general overseeing Fawnrun City's actions, he too bore some responsibility for the situation.

Given the strategic nature of the talks, it was clear Barrett had to be protected. Agreeing to hand him over on the first day would open a dangerous precedent. For now, Starhaven only agreed to surrender Aurora and nothing more.

And so, the first day of the negotiations ended without significant progress. The only agreement reached was on the first two conditions-mutual apologies and compensation.

Before the day concluded, Lisandra made one last remark, "If you think the massacre of the Sinclair family can fully cancel out the events at Fawnrun City, that is impossible."

Rafael responded in kind, his voice just as resolute, "These are human lives we're talking about. It's not possible to cancel one tragedy with another. To do so would be a profound disrespect to those who died in such brutal circumstances." As such, the negotiations for the day ended without any meaningful breakthroughs.

## Chapter 959

After the Westhaven envoys left the Diplomatic Affairs Department and returned to their lodgings, the Starhaven negotiators remained behind and continued discussions about the next round of talks. Jeremiah was involved in the conversation, his voice calm but firm.

"If we're going to compensate with grain, we can't offer such a large quantity. Last year, there was a poor harvest and the military wages were insufficient. If we give them 3,000,000 bushels of grain, we're essentially funding their war efforts. We can compensate, but it can't exceed 300,000 bushels."

He paused, then added, "Also, His Majesty insists that we cannot make any concessions on the border issue."

Having delivered his points, he left the room. From the way Rafael had been conducting the negotiations, Jeremiah felt confident in the direction they were heading.

Meanwhile, at the Ministry of Justice, Barrett requested a meeting with Patrick.

After his conversation with Aurora the previous night, Barrett had been troubled. Aurora had mentioned a plan to convince Westhaven to take Dominic, but Barrett couldn't understand how she could pull that off. So, he turned to Patrick for advice. "She really said that?" Patrick asked, coming to meet Barrett in person. "Did she say how?"

Barrett shook his head. "She didn't say, and when I asked, she just refused to explain. But she has mapped out an escape route, and it's clear she's confident she can convince the Westhaven envoys to take General Sullivan with them."

At that point, Patrick still didn't know the outcome of the negotiations. However, he knew Dominic would definitely be brought up at the table. If Starhaven refused, Westhaven wouldn't be able to take him.

But if the talks ended without a resolution, what could Westhaven do to take Dominic after the fact? More importantly, how could Aurora be so sure she could persuade the Westhaven envoys?

"That doesn't seem likely," Patrick said. "If she's taken, she'll be in a prison cart. The Westhaven envoys hate her with a passion. No matter what she says, no one will listen."

Barrett frowned. "I agree, it seems unlikely. But she's convinced that Westhaven will take General Sullivan. I just don't get how she's so sure. I've been locked up here, so I want to ask you to send a message to my wife... No, to Madam Zoey, and ask her to investigate the servants at Valor Estate."

"You suspect that Aurora has been in contact with someone outside through the servants, perhaps even conspiring all along?" Patrick asked, his expression thoughtful. Barrett thought it over, but couldn't untangle the mess in his mind.

"I'm not sure," he admitted, "but it's better to investigate, just to be safe. If something does come up, please have Madam Zoey inform Cari—I mean, Lady Carissa." Patrick nodded, but couldn't hide his confusion. "Why Madam Zoey? Why not have your wife look into the servants at Valor Estate?"

From what Patrick knew, Zoey was the sister-in-law of Barrett's wife, Viola. Why would he ask his wife's sister-in-law to handle this rather than his own wife?

Barrett looked visibly uncomfortable.

After stammering for a moment, he finally replied, "Well... Madam Zoey has been managing her household for years and is incredibly meticulous. If there's something

suspicious about the servants, she'll

be able to uncover it."

Patrick studied Barrett's expression, suspecting there might be some discord between Barrett and Viola—or perhaps Viola simply wasn't adept at running a household.

"Very well," Patrick said. "In that

case, I'll inform Commander Sinclair.



It's better for her to approach

Madam Zoey about this. Since the Earl of Silverstone is absent, it

wouldn't be appropriate for me to go personally, nor for my wife to step in it might lead to unnecessary misunderstandings."

Barrett nodded quickly. "Exactly, sir. Please act quickly."

Patrick left the Ministry of Justice. Before departing, he made a point of instructing the kitchen staff to improve Barrett's dinner for the evening with a couple of meat

dishes. Afterward, he personally went to find Carissa and relayed

Barrett's concerns.

Carissa also found Aurora's behavior peculiar. After her capture, Aurora had fixated on implicating Dominic in the matter, which initially seemed like a desperate attempt to shift the blame and avoid the worst punishment. After enduring interrogation and torture, Aurora had been explicitly told that no matter who else she implicated, she would still be handed over to Westhaven. Her persistence no longer made sense.

Hearing Patrick's report, Carissa decided to investigate immediately. Without delay, she made her way to Silverstone Estate.

Chapter 960

Once Carissa arrived at Silverstone Estate, she quickly briefed Zoey on the situation.

Zoey immediately said, "This involves General Sullivan, so not a moment can be wasted. I'll go immediately."

Since Barrett had been taken to the Ministry of Justice, Viola had been on edge. She had even returned to her family for help, hoping they could pull some strings on Barrett's behalf. However, Zoey outright refused.

"This is a matter between kingdoms," Zoey had said. "What could a woman like me possibly do to change anything?"

Still, Zoey had made inquiries. She learned that while Barrett was detained at the Ministry of Justice, he was being given special treatment and hadn't suffered any undue hardship.

Zoey shared this information with Viola, but it did little to calm her. She complained incessantly, saying she had worked so hard to see Barrett appointed as commander of the Nightsteel Guard, only for him to end up in prison because of Aurora. She even blamed Natalie for arranging the marriage and Evelyn for agreeing to it.

Zoey had scolded Viola for her complaints, urging her to show more resilience and take responsibility for her choices.

Faced with Zoey's rare display of anger, Viola hadn't dared to argue further and returned to Valor Estate. Once home, she refused to handle any household affairs and left everything to her father-in-law, Jonathan. Word got out, and it became a source of ridicule for some time.

When Zoey arrived at Valor Estate, her first request was for Viola to bring her all the servant contracts.

Viola frowned and asked why, but Zoey simply replied, "I'm looking for a way to help Barrett."

Viola pressed for more details, but Zoey, looking visibly anxious, brushed her off. "I'll explain later. Just do what I said. Now."

Left with no choice, Viola retrieved the contracts and handed them over before retreating to her room.

Zoey pored over the documents and then summoned the steward to question him about the origins of the household staff, focusing particularly on those who served Aurora. After gathering some initial information, she turned her attention to the gatekeeper and interrogated him about any comings and goings.

She reasoned that whatever was going on likely happened in the past few months, from the time Westhaven's envoys arrived until now. Investigating this window of time would yield the most accurate results. If nothing came to light, she would consider earlier periods. The gatekeeper kept

records of entries and exits, though his diligence was inconsistent. Some entries were missing, but overall, there was a decent log.

After reviewing the logs, Zoey found no significant irregularities. The maids and attendants from the inner household rarely left the estate, except for errands like shopping. As for the male servants, Aurora hadn't employed any in her courtyard for some time. The steward confirmed this. Ever since Aurora survived an assassination attempt, she had forbidden male servants from entering Blessed Haven. Even when heavy items needed to be moved, she insisted on supervising them personally.

Aurora had strict reasons for her precautions—she was genuinely afraid that a strong male servant might smuggle in a weapon and take advantage of a moment of inattention to harm her. Her measures were extreme, but they reflected a deeply ingrained sense of vigilance.

With this in mind, Zoey ruled out the

male servants entirely. If no men were allowed in Blessed Haven, any communication had to rely on the

maids. This added an extra layer

risk—each additional person involved increased the chance of information leaking. With things done in such a thorough manner, it meant any information wouldn't pass through too many

intermediaries.

After questioning the steward, Zoey moved on to interview other household staff, excluding those who worked directly in Blessed Haven. She asked whether anyone had seen the maids or attendants from Blessed Haven leave the estate alone, when they had gone out, and if anyone had noticed them meeting with anyone in particular.

The staff recounted various details from the past few months. Most of it was mundane or irrelevant, but Zoey listened carefully with remarkable patience.

To find anything substantial in a short time, she knew she had to sift through the mountain of trivial anecdotes for one loose thread—something she could pull to unravel the bigger picture.

By nightfall, her persistence paid off.

One of the servants, Jill, recalled an

incident on the day Rebecca passed away. The steward had taken a group of staff out to purchase supplies for the funeral. During this errand a maid from Blessed Haven, Leila, had been seen sharing coffee with a woman she referred to as a good friend from the same

hometown.

Jill had stopped by to greet them, and remembered receiving a small cake from Leila during the encounter. At first glance, it seemed innocent enough. It wasn't unusual for people from the same hometown to catch up over coffee. Even Zoey's maids often took similar breaks during errands.

Rebecca had just passed away, and Leila-a maid from Aurora's trusted circle-had been called out for coffee. Furthermore, during the funeral itself, Aurora, who typically avoided large gatherings, had attended in person to observe mourning rites.

However, given the timing, the incident stood out.

While standing vigil, Aurora had exchanged a few words privately with a visitor who came to pay respects named Paige, or better known as Mrs. Lester. As it happened, Paige's maid was the very same friend who had shared coffee with Leila that day.

Zoey immediately recognized the connection. The Lester family was a merchant household in the capital that happened to be related to Henry's late concubine, Melanie Lester. Zoey had previously looked into the Lester family because of Celeste's trip to the Southern Frontier.

Without hesitation, Zoey ordered Leila to be detained and brought before her for questioning. She dismissed everyone except Jane, insisting on conducting the interrogation alone.