

War Song 961

Chapter 961

Leila had heard that Zoey was investigating the servants in Valor Estate, but she had no idea what it was about. When she was brought in, she wore an expression of complete confusion.

It wasn't until Zoey questioned her about having coffee with a friend from her hometown the day before Rebecca's funeral that Leila realized what was happening.

She quickly dropped to her knees and confessed, "Madam Zoey, that day, the person I had coffee with was a close friend of mine. She's a maid at Lester Estate. She mentioned she'd be returning to our hometown and asked if I had any messages for my family. She also invited me to go shopping for some gifts together..."

Having been questioning for a long time, Zoey grew a bit impatient. She interrupted and asked bluntly, "Did she ask you to pass on any messages to Aurora that day?"

Leila thought for a moment, then replied, "Yes, she asked me to tell Madam Aurora that Mrs. Lester would also be attending Madam Rebecca's funeral."

"Did she give you anything to deliver to Aurora?"

"Yes, she gave me a package of herbal medicine."

"What kind of herbal medicine?"

"I remember it was Moonroot."

"Was there any note or message hidden in the package?"

Leila shook her head. "I don't know. After I relayed the message, Madam Aurora dismissed me right away."

After finishing, she suddenly exclaimed, "Oh! Wait, there might have been something. Later, when I returned to serve her, I noticed some ashes on the ground, like burnt paper."

Zoey asked if there was anything else, but after thinking for a long time, Leila confirmed there wasn't. Zoey then instructed someone to escort Leila out.

Viola had been coming to the side hall repeatedly, asking the servants questions. This time, she arrived just in time to hear Zoey ordering someone to take Leila out.

Viola frowned and asked, "Zoey, what exactly are you investigating? You haven't explained anything to me, yet you've turned the whole household upside down. The servants are all either hiding or slacking off. I can't even get someone to bring me coffee, let alone prepare dinner. It's already late and the kitchen staff hasn't even started cooking!"

Zoey glanced at her and replied coolly, "I'm done questioning. You can handle the servants however you see fit."

With that, she instructed Jane to take Leila along and turned to leave.

"She's a maid from Valor Estate. What are you taking her for?" Viola called out from behind, but Zoey ignored her and hurried off.

Leila was nervous and confused. She had no idea what was going on, but with both Barrett and Aurora arrested, she was terrified.

In the carriage, Zoey said gently to her, "Don't be afraid. I'm taking you to see the Hell Monarch's princess consort, Lady Carissa will just ask you a few questions. Whatever you told me earlier, repeat it to her exactly as you said it."

Leila was relieved when she realized she was being taken to see Carissa.

When Carissa managed Valor Estate in the past, she had never made things difficult for the servants. In fact, she was always generous with rewards and treated them with kindness. She had always been the most gentle and considerate of mistresses.

Once they arrived at Hell Monarch Estate, Leila was introduced to Carissa and Violet. Zoey shared the findings of her investigation.

"I thought you might still have questions for Leila, so I brought her along," Zoey said.

Violet immediately turned to Leila and asked, "The woman you mentioned, Mrs. Lester. Is she Melanie Lester's sister-in-law?"

"Yes, Ms. Spencer," Leila quickly replied. "That's her. My friend serves her as a maid." Noticing the sudden change in Violet's expression, Carissa asked, "What's wrong?"

Violet's face grew serious as she explained, "I didn't mention this to you before because I didn't think it was important, but I learned that earlier this year, when Mrs. Lester and her husband went to the outskirts of the city to pray, their carriage lost control and fell down a hill. Four people died- Mrs. Lester, her husband, the coachman, and a maid."

She glanced at Leila. "I'm not sure if one of them was your friend from the same hometown."

Leila's face paled. "My friend's name is Maeve. But... she said she was going back to our hometown."

"I don't know the maid's name, but you can find out for yourself," Violet replied.

Her heart racing, Leila quickly excused herself to head to Lester Estate in search of her friend. Violet secretly sent someone to follow her.

Seeing that Carissa didn't ask Leila any further questions, Zoey realized that Carissa trusted her investigation and understood that she and Violet would need to discuss the matter privately. Smiling, Zoey said, "If there's nothing more you need from me, I'll return home and have dinner."

Hearing that Zoey hadn't eaten yet, Carissa quickly took her arm. "Please stay and dine here. I'll have someone prepare something for you. I'm sorry you've been delayed and missed your meal." Zoey laughed, "You don't need to be so formal. You all continue with your business. I'll eat later when I get back."

Carissa was about to insist, but Zoey waved her hand dismissively. "No need to insist. There's no rush. Once everything's settled, we can have a meal together later."

Carissa reluctantly nodded. "Alright. Then, let me escort you out."

Chapter 962

After seeing Zoey off, Carissa and Violet returned to the council hall.

Most matters had previously been discussed in the large study, but since Everett had arrived, he insisted that important matters be reported in the council hall. He would remain in the hall from morning until night, listening to everything that was brought before him. Rafael hadn't returned yet even though the negotiations had concluded hours ago. It was likely that he was still in discussion with the delegation about tomorrow's talks.

Once Carissa finished reporting the day's findings to Everett, he gave a conclusion everyone was already aware of.

"It's a case of silencing witnesses-tracing the killer leads nowhere."

Kyle spoke up, his voice thoughtful, "Sir, is it possible that Aurora never had to speak with the Westhaven people at all? That someone else already reached out to them and is just focusing all the blame on Dominic?" "But Harvey has already fled," Carissa replied. "I doubt Leroy would trust him now."

Kyle looked at her, his expression tense. "But what if it's not Harvey and Leroy? Yes, it's obvious that they were targeting you. However, that person has been planning for years, which indicates he has a complex mind. What if he was hiding some other plan that's targeted at your grandfather?"

The analysis hit home, and Carissa had to admit there was a chance.

After all, Yuvan was a man who had been playing the long game.

Also, Aurora had likely been planning her escape for some time. She probably wanted to run, but the king had placed people to watch her movements, something she must have known. On top of that, after all the failed assassination attempts, she would have been terrified of leaving Valor Estate, fearing another attack.

So, she had stayed put, enduring in Valor Estate until the Ministry of Justice came for her. When they did, she called Barrett back, asking for his help to escape. But that plan had failed as well.

After being captured, her testimony focused solely on implicating Dominic, which was likely what someone had instructed her to do. This was her final chance to avoid the noose.

However, her hand was forced when the Ministry of Justice brought Barrett back to interrogate him. She couldn't let Barrett get caught up in this. If she stuck with her story that Dominic was guilty, Barrett-being the general of the operation-would face even graver consequences. So, she changed her testimony, claiming that it was her own spontaneous decision to orchestrate the massacre of the villagers and murder of the prisoners.

It didn't matter how capable Barrett was. Aurora had protected him because once she was taken by the Westhaven forces, he would be the only person she could rely on.

After some analysis, Violet raised a question, "I'm curious-why did Aurora think Barrett could rescue her with so many Westhaven guards watching?"

Everett turned to Carissa. "If your grandfather were taken by Westhaven, would you try to intercept them?"

"Yes!" Carissa answered without hesitation.

Everett nodded. "So, that was Aurora's plan."

Violet growled, clearly irritated. "That woman's been hiding away in Blessed Haven, probably scheming all sorts of things. But Barrett actually speaking out-now that surprised me."

Surprise aside, Violet's disgust for him remained.

Barrett was always indecisive. He still had a bit of conscience, but his actions were always messy and unclear.

"Let's see how the negotiations go. If Yuvan really has another hidden plan, it will slowly come to light in the next few days," Kyle said.

Carissa nodded. "Alright. While Raf isn't back yet, I'll go visit Mother and Aunt Cindy."

"Don't let them find out about your injury," Violet reminded.

Carissa waved off the concern as she walked out. "It's nothing, just a small scrape. They won't notice."

Everett watched her leave, letting out a soft sigh.

The rare hint of concern in his eyes

didn't go unnoticed by Kyle. He quickly shifted his gaze and said nothing, though moments later, Everett's voice called out from outside, "Get the pot."

Kyle was speechless.

At around nine in the evening, Rafael and Winona arrived almost simultaneously.

Winona had chosen to handle the task of intercepting Harvey's wealth on her own, wanting to avoid Everett's punishment. If she had successfully completed the task but still faced punishment, it wouldn't make sense.

As they approached the council hall, she stopped in her tracks upon seeing Kyle, who was holding a pot over his head. What? Was there no logic to these punishments anymore?

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Rafael shot a glance at Kyle before striding in.

"Sage Everett, why are you making Kyle hold a pot over his head again? With so much going on, I was hoping he could help me out more. If he's always busy being punished, he won't be able to." After hearing that, Everett said, "Then, he's excused from punishment."

Outside, Kyle and Winona realized they had found their support.

Winona stepped in to report, "Sage Everett, we've swapped out all of Harvey's gold and silver for fakes. Now, all the chests are filled with stones."

"I see. Have they discovered it?"

"When they stopped to rest in a small grove, we knocked them out. When they wake up, they might inspect the chests and will likely figure it out," she answered.

"Did you send anyone to keep following them?"

Winona wanted to roll her eyes. Was that really a question? Of course she had sent someone. She wasn't a rookie. After all, she was the one who founded Skywing Spire!

But since Kyle was still out there holding a pot over his head, she didn't dare be too bold. She replied respectfully, "Rest assured, sir, I've already sent someone."

Carissa and Violet heard that Rafael had returned, and hurried over to ask about the negotiations.

Everett's face darkened. "He's been so busy, he probably hasn't had a bite to eat. Isn't there hot food in the kitchen? Have it brought out."

Seeing Everett's stern face, Carissa immediately turned and left.

Everett turned to Rafael. "You treat her like she's the world to you, but how does she treat you? She doesn't even care about your food or drink." Rafael chuckled. "I ate at the Diplomatic Affairs Department earlier. Carissa's just focused on the negotiations. Please stop getting upset with them." Kyle and Winona mentally applauded.

Seeing his apprentice acting so indulgent, Everett sighed softly. How could Rafael plead for mercy if he didn't punish them? And if Rafael didn't plead for them, how would they realize how important his apprentice was? Though they were all apprentices of the Pathfinders Guild, the others had the advantage of numbers, while Rafael was alone. If any issues arose between Rafael and Carissa, the guild members would surely side with Carissa. Wouldn't that put Rafael at a disadvantage?

Unaware that his mentor had already been worrying this much, Rafael removed his cloak and sat down. He listened intently as they explained the investigation Zoey had helped with.

After a moment of silence, Rafael said, "Once Grandfather finds out, it'll probably ease his mind a bit. At least his genuine efforts won't have gone to waste."

What they feared most was getting betrayed by a treacherous one of their own. Barrett's past actions had already hurt them deeply. What was done couldn't be undone, but this would at least make them feel a little better.

"That's all secondary," Everett said.

"Pay close attention to tomorrow's negotiations. Figure out who's colluding with Yuvan. We don't know his plan, so we can't develop a counter strategy. For now, we'll have to rely on some underhanded tactics. Winona will handle those.

She's good at that."

Winona glanced at Rafael and said, "Do you think it's appropriate to use such tricks from the martial arts world for such important state affairs? I doubt my guild junior will agree."

Before Rafael could respond, Everett cut in, "What's the problem with that? If they play dirty and we always try to be honorable, we'd be at a huge disadvantage."

He scoffed, then continued, "We

know exactly what they're up to

behind closed doors. Going forward, we'll use that knowledge to guide our actions. For anyone like

that sneaky and impossible to pin down-we'll use whatever methods are necessary."

Rafael agreed. There were things that, even when known, were hard to prove. And even if proof was found no one would have the authority to act on it. Besides, this wasn't about who had the power to decide Anything that disrupted the normal flow of negotiations would be removed.

Chapter 964

After Rafael had eaten a little of the hot food, they began discussing the day's negotiations.

Carissa sat beside him, clearly taking advantage of her position. At least when she spoke out of turn or disagreed with Everett, she wouldn't receive the cold shoulder since she was sitting right next to Rafael. "Has the king heard their terms? What did he say about it?" Jacob asked.

"Davis reported to him. When he returned to the Diplomatic Affairs Department, he relayed the king's stance. The borderline can't be compromised, but everything else is open for negotiation. We're not bound to the conditions they've proposed. We can offer alternative compensation. That's the king's directive."

Everett thought for a moment before speaking, "Not yielding on the borderline means forcing Westhaven to acknowledge the treaty Aurora signed. If they deem the treaty invalid, the borderline should revert to the previous one. But the border dispute has been going on for years. Considering they took advantage of Starhaven's chaos to invade, this situation is complicated."

Rafael nodded. "The matter discussed tonight at the Diplomatic Affairs Department was exactly that the borderline. We know it's impossible to get Westhaven to recognize Aurora's treaty, and we're not thrilled with it either. But if we push back the borderline, the people will likely rebel and turn Aurora into a hero. How can a person so stained with guilt be considered a hero?"

"It's indeed a tricky issue," Everett said.

He didn't have a perfect solution for it, either. But then again, how could there ever be a perfect solution for such matters?

"We've already compiled the border maps from the time of our ancestors and the original agreements between the two kingdoms. We hope to convince Westhaven to accept those agreements in place of the one Aurora signed. We never agreed with their invasion, so there was never a new border agreement," Rafael said.

"That's not going to be easy," Carissa commented.

"Of course it's not easy," Everett replied flatly. "If it were, would the king have sent him? He'd have given up the credit for nothing."

Carissa fell silent, realizing her comment was met with more of a lecture than she had expected. Anyway, she had no new insights to offer.

Jacob furrowed his brow, clearly troubled. "We can't fight, we can't retreat, and we're in the wrong. This situation is already hard enough to manage, but we still have to deal with it. How do we find a breakthrough?"

Everett glanced at Rafael, who looked a little weary. "Go get some rest. Tomorrow's negotiations are crucial."

Carissa immediately stood up. "Yes, go take a hot bath. You'll sleep better."

"Everyone should disperse and get settled for the night," Rafael said as he rose, bowing respectfully to Everett before taking Carissa's hand and leaving.

The next day's negotiations brought no breakthroughs. Both sides remained firmly focused on their core interests, unwilling to compromise.

Leroy hardly spoke at all today,

clearly having been reprimanded by Lisandra when they returned the previous evening. On the other hand, Garrick was more vocal. However, he never mentioned Dominic, so Rafael just paid attention but didn't jump to conclusions about him.

On the third day of talks, Garrick's demeanor didn't change. He didn't bring up Dominic, and both sides remained deadlocked, unwilling to yield an inch.

But by the afternoon, Lisandra suddenly became ill. She clutched her head as waves of nausea swept over her. Her face turned pale and she was drenched in cold sweat.

Although they had brought along a royal physician and supplies, Rafael still asked, "Would you like us to call for a physician from Starhaven?"

Lisandra declined, explaining, "This headache has been a chronic condition for years. The royal physician I brought with me understands my condition better and knows how to treat it." However, it seemed likely that the negotiations would need to be postponed by a day.

Rafael nodded. "Then, we'll delay by a day and resume once Her Highness has recovered."

Michael, who was responsible for security outside Concord Lodge, had been leading the guards. For now, the Capital Guard was under

Alistair's command. After several

days of hard work, Michael was

exhausted. Carissa went to relieve

him that evening so he could rest while she took up watch.

Alistair could have handled it, but Carissa didn't trust him-his loose tongue was a risk. With the Westhaven envoys here, Violet hadn't been teaching, so she came to keep Carissa company.

The exits of Concord Lodge were all guarded. While they wouldn't stop the Westhaven people from coming and going, the guards had to be alert in case of any assassination attempts.

The Capital Guard didn't enter unless there was a special reason. Westhaven had their own guards and had taken residence inside. For now, Concord Lodge effectively belonged to Westhaven.

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Although it was already late February and the weather had warmed considerably, sitting by the entrance with no shelter still felt a bit chilly.

The small guardhouse at the entrance of Concord Lodge was available for their use. Inside, there was a brazier for heating water. Seeing that Violet wasn't dressed warmly enough, Carissa led her into the guardhouse to sit and drink coffee. "You don't need to stay with me tonight," Carissa said as she poured the coffee. "I'll be fine here."

Violet blew on the dark liquid's surface. "It's no trouble. I'll stay with you. It's a good chance to let Claire and the others rest. I'll keep an eye on things."

Claire and the others were watching the comings and goings of the Westhaven people, observing where they went and who they interacted with.

Lisandra and the officials didn't leave Concord Lodge much, but there were plenty of others in the group. With all the information Barrett and Zoey had gathered, if there really was another hidden plan, Yuvan's people might still try to make contact with Westhaven. "By the way, I overheard Jacob when I left." Violet glanced at Carissa. "He said that Prince Rafael plans to visit the Ministry of Justice tomorrow to see Barrett."

Carissa nodded. "I know."

"Is it necessary for him to meet Barrett? He should have already said everything he knows."

"He hasn't mentioned the route Aurora plans to use when she escapes."

"Is that important? She's not getting away. She planned the route, not Yuvan. Asking about that now seems unnecessary."

Carissa tapped Violet playfully on the forehead, smiling. "Raf just needs an excuse to talk to Barrett again and see if he can uncover anything useful. At least we'll know who he's dealing with. This person is hiding too well-if they slip up only at the end of negotiations, it'll be too late to act."

Violet understood at once. "You're right. Three days of talks and no mistakes yet. It's time to think of another way."

At the Ministry of Justice, Barrett didn't expect the Hell Monarch to come looking for him personally. When he heard that a Ministry of Justice official, Lonnie, had come to fetch him, he stood there stunned for a moment. Then, he asked somewhat stiffly, "Why would he be coming to see me?"

"His Highness didn't say. He just asked me to bring you. You should go quickly. Don't keep him waiting," Lonnie replied.

Barrett didn't know why, but a sense of unease settled in his chest. "Was it just him? Were there any other officials? Was Mr. Lloyd present?"

"No, it was only His Highness," Lonnie replied.

Barrett nodded absent-mindedly, but didn't get up. "What about the matter I asked Mr. Lloyd to investigate? Did he look into it? What did he find?" Lonnie's expression didn't change. "I'm not sure what you had Mr. Lloyd investigate."

Seeing the man's indifferent attitude, Barrett didn't press further. He stood and followed Lonnie.

Before entering the side hall, Barrett took a deep breath. Then, he walked inside with heavy steps.

When he was the Crown Guard

commander or the Nightsteel Guard

commander, he had met Rafael.

Even then, he had felt inferior in the latter's presence. Now, in his current sorry state, imprisoned and in

despair, that sense of inferiority only

grew.

He didn't know if Rafael would purposely make things difficult for him, but what did it matter? In his position now, he was already someone to be looked down upon. Upon entering the side hall, Barrett saw Rafael.

The prince looked every bit the regal

figure as he sat in a carved,

round-backed chair. His posture was straight, unwavering. For some reason, the sight of the Hell

Monarch's strong and dignified form made Barrett recall a moment from the past-when he had returned from Victory Pass and gone to

Grace Mansion to see Carissa,

telling her he intended to marry

Aurora as his rightful wife.

At that time, she had sat just like this on a chair. However, she looked far more slender and fragile. The memory stirred something in his heart, a mix of emotions too complex to name.

He collected himself, cleared his throat, and approached to bow. "Greetings, Your Highness."

Rafael glanced up. "Sit."

Barrett froze for a moment.

Sit? He was being asked to sit? Wasn't he about to be questioned? Even if it wasn't an intentional slight, considering his status as a criminal, just being allowed to stand and respond was already an act of

mercy.

And yet, here he was being told to sit.

Rafael looked up at him and frowned. "Sit down. I have questions for you. There's no need for these formalities."

Barrett blinked, then quietly sat across from the Hell Monarch.

Chapter 966

Rafael first shared the results of Zoey's investigation with Barrett, giving him a clear conclusion.

"It's pretty much confirmed that the people behind this used the Lester family to contact Aurora. They had a maid inform her and got her to show up at your mom's funeral. Afterward, Mrs. Lester went to offer her condolences, which gave her the opportunity to speak with Aurora privately. Once she did, both she and her husband were silenced."

Barrett was stunned beyond words. "Is that truly the case?"

Rafael didn't hesitate. "I'll be straightforward with you. While investigating Eleanor's treason case, the Supreme Court found links to the Lester family. However, we didn't have enough evidence, so we never moved against them. Mrs. Lester's involvement with Aurora indicates that the people behind her are the same as Eleanor's conspirators-the true masterminds behind the treason."

Rafael's gaze grew heavier. "Aurora is involved in this case, and she will be taken to Westhaven. However, you're her husband. Once the truth of the treason is uncovered, what will happen to you and your family? You know exactly what that means."

Barrett's lips trembled slightly. He had served in court before and knew full well how seriously Salvador took this treason case. It was why Salvador was so furious. It was a dagger that stabbed deep into the king's heart. When the time came, anyone even remotely tied to it would never escape the reckoning.

"Barrett, there's no other choice for you. You'll need to earn merit if you want to avoid punishment."

Merit and punishment.

It was those words again.

The pressure of those words felt like a heavy hand clutching at Barrett's heart, squeezing the breath from his lungs. One decision had shattered everything-his family's peace and his own. He clenched his teeth, fighting the rising frustration. "Your Highness, just tell me what to do. I'll do it."

Rafael watched him for a long moment, then said, "Go to Aurora and ask her if Mrs. Lester mentioned anyone from Westhaven. As for how to ask, what techniques to use, whether you'll get anything out of her-well, that depends on your ability." Barrett was silent for a long time before replying, "Understood."

This was a matter of life and death for his entire family. There was no question of whether he would go. Whether he would get answers was another matter, but at least by asking, he could try to clear his name.

Barrett wasn't sure if this would clear his name, but at this point, he had no other options.

He took his leave, and was led by Lonnie to Aurora's prison cell.

When Aurora saw him walk in again, a wave of caution washed over her. She understood the situation-after all, they were both prisoners. Even though Barrett was under special detention, a visit had to be authorized by the Minister of

Justice.

Yet, despite her wariness, Aurora knew Barrett well. He wasn't one for scheming, and his lies were far from convincing. If there was something unusual, she'd be able to sense it immediately.

Barrett sat on the foul-smelling

straw bed. With spring in the air, the

dampness was unbearable, and the stench in the cell had only grown worse since his last visit. Aurora herself carried the same foul odor, and her disheveled hair seemed to teem with fleas. Her face was swollen from flea bites, and some of

them were broken open and

bleeding from scratching.

Seeing her in such a condition tugged at Barrett's heart. No matter the circumstances, they had once been husband and wife. The sight of her suffering made him feel a pang of discomfort. The sympathy on his face made Aurora drop her guard just a little.

"Did they send you to see me?" she asked.

Barrett shook his head. "I begged to come. His Majesty showed mercy, and I'll be released tomorrow."

Aurora blinked in surprise. "The negotiations are over? Have you been reinstated?"

The mention of his official post struck a sore spot in Barrett. His heart sank with a hollow, disappointed gaze, he said, "Not yet, but His Majesty has issued an edict that allows me to return home and reflect on my actions."

Aurora studied his expression closely and felt that his words held no lies.

"If you're leaving, then you have to remember what I told you," she said, her voice softening considerably.

Chapter 967

Barrett's eyes instinctively flickered toward the door. It wasn't something he did on purpose. He simply felt uneasy, as if everything he was doing was underhanded. Because of that, he couldn't help but act cautiously. This nervous, furtive behavior only lowered Aurora's guard even further. In front of her, this man was as transparent as glass-what was there to fear?

"The thing you mentioned that day..." Barrett's voice was barely above a whisper. He avoided looking directly at her. "I've thought about it a lot since then. I can't help but feel the chances are slim. And you never said how you would ensure the Westhaven envoys will take General Sullivan. Without that certainty, I can't be sure the people of Hell Monarch Estate will intervene, and whether we'll get the right chance at all."

His voice was very low, and his gaze towards Aurora was somewhat evasive. He still cared for her as his wife, and asking her questions like this felt like he was betraying her. He felt deeply troubled, but in order to keep the Warren family safe, he had no choice but to act this way.

Aurora frowned. "If I said it will happen, it will. What are you worried about? You can leave, so just prepare yourself."

"You make it sound easy. How am I supposed to save you by myself? Don't I need more people and some money to make it happen? But if there's no guarantee, how can I justify spending that money? Don't call me stingy. You know the situation at the estate." The mention of their estate's troubles made Barrett sigh deeply.

"More people?" Aurora's voice turned sharp. "What kind of people can you find? You can't just pick anyone for this kind of thing."

Finding people would be too risky.

"You just need to take advantage of the situation while they're rescuing Dominic. Your martial arts skills are enough," she added.

"Don't blame me for being heartless," Barrett said. "I can't rescue you directly. I can only help from the outside. I'm willing to take risks for you, but I can't put my own life at stake."

Aurora's expression suddenly changed. "You... Are you really that cold-hearted and ruthless?"

"Your life matters, but mine doesn't?" Barrett couldn't help but feel a flash of resentment. "His Majesty has pardoned me. If I reflect on my actions and keep to myself, I can still find a way out. But if I try to save you, sacrifice my future and my position. All I will be able to hope for is a chance to keep my life. The truth is, this isn't my fault. Helping you is a kindness, not an obligation. If you can't accept that, then we're done here."

Aurora's laugh was cold, almost mocking. "You're such a spineless coward! We're husband and wife, and we've been through a lot. How can you just stand by and watch me suffer?" Barrett's temper flared. He hated being called a spineless coward, and his face darkened. "If you keep talking like that, I'll walk out right now."

Aurora's anger flared, but she reached out and pulled him back. "Who are you thinking of asking for help? I need to know if they're reliable."

Barrett explained, "When I was with

the Capital Guard, I met a few down-and-out men from the martial world. They're skilled fighters, but

their pride won't let them accept

orders from just about anyone. They prefer taking dangerous jobs, even if it means their life is on the line. If the pay's good enough, they do it.

"I'm thinking of gathering seven or eight of them. The amount of money

I need won't be small, though. If

you're not sure about this plan, I can't waste the money. I need you to tell me how confident you are, we've been thinking it over and I just can't believe you'll be able to convince Westhaven to take General Sullivan without something more than just your words."

Aurora gave him a cold, calculating look. "Why would you need to know the details? You just have to trust me. If I say I can handle it, I will."

Barrett shook his head, doubt clouding his eyes. "I can't take that gamble. You want me to spend all that money and risk my future based on nothing but your word? You know the situation at the estate. We've lost everything. We don't have money and my mom's belongings have been sold off. I'll have to borrow from Viola."

A red flush of shame appeared on his face as he spoke, and he continued bitterly, "I don't have a good relationship with her. Borrowing from her means I'll have to lower myself, and you can imagine how difficult that is for me."

Then, it seemed like he suddenly remembered something.

"Don't you have any savings? How much do you have? If you can contribute, I won't have to borrow from her and deal with her attitude."

Chapter 968

Aurora pursed her lips.

She did have some money saved up. No matter who managed the household, her portion was non-negotiable. As for the bride price, she had kept some of it for herself there was no way she would have given it all to the Warrens! The small dowry she had been given wouldn't have been enough to live on, and she would never agree to the marriage without some savings of her own.

However, the money she had saved was meant for the future.

"You can take it if you need it, but you have to borrow what's necessary. After I escape, I'll be alone and without any support. I can't be left without money. You can't expect me to wander the streets and starve in the cold," she said.

Barrett steered the conversation toward money as he knew it was better to discuss that first. Otherwise, pressing for too much information would make him seem too forceful and arouse Aurora's suspicions.

"How much do you have? I'll look at it, leave you some, and use the rest to hire people. If it's not enough, I'll borrow from Viola," he suggested.

Aurora pondered. She knew that relying on Viola for a large sum might not work. Though Viola was from a noble family, the woman was stingy and frugal.

"I have two to three thousand silver coins, but you can only take one thousand," she said.

Barrett tried to ask for two thousand. After some back-and-forth, they settled on one thousand five hundred.

With the money settled, Barrett naturally needed to know what cards Aurora had up her sleeve. She had to tell him, or he wasn't willing to take the risk. This was a matter of his future, maybe even his life. If he didn't feel secure, he couldn't agree. Aurora watched him for a long moment before suddenly asking, "Barrett, you're not trying to sell me out, right?"

Barrett's thoughts hadn't fully shifted away from the bargaining. He wasn't the sharpest and his emotional responses were often slow. After all the bargaining, it almost seemed like he truly believed he was planning for her.

So, when he heard her question, he looked up in surprise, his tone filled with anger and grievance as he replied, "What did you say? If you don't trust me, why would you entrust me with something so important? I'm putting my life and future on the line, and you still doubt me?"

Aurora might have understood Barrett, but the truth was, she didn't understand men. Lying was second nature to them and they had a knack for it.

Human nature was complex and ever-changing, and that included her own. When it came to Barrett, she always saw him through a simplistic lens and thought she had him figured out. Her caution, sensitivity, and suspicion often blinded her to the truth, leaving her unable to see through the man she believed she understood so well.

On top of that, Barrett was her last hope. Deep down, she still believed that he had feelings for her.

After a long silence, she said, "Don't worry. The remnants of Eleanor's faction are colluding with a female official at Grand Princess Lisandra's side. She can ensure that nothing goes wrong."

Barrett looked at her in shock. "A female official at Grand Princess Lisandra's side? Are you saying that Grand Princess Lisandra has joined forces with Eleanor's faction?!"

"No, not Grand Princess Lisandra,

but a female official at her side." Aurora decided to just come clean. "When Mrs. Lester came to see me during your mom's funeral, she told me this. She insisted I hold onto Dominic because if he gets captured by Westhaven, Victory Pass will fall."

"That doesn't add up." Barrett thought carefully. "If they told you Westhaven wants General Sullivan, then even if the Hell Monarch's people try to rescue him, it's unlikely to succeed."

"Naturally," Aurora replied, "most of

the troops will be focused on guarding Dominic. If the king agrees to Westhaven's request but the Hell Monarch's people try to rescue him, that would be going against military orders and violating the treaty made after the two kingdoms' negotiations."

Her eyes were filled with a chilling certainty, as though she could already foresee Carissa's fate.

"In that case, whether they succeed or fail, the king will punish them."

She leaned in even closer to Barrett, her voice dropping to a near whisper, "When the chaos hits, you'll have a better chance of saving me. The odds will be much more in your favor."

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Barrett still couldn't bring himself to believe it.

"Grand Princess Lisandra is against the war," he said. "If a female official around her is doing this, wouldn't it go completely against her stance? There's no way she'd agree to it."

Aurora let out a cold laugh. "It seems she may not have a choice in the matter."

Barrett was shocked. "What do you mean? Are they trying to undermine Grand Princess Lisandra?"

Aurora's expression hardened. "How should I know? That's what Mrs. Lester told me, but she didn't go into detail. I don't even know the identity of the female official! I didn't believe her at first, which is why I asked so many questions. But she promised that if I cooperated, they'd help me escape when the time came. Because of you, I didn't press the issue with Dominic. They may not care about me anymore. However, no matter what I confess, I'm afraid their plan will go forward regardless. That means I still have a chance."

After the initial shock, Barrett looked at her intently. "You didn't change your confession because of me. You know they can't be trusted, and you're worried they'll turn on you once they've used you. That's why you're turning to me. Don't say you're doing this for my sake. You still want me to pay the price. I'll be taking as much money as I need, or I can't help you."

Aurora didn't feel guilty at all, even when he saw through her. "This is something you owe me, Barrett. Nothing in this world is free. You started this, so you have to take responsibility."

Barrett felt a coldness settle in his chest. "Did I start this? Didn't I take responsibility? When you were captured on the Southern Frontier battlefield, I defied Carissa's orders multiple times to save you. I even took the punishment meant for you. How can you be so shameless?"

Aurora's expression turned cold. "Don't bring up the past! This is all your doing, not mine. I never forced you into anything. You chose to be with me. You gave up your military merits to marry me, even abandoning Carissa. Everything you did was your own choice. Don't try to act so wronged. If you didn't want it, no one could've forced you."

Barrett was beyond furious, but he was no good at arguing. He always ended up losing when he fought with Aurora. So, he fell silent.

He'd asked the questions he needed to ask, and now he simply said, "Fine. Just wait."

After he left, Barrett immediately relayed everything about his conversation with Aurora to Rafael.

Rafael listened, his expression puzzled.

A female official? Why was it a female official?

The path to becoming a female official in Westhaven was incredibly difficult. It was only with Lisandra's support that they managed to stay afloat. Without her, the selection process every three years might not even continue. To so blatantly betray Lisandra-wasn't that cutting off all of one's future prospects?

"Do you think she was telling the truth? Was she lying?" Rafael asked.

Barrett thought for a moment, but didn't dare to be sure. "I don't know. I can't tell when she's lying."

Rafael gave Barrett a look, his gaze unreadable.

No wonder Salvador liked using Barrett! This man couldn't even understand the woman beside him, let alone dare to guess the king's intentions or do anything inappropriate. Someone like him was perfect for being a scapegoat. "Did she say a female official or a maid?" Rafael asked, wanting clarification.

There were only three female officials who had come this time. It wouldn't be hard to investigate them. But if it was a maid, that would be much more difficult.

"She said it was a female official, but..." Barrett hesitated, unsure if the Hell Monarch wanted his opinion.

"Go ahead," Rafael urged, growing impatient with Barrett's hesitation.

Barrett took a deep breath. "But I

don't think it's a female official. I know the situation in

Westhaven-female officials rely on Grand Princess Lisandra's power to maintain their positions. If she's sidelined, it wouldn't benefit them."

He felt like he had made a sharp observation, but little did he know, Rafael had already thought of that and perhaps even deeper. The female official idea wasn't impossible. Lisandra's power was waning, and the female officials might not be able to rely on her for much longer.

Rafael stood up. "Good. Thank you for your input."

Barrett watched Rafael's retreating figure.

Was that... an acknowledgment?

Chapter 970

Rafael quickly returned to Hell Monarch Estate and made his way to the council hall, where Everett was already sitting in the main seat, waiting for reports. Rafael instructed Jacob to gather information on the three female officials who had arrived this time. It was crucial to examine the details thoroughly.

At Concord Lodge, Violet had drunk a lot of coffee and was beginning to feel uncomfortable. She excused herself and told the Westhaven guards stationed there to wait as she went to the inner chamber. Carissa also stood up to accompany her. A maid who spoke Stellish was called over, and they were escorted toward the inner chamber. As they passed by the main courtyard of Concord Lodge, they noticed that the place was brightly lit. Sounds of an argument could be heard from within. Carissa took a quick look and saw that most of the envoys were present, as well as the female officials from Lisandra's side. There were easily a dozen or twenty people inside, arguing. Their voices weren't loud, but some looked solemn, while others were clearly angry. Carissa only understood a few phrases in Westic, so she couldn't catch the full meaning of the argument, but she very clearly heard the words "danger" and "very dangerous."

She stopped, trying to listen further, but the maid urged her forward. Carissa and Violet continued toward the inner chamber, gradually distancing themselves from the main courtyard, where the sounds of the dispute faded.

They exchanged a look, both of them filled with uncertainty. This didn't seem like a discussion about the upcoming negotiations. Lisandra wasn't present, and there were guards and maids around. One of them even wore the hat of a medical officer.

By the light of the passing lanterns, Carissa stole a glance at the maid, who had clearly just been brought out from the main courtyard. Her expression was one of quiet anxiety.

Carissa thought back to Lisandra's condition. She had heard that Lisandra had been vomiting during the negotiations earlier today, and wondered if the grand princess' condition had worsened.

Carissa turned to the maid leading them and asked, "Has Grand Princess Lisandra gotten any better? If not, we have a physician in the capital named Sebastian who—"

Before Carissa could finish, the maid's eyes brightened. "Sebastian Dalton? The renowned physician? Is he in the capital?"

"Yes, he's in the capital," Carissa replied, sensing that Lisandra's headache had likely intensified. "Should we send someone to invite him to check on Grand Princess Lisandra?"

The maid hesitated for a moment before shaking her head. "No need, Your Grace. Her Highness has taken medicine and is already feeling much better."

"Is she truly feeling better?"

Carissa couldn't help but grow suspicious. Upon mentioning Sebastian, she had seen the maid's eyes light up. But when she talked about Lisandra feeling better, her gaze seemed to flicker and avoid meeting Carissa's. "Yes, Your Grace. Please hurry along. I must return to attend to the grand princess," the maid urged.

Carissa had originally only accompanied Violet, so whether she went or stayed didn't matter much. She motioned for Violet to continue ahead and lingered behind.

She said to the maid, "You're one of Grand Princess Lisandra's personal attendants, right? You've brought medicine with you on this trip,

haven't you? If you're missing annet

ingredients, you can tell us and we'll send someone to fetch them right away. You can trust us—we want nothing more than for Her Highness to recover her health."

The maid nodded but didn't speak much further, her expression still wary.

Seeing this, Carissa didn't press her and instead chatted casually, asking, "What's your name? How long have you been serving Grand Princess Lisandra?"

"My name is Aria," the maid answered. "I've served Her Highness since I was 11. It's been 12 years now."

"I never would've guessed you were 23. I thought you were only 17 or 18. Your name is lovely," Carissa complimented with a smile.

"Her Highness chose my name," Aria replied softly.

"I see." Carissa noticed Aria kept glancing toward the inner chamber, as though she were anxious to return. "Aren't you supposed to be attending to Her Highness? Is she settled?"

"Her Highness... is settled." Aria hesitated before continuing, "Um... You mentioned Mr. Dalton just now, Your Grace. Is he difficult to call on?"

"It depends on who's calling on him."

Carissa was now more certain than ever that Lisandra's condition hadn't improved. She recalled hearing bits and pieces of the argument about "danger" and "very dangerous". She wondered if it was referring

Lisandra's condition.

Furrowing her brows, she said seriously, "Aria, tell me. Has Her Highness truly gotten better? Is her condition dangerous? You're her personal attendant, and you must know that we would never wish her harm." Suddenly, tears welled up in Aria's almond-shaped eyes.

"Your Grace," she cried, "Her

Highness fainted after having a fit. The royal physician we brought said there may be a tumor in her brain, which is very dangerous. They're arguing about whether to summon a Starhaven physician to examine her."