

BACKUP GIRL NO MORE: ADIOS TO MY V-CARD AND MY FIRST LOVE

Backup Girl No More

Backup Girl No More Chapter 31

Released on February 6, 2025

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Though our demanding work left little time for each other. Most of our encounters occurred in conflict zones—he'd be rushing to treat the wounded while I fought to save lives in the operating room. Often, a brief touch as we passed was all we could share.

The unreliable network coverage didn't help. Days would pass without contact, then suddenly my phone would buzz incessantly with an avalanche of messages. They arrived jumbled and chaotic, as if they too had navigated through gunfire and devastation, yet each carried the weight of longing and unwavering devotion.

The situation in East Meridian Province deteriorated rapidly.

Our first serious argument erupted when a village near Meridia came under attack. We arrived while the militants were still active, with security forces engaged in ongoing firefights.

We were rushing back to evacuate when Joseph suddenly leaped from the ambulance. At the battlefield's edge lay a fallen villager. Joseph hoisted the man onto his back and carried him to safety, his own body lacerated by shrapnel.

Terror and fury coursed through me. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

He stood firm. "I'm a doctor! I couldn't leave him there! His leg injury was survivable—if I hadn't acted, he would have died for certain!"

I knew he was right. I knew it was his duty. But when he returned drenched in blood—so much I couldn't distinguish his from the victim's—my composure shattered.

After confirming with trembling hands that his wounds were superficial, I broke down, clinging to him as I sobbed.

“Joseph! I can’t lose anyone else! If something happened to you, what would I do?”

He held me in silence before wrapping his arms around me, his voice raw. “I’m sorry... I promise to be more careful. No more unnecessary risks. No more making you worry.”

Still crying, I pressed my face against his chest. “You have to promise!”

“Let’s make it official,” he said, extending his pinky. “Pinky swear—whoever breaks it turns into a puppy!”

I couldn’t help but laugh through my tears. “If you really turned into a puppy, how would I introduce

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you to my mother?”

“Your puppy boyfriend?” he teased with a grin.

I hurled a pillow at him in exasperation. He played dead, lying motionless until I frantically pulled the pillow away to find his face unmarked, wearing that sly smile. His expression seemed to say: See? I’m not so easy to break.

I glared until my vision blurred with fresh tears. In that moment, I realized how precious each day with Joseph truly was.

As the conflict intensified, Ebola began its merciless sweep through this already ravaged land. By spring, Joseph’s schedule grew even more demanding. With medical staff severely depleted, he shuttled between refugee camps and the Ebola treatment center.

When armed groups launched surprise attacks on treatment centers across several cities, many doctors were forced to evacuate. But Joseph refused to leave. While Meridia remained relatively stable, nearly a hundred patients lay in the center. Abandoning them meant leaving them to die in their beds.

Joseph and four other doctors chose to stay and adapt as events unfolded. But the situation deteriorated rapidly. Armed groups seized the outskirts of Meridia, cutting off all escape routes. We

were trapped.

Amid this tension, Joseph suddenly messaged me to come to the treatment center. He offered no explanation, but dread settled in my stomach.

After donning protective gear, we entered the medical waste disposal area. In a hastily cleared room, I found a group of Huronai children—more than ten of them. They had fled from the mountains, the eldest no more than twelve.

Their clothes hung in tatters, their bodies riddled with infected wounds. I could hardly believe my eyes.

The armed groups controlling the outskirts were Tusari, locked in a generations—old blood feud with the Huronais. If these children were discovered, not only would they face certain death, but the entire treatment center could be destroyed.

Overwhelmed, I shouted at Joseph: “Have you lost your mind? What about the principles of Doctors

Without Borders?”

He wasn’t supposed to involve himself directly in the conflict. Only through neutrality could he help the most people.

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He hung his head, speaking softly. “I know it’s dangerous. That’s why I need your help finding an organization that can shelter these children.”

“How will you get them past the patrols?” I asked, nearly despairing.

Joseph’s words tumbled out rapidly: “They’re small enough to hide in protective suits inside medical waste bins. The disposal trucks come every three days, and no one inspects those bins. If someone’s waiting to receive them on the other side, we can save their lives!”

The audacity of his plan left me speechless.

He clenched his fists, his voice filled with conviction: “Zoey, I am a human being first, a doctor second, and a member of Doctors Without Borders last. I cannot stand by and watch these children

be thrown away to die!”

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My mind was in turmoil, reason and emotion waging war as the children silently watched our heated exchange. Despair filled their eyes. The youngest huddled together, tiny hands clasped tightly, as if awaiting fate's final verdict.

My heart melted at the sight. They had already fought so hard to escape hell—we couldn't send them

back.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I spoke quietly: "I'll help you. But I won't just find someone to

take them. I'm staying here until they're all safely out."

Joseph froze, then shook his head vigorously. "No, it's too dangerous!"

I met his gaze, my voice firm. "And let you face this danger alone? If you don't agree, I'll walk out

right now and tell them about the Huronai children you're hiding."

He glared at me through gritted teeth. "... You! I never should have involved you!"

"Too late." I shrugged. "You've already pulled me into this."

Joseph turned away angrily, refusing to look at me. I sighed, stepped closer, and wrapped my arms around his neck, forcing him to meet my eyes.

"At least in the worst case, we can die together."

He exploded. "Don't say that! That's not going to happen!"

Through the clear visor of his protective suit, I touched his face gently. "Of course not. After all, you promised—we still have to visit my mother."

I had to admit, Joseph's plan was nearly perfect. No one would dare touch bins containing Ebola-contaminated waste, let alone suspect they concealed people. We could smuggle out two children per trip. The truck would stop midway, where aid workers would transfer them to safety.

After two weeks, only two remained—siblings named Ray and Mary.

The day of their planned escape, Joseph was elated. He looked at me with sincere gratitude.
“Thank you, Zoey.”

I didn't respond, just squeezed his hand tightly.

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Victory felt within reach. We even celebrated early. The children performed Igamara, a traditional Huronai dance, while Joseph prepared what could almost be called a feast. I captured everything on

camera.

As night fell, the siblings began donning their protective suits. Mary held out a marker, asking softly,

“Could you write your names on them?”

Joseph and I exchanged surprised glances but agreed. I thought for a moment before adding beneath my name: “Grow up strong and well.”

Joseph wrote: “May you reunite with your family.”

I added: “May peace come soon.”

He followed with: “Until we meet again.”

We covered their suits with blessings until everyone's eyes brimmed with tears. The siblings embraced us, their voices muffled inside their suits: “We'll remember you forever! Thank you! You're our heroes!”

Late that night, the transport truck arrived on schedule. As usual, we settled the children into the waste bins and loaded them aboard.

Just as we finished, gunfire erupted from the center's main hall.

Joseph and I exchanged tense looks before rushing toward the commotion. Armed militants had stormed the center, claiming they had intelligence about hidden Huronai children.

Joseph stepped forward calmly, maintaining his composure as he cooperated with their search. I followed close behind, watching them kick down doors and ransack rooms, my breath caught in my

throat.

Finding nothing, they hurled threats and prepared to leave. But as the last man reached the door, a

shout rang out: “The truck that just left!”

The militants erupted in curses and stormed out. The final man stopped suddenly, unleashing an enraged roar as he yanked a grenade from his belt and hurled it into the center of the hall.

Time seemed to slow.

I watched the grenade trace its lazy arc downward.

I saw the horror bloom on the other doctors’ faces.

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I saw Joseph’s expression harden with determination as he lunged toward me.

In the instant before detonation, he threw himself over me, pressing me to the ground and shielding

me with his body.

“No!!Joseph!!”I shouted

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For a moment, my hearing vanished—the world plunged into absolute silence. It felt as if a searing giant hand had slammed me into the ground. I coughed up blood, my organs seeming to shift from the impact. Thick smoke filled the air, obscuring everything. Something warm trickled down my face. When I touched it, my palm came away crimson.

The blast had thrown Joseph several feet away. I tried to stand, but my legs wouldn't cooperate. With trembling hands, I crawled toward him, knees scraping against the rough earth. Reaching him, I checked for breath, praying desperately. Thank God—he was still alive.

Gunshots echoed again, faint but drawing closer. Fighting back panic, I hoisted Joseph onto my back

and struggled to my feet. I stumbled forward, but armed men were everywhere, their shadows looming. Forced to change direction, I plunged deeper into the forest.

I lost track of time as I ran. My legs gradually went numb until I could no longer feel them. Finally,

my strength gave out, and I collapsed.

Joseph stirred then, struggling weakly to rise but finding himself unable to move. His voice came faint but urgent. "Zoey... leave me. Go!"

Tears streamed down my face as I sobbed, shaking my head violently. "No! We leave together! Both

of us!"

He grabbed my ankle, his grip weak but insistent. "Go... get help. You can't carry us both out of here."

I broke down completely, crying so hard my chest ached. "Joseph! We made promises! You can't lie

to me! If you die, I'll never forgive you!"

A faint smile tugged at his lips, only to be interrupted by a coughing fit that brought blood to his mouth. "I'm not lying... Liars... become puppies..."

Choking back tears, I forced myself up, helping him lean against a tree. Even as I wiped my face, fresh tears kept falling. He squeezed my hand gently, his gaze steady but pleading. "Go now... you

won't let me die, right?"

I nodded fiercely through blurred vision. "Wait for me! I'll come back for you! You'll be okay—I promise!"

He smiled weakly and waved me away. “Alright.”

I turned to flee, but before I could take more than a few steps, a deafening gunshot split the air. A

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powerful impact knocked me to the ground. Searing pain spread across my shoulder, leaving me gasping. I’d been shot.

Terrified, I turned my head to see Joseph collapsing onto me. Blood poured from a massive wound in his chest, staining his white coat crimson.

My mind went blank. Ignoring the burning pain in my shoulder, I rolled him over, pressing my shaking hands against his wound. “Joseph! Joseph!” My cries grew desperate, tears unstoppable.

He weakly raised a hand to clasp mine, the simple action seeming to drain his remaining strength. In a hoarse whisper, he said: “I’m sorry... I love you... In the next life... please be my little one again, okay?”

His eyes held a kaleidoscope of emotions—reluctance, tenderness, resignation—all fading into stillness. The light in them extinguished. His hand slipped limply from mine.

I stared at him in disbelief as overwhelming terror and heartbreak consumed me. It felt like my heart was being incinerated. I coughed violently, blood spilling from my lips as my vision blurred. Sweat drenched me as pain from my shoulder wound surged through my body. Even so, I reached out, trying desperately to grasp him, to pull him back.

“Joseph...” I called weakly, voice trembling with fear and grief. But my body had reached its limit.

Darkness closed in as I collapsed backward, consciousness slipping away.

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When I regained consciousness, the sterile scent of antiseptic filled my nostrils. I had been evacuated to a hospital back in Meridia. The doctor explained that I’d spent two weeks in intensive

care. My internal injuries were severe, and I had taken a bullet to the shoulder. But by some miracle,

my spleen remained intact, and the bullet hadn't exited my body. The limited blood loss had kept me alive until the peacekeepers found me.

I knew with crushing certainty why I had survived—Joseph had shielded me twice. He had given his

life for mine.

I reached out desperately to everyone I could, searching for any trace of him. But they all said the same thing: the chaos made recovering his body impossible. With casualties mounting, Doctors Without Borders had suspended operations in East Meridian Province. I had no way to return and

search for him.

Just like that, Joseph vanished.

Every night, I woke screaming, gripped by terror. His final moments played endlessly in my mind,

refusing to fade. The doctor diagnosed me with PTSD. I tried everything—medication, therapy, even

alcohol. Nothing helped.

Everyone urged me to move forward, to let go of the past. But how could I? He died protecting me.

This thought became an inescapable shadow, constantly looming over me. It made me hate myself

for surviving, hate that I lived while he died, hate this world for denying him his happiness.

Countless times, I stood at the edge of rooftops, wanting to follow him. But each time, at the last

moment, I stepped back. This life was bought with everything Joseph had. I no longer had the right

to throw it away.

Six months later, I returned to work after my leave. But I could no longer bear to handle cameras or photographs. I requested a transfer to an administrative role.

Time crawled by, yet I remained a shell of myself, hollow and lifeless. My colleagues couldn't stand watching my decline and encouraged me to socialize, even arranging a blind date. I planned to exchange mere pleasantries and leave.

Then I met Jackson.

The moment I saw his face—identical to Joseph's—I froze, summoning every ounce of strength not to

break down.

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Later, I learned he was the brother Joseph had mentioned,

At first, using him as a substitute brought some comfort. Those ordinary days were seductively peaceful.

I would cook dinner when he worked late. We'd spend days off watching movies together. When nightmares jolted me awake, seeing him sleeping beside me would ease me back to rest.

These were the simple moments Joseph and I never had. I lost myself in the illusion, almost believing the lie I'd crafted. If I could spend my life this way, in quiet contentment, wouldn't that be enough?

But illusions always shatter.

They were never the same person. Joseph had promised to meet my mother. How could he have given away her camera? He had risked everything to protect me. How could he stand idle while others belittled me? He said he found his purpose in me. How could he ever view me as merely a

sheltered woman confined by family obligations?

I was filled with self-loathing. His body wasn't even at rest, yet here I was, escaping into a fantasy

with his shadow.

How could I betray him like this?

I had to leave, even if I wasn't ready to face reality. I needed to find him. I should have gone back

long ago.

I have to return and bring him home myself.

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I returned to the Meridia refugee camp and reunited with Joseph's colleagues. Doctors Without Borders had resumed operations, and his former partner, Adam, now coordinated the entire Meridia project.

When we met, no words were needed—tears flowed freely. After crying together for half an hour, I

told him I had come to search for Joseph.

He led me to the warehouse where some of Joseph's belongings remained. "We evacuated in a hurry, leaving much unsorted," Adam explained.

In a box, I found scattered items: a paper card, packet of flower seeds, set of keys, medical books, a stethoscope... These simple objects transported me back three years. I could almost hear his voice: "You're here!" I remembered walking into his quarters one afternoon, finding him lounging in a

chair, casually twirling a pen while reading.

Adam's expression turned wistful. "These should have been dealt with long ago, but I thought you might return to sort through them for him someday. I never expected that day would actually come."

I accepted the items solemnly. "Adam, thank you. I'm the one who came too late."

Later, I mentioned wanting to locate the children from that time. He promised to keep watch, though he cautioned against high hopes after so many years.

Back in my quarters, I received messages from my colleagues. Jackson had come looking for me.

I hadn't shown up for the wedding. His parents were furious. He'd searched everywhere before learning from my colleagues that I'd gone to the Nyara Republic. He'd refused to believe it, causing such a scene at the hospital that security nearly intervened.

I sighed, confused. If he loved someone else, where did I fit into all this?

Not wanting to burden my colleagues further, I initiated a video call with Jackson.

The moment we connected, my breath caught. He looked disheveled on screen, the room behind him dim and smoke-filled, empty bottles littering the floor.

“Zoey?” He stared in disbelief, rubbing his eyes. “Is it really you?”

He scoffed, burying his face in his hands. “You’re something else. You fled to Azora over a few words from Sara? Are you insane?”

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Anger flared within me. I nearly hung up when I noticed large drops falling between his fingers.

“You can’t... play with your life like this! How could you make me worry so much?!”

Suddenly, it all felt absurd.

“Worry about me? Our relationship began with you using me to appease your parents, and me using you as a substitute to ease my loneliness. There was never real affection-”

He cut me off with a shout. “To hell with real affection! When I went to find Sara that day, I couldn’t stop thinking about you! I worried how you’d get home after drinking! When your camera broke, I searched every shop in the city. When they said it was too old, I asked friends abroad, flew there myself to get it! You vanished without a word. They said you went to East Meridian, and I couldn’t sleep, searching all night! You made me fall in love with you, then just left! How could you?!”

His eyes were red, his expression like a stray dog at the doorstep.

“Please come back?” He pulled out the ring I’d thrown away, his voice humble. “We can set a new wedding date. I’ll only marry you...”

We stared at each other for a long moment.

Finally, I smiled. “Jackson, you never really understood me. How can you say you love me? Who is Sara, and who are you to make me act out of spite? I came back because the person I love is here.”

His pupils dilated as he swept everything off the table in anguish. “Who is he? Who is he, really?!”

I ended the call coldly. “You don’t need to know.”

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I resumed my work as a doctor.

Three years later, the situation in the Nyara Republic had deteriorated beyond imagination. Armed groups had expanded their territory to unprecedented levels. Food crises, cholera outbreaks, sexual violence, and kidnappings had become endless cycles of suffering. This land seemed truly forsaken.

Each day, witnessing the hellish reality around me, I questioned whether Doctors Without Borders

was extending hope or merely prolonging suffering.

Months later, Adam told me he had located five children from that group, including Ray and Mary.

They had escaped successfully that day and now lived with relatives in Kisangani.

This news was like a breath of fresh air. I rushed to meet them.

As soon as my car reached the meeting point, Mary ran out and threw herself into my arms, eyes brimming with tears. “Zoey!! You finally came!”

She had grown tall, blossoming into a young woman. Looking anxiously at the car, she asked, “Where’s Doctor Joseph? Why didn’t he come?”

I hesitated. “He’s too busy.”

Mary’s fingers tightened immediately. “...Has something happened to him?”

Children who have witnessed death are particularly sensitive to vague answers.

I shook my head reassuringly. “No, he’s fine. Let me show you.”

I scrolled through my phone but found no pictures of Joseph. I had stored them all away on my computer at home, unable to bear looking at them. At the very end, I found a photo of Jackson in his

white coat, reading medical records under warm lamplight. The resemblance to Joseph was striking.

Mary’s face lit up when she saw it. She jumped with joy, pulling her brother over. “I want to be a

doctor too!”

The other children joined in: “Me too!” “I want to heal people!”

I gently patted their heads and turned to the quiet boy. “What about you, Ray? What do you want to do?”

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Ray glanced at my camera shyly. “...I want to be a journalist.”

I was stunned.‘

“I want to show the world those who are suffering. If people can see them, maybe someone will help...”

Fighting back tears, I gathered them all in my arms. If Joseph were here, he would be so proud.

Before leaving, I gave Ray my compact camera and left Joseph’s stethoscope and books with Mary and the others. Their faces glowed with excitement.

These children, despite living in hardship, still reached for a bright future through their scars. Just as Joseph had said, “Where there’s hope, there’s a future.”

Months passed. My search for Joseph’s body proved fruitless. I visited the forest countless times, but the darkness of that night had left me disoriented. Eventually, I had to accept defeat.

I began documenting Joseph’s story on Instagram, going through old photos. Many details had grown hazy after three years. Initially, I did it fearing I might forget more, but unexpectedly, the posts went viral.

“Doctor Joseph was amazing. When my mother became confused during her illness, he never lost

patience.”

“He performed magic tricks for my daughter. The director scolded him for playing cards!”

Then Jackson video called me. He sent screenshots of my Instagram. “Is this you?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly.

He looked stunned, his expression bitter. “So you meant my brother...”

“Yes.”

“I should have known... should have realized! No wonder you looked at me that way! I thought you actually loved me!”

He lowered his head in defeat. “Is he... okay?”

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I hadn't told him what happened afterward, so he couldn't have known. “He's not okay,” I replied coldly. “He died three years ago.”

The phone slipped from Jackson's hands, clattering against the floor. The screen flickered before coming back to life. He looked like he might collapse. “Dead? Why didn't I know about this? Why

didn't you tell me?!”

“How do you think I feel?” I shot back. “Has anyone in your family ever cared about him in all these

years?”

Jackson trembled violently, too ashamed to meet my eyes. I remembered the first time I met his parents and cautiously asked if he had any siblings. They'd dismissed the question with a wave of their hand: “No.” Jackson himself had said, “There used to be one, but you can consider him dead.” When I pressed for details, he'd slammed a bowl down, warning me, “We don't speak of him in this family.” He'd resented Joseph for escaping, for making him the new target.

“Save your crocodile tears. Do you really think he ended up in the Nyara Republic by choice? It's all because of your family.” Jackson abruptly ended the call.

A few days later, his parents showed up at my door, telling me Jackson had disappeared.

They explained how he'd rushed home that day and gone on a rampage, destroying everything in sight. He'd blamed them for all the tragedies, saying if they hadn't forced Joseph to leave, he would never have gone to the Nyara Republic, never met me, and never died. Everything was connected, he'd said, with no way out. He'd confessed that his suppressed emotions had led him to mistakenly believe he'd fallen for the unconventional Sara, making him miss his chance with me.

None of it could be undone.

After that, Jackson quit his hospital job and vanished.

“Zoey! How can you blame us?” his parents pleaded. “As parents, we just wanted our son to make more money. What’s wrong with that? We told him to stay at the hospital, but he wouldn’t listen. Now look what’s happened—he’s gone! Isn’t this all his own doing?”

“How could Jackson be angry with us? We’re his parents!”

“Please, help us bring him back! We’ve already lost one son; we can’t lose another!”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I hurled my phone down. “Get out!” I screamed. “You don’t deserve to be

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parents!”

Devastated, I found myself wandering back to that familiar forest. I settled beneath a massive tree,

watching the sunlight dance through the leaves as I hugged my knees to my chest.

Though the Nyara Republic had given me just one chance encounter, I could imagine how suffocated Joseph must have felt in that household. He’d originally listed his partner as his emergency contact

with Médecins Sans Frontières, but later changed it to me. He never wanted his family to know about his struggles. Despite coming from such a dysfunctional family, he’d grown into an incredibly kind, gentle, and selfless person.

The thought filled my heart with an overwhelming sadness.

Suddenly, a gust of wind rustled through the trees, and something hard fell from above, striking my forehead. I picked it up—a dog tag. Aid workers in conflict zones often carried them for identification in case of accidents. I assumed it belonged to some soldier, but when I turned it over, I

saw “Joseph” engraved on its surface.

My heart stopped. I ran my fingers over the name repeatedly, unable to believe it. How could this

be? Why would Joseph's tag be here, of all places?

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I frantically clawed at the soil with my bare hands, dirt and blood collecting under my fingernails. I

kept digging until I uncovered bone. In that moment, I broke down completely.

I carefully excavated the remains entangled in the tree roots. Among the soil, I discovered fragments of the white coat he'd worn that day.

It was Joseph. I'd found him! After all this time, I'd finally found him!

It felt as though he'd seen my grief and gently tapped my head, as if saying, "Don't waste your anger on those who don't deserve it. Let the past rest."

I cradled his skull and whispered, "Let's go home. We're finally going home."

I took leave from work, brought his ashes back to my country, and laid him to rest beside my mother.

On the day of the burial, Jackson appeared. He'd lost considerable weight, his face gaunt and exhausted. He placed two white chrysanthemums on my mother's and Joseph's graves, telling me he'd figured everything out.

He showed me an apology video on Sara's Instagram. In it, she confessed to everyone she'd deceived. She admitted she hadn't traveled the world as claimed—she'd fabricated that persona to make Jackson yearn for her, and she'd been cruel to me out of jealousy over my engagement to Jackson.

After we watched, Jackson called Sara right there. Her voice dripped with remorse. "Jackson, I apologized like you asked! You promised we'd get married—is that still true?"

"No," he replied coldly. "I won't marry you. You lied to me, and I lied to you. We're even now. I only

made you apologize because you hurt Zoey. Let's never cross paths again."

He hung up, blocked her number, and turned to me. “About the camera—I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was your mother’s memento.”

I shook my head. “Don’t bother apologizing. I’ll never forgive you.”

Jackson bowed his head heavily. “I’m sorry about my brother too... He reached out many times after leaving for the Nyara Republic, but I always berated him, blamed him... I knew our parents forcing me to break up with Sara wasn’t his fault, but I lacked the courage to leave. I envied him.”

He stared at Joseph’s gravestone. “If I hadn’t been such a coward, if I’d gone with him... maybe I

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would have met you, had a fair chance with you.”

“No one can go back to the past,” I replied evenly. “What-ifs don’t matter. I loved Joseph, that’s all

there is to it.”

Jackson sighed softly. “Perhaps I’ll join Médecins Sans Frontières... try to be closer to you, atone for

my regrets.”

I remembered something then. “Someone once said your brother never really wanted to be a doctor. He always thought of you, hoping you’d discover who you truly wanted to be. Don’t set yourself up for more regrets.”

Jackson froze, his eyes reddening with memories.

I picked up the chrysanthemums. “Neither of them liked white chrysanthemums. Don’t bring them again.” I handed the flowers back and walked away.

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As I left the cemetery, I encountered someone unexpected—my father. Jackson must have contacted him, which explained how he knew about my mother’s camera and my return.

“Have you eaten?” he asked hesitantly.

“What do you want?” I responded coolly.

He paused before answering, “Could you come home for a while?”

I couldn’t suppress a bitter laugh. “You’ve always told me to stay away. I’ve respected your wishes, so why the sudden change?”

His voice quavered. “Your sister has cancer.”

I froze, stunned by his words.

“I’ve tried everything... sold everything we could. You’re her sister. Would you help her?”

His face was etched with sorrow and regret.

“I know you resent me, but pushing you away wasn’t what I wanted. It wasn’t my choice...”

Pain filled his eyes. “You’re my daughter. How could I ever want to send you away? I had my reasons.”

I looked at him quietly, knowing our past was a web of misunderstandings. “I know,” I said simply,

requiring no further explanation.

He seemed lost in thought. I remembered the day I received my college acceptance letter, overjoyed at the prospect of following my mother’s path into medicine. Racing home with the news, I’d overheard him arguing with my aunt in the kitchen, their words cutting deep:

“May will be starting college soon too. How can we possibly afford it?”

“You’ve already raised her to adulthood. Isn’t that enough?”

“Harry! It’s either her or me in this family!”

I’d quietly closed the door and spent the afternoon alone on the street. That entire summer, I lived in limbo, waiting for answers I couldn’t comprehend.

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“You didn’t want our home to crumble again, so you sacrificed me. Despite the pain, you sent me away,” I said softly.

He tried to speak, but I continued, “I don’t resent you. I understand.”

I paused. “But as a daughter, I can say you’re not a terrible father, but you’re not a good one either.”

I took out my phone and transferred 300,000 yuan to him. Over the years, he’d deposited money in my account, which I’d saved to repay him when the time was right.

“I’ve returned what you gave me. The rest... consider it payment for raising me.”

“Please don’t seek me out again,” I added coldly.

Leaving the restaurant, I felt lighter. The burdens that had weighed on my heart seemed to lift away, one by one.

I turned a corner and found myself at the flower shop where Joseph had bought my mother the bird-of-paradise flowers. The owner recognized me, but the shop was nearly empty, with the last flowerpots being loaded onto a truck.

“Where are you moving?” I asked.

She smiled. “We’re closing! Time for something new.”

I nodded. “That’s alright.”

She gathered the remaining lilies of the valley, hyacinths, and olive branches into a bouquet. “To new beginnings.”

We shared a warm embrace before parting.

Walking home under the painted sunset sky, I paused to appreciate the moment until my phone rang—the dean, his voice urgent.

“Joe, we need you back sooner than expected.”

“What’s happened?”

He sent me a news article: “Celestial Sea Conflict Intensifies, Multiple Pager Explosions Reported.”

“The hospital thinks you’re best suited for this-”

“I’m going,” I cut in.

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Chapter 19

I pulled out the necklace bearing Joseph's dog tag and kissed it gently.

I knew then that there would be no other path. Wherever the flames of war rise, that's where we're

needed.

We'll always believe that everyone in this world, no matter how deep their darkness, will find a glimmer of hope.

Chapter 20

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Chapter 20

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Zoey's Nyara Republic Diaries ended its online run, moving countless readers to tears with Joseph's tragic ending. Many made pilgrimages to his grave to pay their respects. Even his parents, who had once disowned him, appeared in the media praising his kindness and selflessness. However, netizens quickly exposed their past cruelty, igniting public outrage. Anonymous funeral wreaths began piling up in their hallways until finally, they fled in the dead of night, vanishing without a

trace.

Joseph was posthumously awarded the Nansen Refugee Award by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, honoring his exceptional dedication to protecting and aiding refugees. Though he was gone, his spirit and work continued to inspire countless others.

Jackson didn't join Médecins Sans Frontières; instead, he purchased the flower shop beside the cemetery. Zoey's words that day had stirred memories of his childhood, playing in the yard with his

brother, making mud pies. His brother had asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, and Jackson had dreamed of owning a grand flower shop—a memory lost to time. Each year, no matter how demanding her schedule, Zoey would visit the cemetery to honor her mother and Joseph. It was

her only chance to connect with them. The rest of her time was spent traversing conflict zones across the Celestial Sea region and Eastern territories, while Jackson quietly counted the days until their

paths might cross again.

Sara's social world imploded. Former friends cut ties, seeing her as a manipulative liar. With nowhere else to turn, she sought out Jackson, only to discover his heart had long belonged to Zoey. The false reality she'd constructed crumbled, leaving her a tragic figure of her own making.

Two years later, Zoey's half-sister succumbed to her illness. Her stepmother, who had reclaimed her daughter, now found herself childless. Zoey's father, Harry, was alone once more, his family fractured beyond repair. This time, he had no daughter by his side, and shortly after, he too passed

away.

Zoey continued supporting the children she'd saved. Ray and Mary achieved their dreams, becoming a journalist and a doctor respectively. Years later, when Zoey received the United Nations Contribution Award, she declared in her acceptance speech, "If we cannot stop war, we must do everything in our power to save those who still have a chance at life."

Zoey found her purpose and stayed true to her mission. As the world transformed around her, she remained unwavering, carrying the hopes of those lost while illuminating the path forward for countless others.

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